

## DISPUTATION CXC

October 18, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

After taking complaints about early emails, I respectfully and traditionally submit this missive at the appropriate hour. An indecisive evening last week to be sure. After a split vote between the table and declaimed members in attendance, we found in the affirmative: *this house will not tolerate violence in social protest*. I appreciated the especial passion attending comments last week, and I hope to see more of the same tonight.

Ever listen to the Fleet Foxes? They're an indie folk/Americana band, mostly known now for producing Father John Misty (thought their recent stuff is dece). Their rise to prominence and peak roughly coincided with the re-founding and first Golden Age of Peucian. In any case, it seems Werner Heisenberg was a fan, and on October 16th, 2014, the Peucian Society heard arguments for Disputation CXXVI, "Resolved: I'd Rather Be A Cog in Some Great Machine Than a Snowflake," argued in the affirmative by Euclid (Tara Palnitkar '16) and in the negative by Ernest Hemingway (Lindsay Welch '15). The resolution is inspired by the lyrics of [Helplessness Blues](#):

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique  
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see  
And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be  
A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me

A full Bowdoin cycle later, we're running it back.

### **RESOLVED: I'D RATHER BE A COG IN SOME GREAT MACHINE THAN A SNOW-FLAKE**

**Affirmative: Aldous Huxley '20**

**Negative: Fernando Pessoa '21**

What the hell was Dr. Seuss on about when he wrote, "Today you are you / that is truer than true / there is no one alive / who is you-er than you"? Is he eluding to some inner self, an essence of identity, that each of us has? A soul, maybe? The individualist impulse has haunted the American psyche since the beginning, and it pollutes—or enlightens?—our discourse about education and ambition. It seems many of us pursue the liberal arts so that we can "find ourselves," "figure ourselves out," "discover ourselves," *etc.* Then we have the audacity to demand employment that is also generates passion and meaning. If the Boomers were the "Me Generation," what are we?

This is an unflattering view of the snowflake. No, not the nasty pejorative that conservative pundits use for overly sensitive liberals. We're talking about snowflakes the way your kindergarten did—with apt admiration for tiny crystalline beauty asserting itself in the anonymity of a blizzard. The snowflake has much to recommend it, and Pessoa—taking the lectern for the first time!—has powerful arguments for taking the snowflake seriously. Self-cultivation, independence, and uniqueness are worthy goals for Peucinians trying to make sense of a disjointed, modern world. A turn inward can provide comfort, meaning, and fulfillment.

Huxley asks us instead to look outward, to consider things greater and holier than ourselves, to submit to collective pursuits. Our own individual moral worth pales in comparison to the Great Causes of today: the Grace of God, the Health of the Earth, the American Military, homelessness, Hunger, the never-ending

conquests and horizons of Science, the infinitesimal questions of Philosophy, that strange force called Globalization, the literary canon (to name a few). As *cogs* in a *machine* we are a necessary, important (and maybe replaceable) component of a higher function—whether it’s a Great Cause or a new soup kitchen, an archival project or a high school theater production.

Will our machines swallow us and fumigate our lungs with thick black smoke?

I’m reminded of Alexander Hamilton’s line in *Hamilton: An American Musical*, “I wanna build something that’s gonna outlive me.” WJB points out to me that Hamilton himself, despite his throwing himself into noble machines, was himself a snowflake—a meteor, a star, a bright light that was extinguished after a short shining. Should we follow his example? (Notwithstanding his contributions to the Founding, was his life itself—like Goethe’s—a work of art and an inspiration unto itself?)

In the end, I think this disputation is about fulfillment—what it is, and where we should get it. I eagerly await your thoughts on this resolution and its associated questions. New and old welcome, as always.

Your ever obliged, and affectionate servant,  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
*Primus Inter Pares*, Peucinian Society

**Peucinian Society Disputation CXC**  
**Thursday, October 18th, 7:45 PM**  
**Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall**  
**Semi-formal attire encouraged (see Postscript)**

### POSTSCRIPT

Why do we dress up?

Although our dress code can seem uninviting at first glance, we use it as a way to distinguish our discussions from the rest of the week’s activities. This marks disputations as something special and worthy of our attention. In choosing to dress ourselves differently, we convey respect for the event and for each other, much in the same way one would for a *capella* or mock trial. If you choose to attend a disputation, feel free to dress in a way that is special and comfortable for you.

P.P.S. Weil subbing for de Staël, who is out of town. Sappho subbing for Hux, disputing.

P.P.P.S. Have a nice Family Weekend. If you’ve got time, check out the President’s Research Symposium. I think it’s in the gym on Friday from 1:45 PM to 3 PM. Alongside other Peucinians, Weil will be presenting on her summer research.

*Pinos loquentes semper habemus*