

DISPUTATION CXCII

November 8, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

I hope you didn't plan to attend curling practice, 'cause we're disputing tonight. After a recess for All Hallows's Eve, we'll consider whether suffering is wholly bad or adds meaning to life.

RESOLVED: I WOULD WANT TO LIVE IN A WORLD WITHOUT SUFFERING

Affirmative: Ursula K. Le Guin '21

Negative: Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington '21

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973)

Suffering is perhaps that which we fight shy of at all costs, states of being whose disutility is so great that many recognize a “doctrine of necessity” in avoiding them: death of self, death of loved ones, starvation, rape, slavery, and so on. These are so terrible that we often bend or wholesale eschew moral imperatives for people facing them.

Is there a place for suffering in our world? Is a painless utopia desirable? At first take it may seem that good should triumph over evil—that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, and that there's a pot of ethical gold at the end of the moral rainbow. Suffering has a chilling effect on human freedom and creativity; it depresses human innovation and aspiration, a devastating loss not just for those who suffer but for everyone who might have benefitted. How many Ovids starved in the barren fields of Iran and China, how many Dickinsons were born Helots, how many people didn't even get a shot at a happy life? Humanity—its goodness, its greatness, and its basic happiness—would flourish with the terrific freedom offered by a liberation from suffering.

Is this a myopic view? Suffering is bad, yes, but isn't it fundamental to being a person? Do the stories we tell ourselves and each other about what makes life worth living mean anything without some evil in the world, something to overcome, a black backdrop to make the stars shine a little brighter? For many, their suffering—presently or in the past—is part of who they are. Some would happily trade their suffering for relief. But would all? Is the range and depth of human pain the inspiration of so much art and philosophy? If so, are those treasures of civilization worth their weight in pain? Can we be fulfilled, truly happy people without serious adversity in our lives?

I'm rather hype for these two first-time disputants to show their chops at the lectern. It should be a fascinating disputation. Because discussing suffering can be difficult for some, I politely remind everyone to be mindful of this fact around the table tonight—but certainly, do not hold back your genuine opinion or temper your enthusiasm.

I look forward to seeing you and I remain meanwhile, yours sincerely,
J.J. Rousseau

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Peucinian Society Disputation CXCII
Thursday, November 8th, 7:45 PM
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire encouraged (see Postscript)

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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.