

DISPUTATION CLXVII

September 14, 2017

Dear Peucinians,

The activities fair has left our mailing list bloated, but I stand firm in our anti-Blink position. Last week we decided that we should—or must—consider physical beauty and its implications in the way we live our lives, regard others, and nurture relationships. This week, as we welcome even more new Peucinians, we turn to a question with higher stakes, one that has the potential to bring out the humanistic, theological, or liberal (and many more) sides of us: our most deeply held philosophical beliefs. When it comes to that question we always want to answer at Peucinian—how ought we live our lives?—perhaps nothing is more fundamental than whether we should have the choice not to live at all.

RESOLVED: WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO DIE

Affirmative: Saint Dominic de Guzmán '19

Negative: Sec. William Jennings Bryan '19

Despite the recent ascendancy of liberal democracy and the enshrinement of liberty and equality, we recognize that personal autonomy has its limits. We routinely give up freedoms in return for security, order, and efficiency via practices such as taxation, traffic regulation, representative politics, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and policing of violent crime. In our hearts, though, we cherish our ability to choose our careers, with whom we associate, the art we consume, what we say, and so on. But where our bodily autonomy begins and ends has not only been the subject of debate, it's also been the cause of war, death, and unfathomable pain: slavery, abortion, corporal punishment in schools, the types of sex we're allowed to have and with whom we can have it, sexual assault and rape, genital mutilation, and domestic violence are just a few examples. Undergirding all these topics is a serious set of questions about the nature of pain, life and death, our commitments to ourselves and others, human rights, and the ability of a political community to restrict the body autonomy of human beings.

You might think that the principle of personal autonomy is clear on giving us a right to die. People have the right to make decisions about their bodies, and deciding whether or not to live is no different categorically than deciding whether to pierce an ear. A mark of a human being is rationality, the trait allowing us to discuss “choice” in the first place. Rational agents, then, can make conscientious choices about life and death; should someone express that suicide is the best option, we ought to believe her. Furthermore, we do not get to choose, in the beginning, whether we want to live. This life, with all its pleasures and suffering, is thrust upon us with no warning. It is wrong, then, to force someone to carry to completion a miserable life she'd rather opt out of. Finally, we will never be able to stop people from committing suicide, that last expression of autonomy. So why not permit suffering people to end their lives in a peaceful, safe, painless, and dignified manner?

You might object that framing the right to die in terms of personal autonomy is a mistaken conceptualization. Suicide is not a victimless crime. There is the suicide himself, of course, but his death's meaning radiates outward, affecting the lives of many. Suicide is a form of murder, a violation of the sanctity of the person and an indisputably immoral act; therefore, society has a legitimate interest in outlawing and banning suicide. Furthermore, torturing or killing even our lawful prisoners strikes many of us as wrong. Why should our attitude be any different when the author of this violence is the self? Finally, this suffering of which the affirmative speaks is often ephemeral, possibly fixed by medication, time, or spirituality. How many people who

came close to throwing away their lives redeemed themselves in their own eyes and went on to live lives of meaning and purpose? How many potential suicides were relieved at their own failure?

We all want to help our fellow man and woman out of suffering. How do you think we should? I hope to hear your thoughts around the table.

Thursday, September 14

7:45 p.m.

Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-formal attire*

Sincerely,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, President

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus

*For men, this means at least a shirt and tie with khakis or slacks. No jeans, please. If attire is an issue for you, please email me personally and we will work something out for you privately—no judgment or embarrassment.