

DISPUTATION CLXXXI

March 1, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Good morning, and Chag Purim Sameach! Last week we firmly rejected a fundamental role for the Western Canon in liberal education with a 14-7 vote. I thought for historical interest we might consider another time a similar debate was held by Peucinian. During Fall 2012, the Society considered, “Resolved: The great books must be central to the American liberal arts education.” Allan Bloom argued in the affirmative; Marcus Aurelius argued in the negative. The tally was 16-9, affirmative. This week we consider a more practical question of ethical significance with orations from William Godwin and the cool-under-pressure Adrianna Siwady, who brings the class of 2021 back to the lectern after a two-week hiatus.

RESOLVED: CONVENTIONS OF POLITENESS ENRICH HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Affirmative: Adrianna Siwady '21

Negative: William Godwin '20

It would be a long story—and it is of no importance—to tell you how I came to be dining—for I am no particular friend of his—with a man who thought he combined elegance with economy, but who appeared to me to be both mean and lavish, for he set the best dishes before himself and a few others and treated the rest to cheap scraps of food. He had apportioned the wine in small decanters of three different kinds, not in order to give his guests their choice but so that they might not refuse. He had one kind for himself and us, another for his less distinguished friends—for he is a man who classifies his acquaintances—and a third for his own freedmen and those of his guests...

So writes Pliny the Younger (Book 2, Letter VI), around the turn of the second century AD, to his friend in an early instance of what might be a universal human pastime: complaining about the manners of others. Almost 2000 years later, Larry David, who is clearly a genius and never wrong, [can't figure out what the conventions of politeness even are](#).

Meanwhile, I routinely take issue with the conduct of people all over Bowdoin: failure to thank the host before leaving a party, failure to greet an acquaintance, failure to thank people for rides, failure to introduce people who don't know each other, failure to fold a blanket used when sleeping in someone else's apartment (oh shit I really went there) and many more (de Staël and Shelley assure me there are *many* more). But a hypocrite am I. According to the aforementioned Peucinians, I look at my phone when talking to people, often show up late and make bad time estimates, question the meaning of common words to an annoying degree, hunch over my food at meals, and "unnecessarily point out reality" (Shelley's polite way of saying I say impolite things). (There are *many, many* more things I do that are rude than I can rightfully complain about.) Can we ever become totally polite? Is this a desirable goal?

There may be some manners we can all agree ought be universal—don't chew with mouth open?—but even this suggestion might be fraught with cultural baggage. We get our sense of politeness from our families and societies—this much we do not dispute—and so in a multicultural society such as ours, all these systems of manners (and ways of subverting norms) clash loudly. It seems my discomfort at wrong-fork-holding is more a product of my class than of any “enrichment” of human life. Many conventions of politeness purport to be neutral but in fact serve to reinforce systems of class, race, and gender to the detriment of the oppressed. Requiring conformity to a set of predetermined behavioral mores is an effective way for groups in power to consciously and unconsciously silence dissent and restrain the trampled. Furthermore, these charades and

machinations we go through just to please others can feel like pure fakery all the way down. Why don't we just interact with each other with a genuine spirit, and say what we think and feel?

Manners can be hierarchical and rigid, but they are also organic and fluent. Just as we communicate with our words and bodies, our actions in the manner-realm allow us to transmit information about ourselves, our feelings, and our beliefs. (I'll hedge this claim with the admission that someone's failure to thank you for a ride does not imply they aren't grateful, and someone's profuse thanks is no guarantee of gratitude.) When we clean our apartment before hosting guests, or we hold the door for another, or we send a note and small gift to someone who writes a recommendation on our behalf, we are performing respect, community engagement, and gratitude. We show we are paying attention. Like our decorum, conventions of politeness properly understood can be uplifting and freeing. For instance, it seems hard to deny that a standard against interrupting others when they're speaking, applied equally, is a good idea. These standards, well-formed or not, connect us to each other in a civil society that feels ordered, secure, and connected to the past.

Whatever we call these things—conventions of politeness, manners, etiquette, decorum—we have to ask: what are they? how do they affect our lives? are they sources of enrichment or impediments to truthfulness? I am eager to hear your thoughts.

Thursday, March 1, 7:45 p.m.
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire

PLSH,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

—Postscripts—

I've heard from a few people, and I agree, that we have an issue with long-winded comments (not with emails, I guess). The Provost *is* able to cut off long comments, but rather than have to go there (but the Provost will if necessary), I respectfully request that we all think about how we can make our points more concise without sacrificing our meaning. This will make us better intellectuals, and it will also increase the total number of comments that can be made in a night, which benefits us all.

I'm pleased to announce that the Society will be bringing Professor Arlene Saxonhouse to campus for a lecture on April 24, time and location TBD. She is a professor of gender and women's studies, classics, and political theory. I highly recommend you [read her bio and CV](#) and check out some of her academic work. I'm a big fan of her book *Free Speech and Athenian Democracy*, and her book *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* is well-reviewed and widely cited.

If you have the time, consider [reading the obituary](#) of Emily Post, a well-known "arbiter of manners," and her [famous book](#) *Etiquette*. Furthermore, an article by Eileen O'Brien, in *Counterpoints*, called "[I Could Hear You If You Would Just Calm Down': Challenging Eurocentric Classroom Norms through Passionate Discussions of Racial Oppression](#)" might be of interest. O'Brien applies bell hooks' analysis of rage and expression of emotion more explicitly to the classroom. She argues that dominant-group norms of what constitutes appropriate and civil expressions of thought serve to reinforce oppressive power structures within intellectual discourse, such as the common "calm down" reproach familiar to many women and people of color.

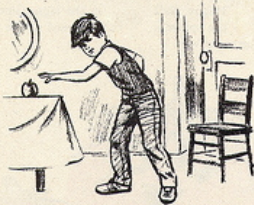
Goofus and Gallant



Goofus bosses his friends.



Gallant asks, "What do you want to do next?"



Goofus takes the last apple.



Gallant shares his orange.

Goofus and Gallant



Goofus keeps his friends distracted from finding out what's really going on.



Gallant warns anyone who'll listen that "it's all an illusion," and everyone is just "a cliched character in a children's magazine."