

DISPUTATION CLVII

December 1, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

Before break, we grappled with a topic close to a tradition of our own; we asked if humility is a virtue. Around the table it was decided that we do believe that humility is a trait possessed by one living the good life. This week, we question the idea of tradition itself. What does it mean to get rid of systems set up in the past and can we live fruitful lives without the beliefs of our ancestors being passed down?

RESOLVED: WE CAN LIVE WITHOUT TRADITION

Affirmative: Cesare Borgia '16

Negative: Μένων '16

Hopefully, we have all returned from a restful break; a break we have every year because of a nice story and a valuable set of beliefs that cover up a historic atrocity. Tradition is ingrained in all of us. Whether it be Thanksgiving, not allowing gays in the military, declamations, or the Lobster Bake, these events and beliefs surround us throughout our lives. Famous, Dublin-born, conservative Edmund Burke would argue that these all have value. Burke makes it clear that he believes tradition is important and points out that it is especially important in terms of our government. Burke says, "The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori." Essentially, he is saying that we should not wander from the beaten path. The path that has gotten us to where we currently are has gradually evolved and been proven to be successful. Thus, it makes no sense to deviate from this tradition. However, Burke still was posed with one dilemma that he could never put a straight answer to; how to preserve individual rights without creating prejudice in the meantime. While talking about following tradition, he acknowledges that we should accept tradition because it hasn't failed us in the past, but he also says that tradition has evolved. Does this mean we can make adjustments to tradition and still call it tradition? Why even have these limits when we can judge in the moment what is right.

Descartes, the father of modern western philosophy, would do away with traditions when first searching for importance and meaning. He speaks openly of his frustrations with his philosophical predecessors, highlighting the various ways that they contradict themselves and leave one in a state of skepticism and despair. In light of the new scientific discoveries of the 17th century, Descartes was convinced that he must make a break with the past tradition and build a new, more secure philosophical system on the model of geometry and compatible with modern science. When Descartes finally arrived at his indubitable truth, that he cannot doubt his own existence, he attempts to construct a philosophical system that will yield the certainty lacking in views of his predecessors. Descartes claims that one must look inward to find meaning rather than looking to the structures and beliefs in place. Although embracing fervently the scientific revolution of his day and hoping to clear away the clutter of the philosophic past, Descartes, despite his own intentions, relied on ancient and medieval theological and philosophical insights. We see this especially in Descartes' various arguments for the existence of God and evil. Can we even escape our traditions? Or will they always mold us despite our attempts to create something new?

We around the table engage in culture, beliefs, and other traditions on both a large and small scale continuously throughout our lives. In order to fully tackle this resolved we must question tradition in the abstract as well as attempt to imagine an existence without them. Why do you need tradition? Have they shaped you for better or for worse? What biases do you hold as a result of the systems you live in? What beliefs and values would have escaped you without the institutions set in place during an ancient past?

Thursday December 1st, 8:15 PM
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire

Yours,
Andrew Carnegie