

DISPUTATION CXCI

November 29, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Welcome back from Thanksgiving break! I hope you got to rest, eat, and spend time with family or friends. Despite the protestations of The Duke, anti-suffering Le Guin and the ones who walk away from Omelas carried the day two weeks ago. The debate seemed to come down not just on whether suffering has value, but whether a world without suffering—even and especially a utopic world—was even possible. Le Guin's *Omelas* seems to be ambiguous on the point, though our Le Guin was not.

And before you know it, Thanksgiving is gone by and the sky is a hazy shade of winter. This'll be the last disputation of the semester, it looks like, and no better way to close out than with a pitched battle between two Peucinian veterans, Dominic and Shelley. Just kidding, these two are just about the last pair to repeat the unfortunate events of May 22, 1856. As reflective and thoughtful and educated as the disputants are, everyone brings the fire in their own way, and so I do not advocate restraint—respect yes, but not restraint—as we turn our celebration of free inquiry toward a topic often discussed yet not to anyone's satisfaction (or at least, not mine).

RESOLVED: WE SHOULD DISMANTLE CATEGORIES OF IDENTITY

Affirmative: St. Dominic de Guzmán '19

Negative: Mary Shelley '19

“I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.”

—James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," *preface to the 1984 edition*.

Maybe the most searching question we can ask in the liberal arts is, who am I?, and who are we? Identity is a strange development in the postmodern philosophical theatre. In some camps, the notion of free will is laughable and eliminative materialists deny basic concepts of mentality. In others, thinkers cling to the antiquated (?) notion that there is a fundamental human nature that transcends time and place. In many of the social sciences, identity is an amalgam of social forces—race, class, gender, nationality, religion—which profoundly influence our beliefs and personhood. These competing views of identity seem to contradict—is there any way we can make them cohere?

Despite the complicated metaphysics of identity, we have to look in the mirror and witness a real human being stare back at us. Who is that person? A sack of skin and bones “controlled” by a floating pink piece of meat whose atoms move according to algorithms determined at the moment of the Big Bang? Is it absurd that the color of that skin *matters*? Does the body that houses that brain have an effect on what that brain can or should think? When we make statements about our identity—I am Jewish, I am male, I am white—are we saying anything about *ourselves* or just about the *groups* we belong to? And why think of ourselves through group association?

We seem to have accepted group association and description as our default state. At Bowdoin, students have the opportunity—are even encouraged—to join up with people who look like them, think like them, and share social “identities” of varying degrees of construction. This practice may be comforting and pleasant, and I suspect there is much to recommend it. But does it close us off from *other* people? Does it make common,

human struggles seem sectarian and competitive? Do our tribes limit who benefits from our compassion? Does identity deny us a fuller chance to discover who we can be?

But if we do dismantle these boxes that divide us, how will we distinguish ourselves—with hobbies and hair dye? It seems that as shallow as categories of identity may seem upon analysis, they are far richer than any individually-conceived project of self-creation. So what if my Jewishness or maleness limits the experiences I can have or the people I can truly empathize with. What would be lost to the world if there was no Jewish tribe!—no Hebrew Bible, no matzo ball soup, no Larry David. Group identity seems inevitable and essential to human community, history, and culture; without it, we'd be aimless, colorless, flavorless.

What say you, Peucinians, to this extraordinary proposal? A statement like this resolution is inherently suspicious coming from anyone but St. Dominic. I expect we will find humanity, love, and understanding from him tonight, and an ardent—if unlikely—defense of categories from Shelley. It is sure to be a night to remember. I'm eager to hear your thoughts on this stunning proposition and to see many of you after a too-long two-week-long hiatus. As usual.

Yours in the cause of free inquiry & lasting friendship,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

—

Peucinian Society Disputation CXCIII

Thursday, November 29th, 7:45 PM*

Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-formal attire encouraged

*We will be starting orations *promptly* at 8:15 tonight. If you wish to engage in the traditional camaraderie and pour a refreshment, come at 7:45.

—

P.S. Gilgamesh and co. will be performing at the chapel Saturday and Sunday at 3 PM. It will be gorgeous—be there.

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus