

Disputation CCXI

January 30, 2020

Dear Peucinians,

Welcome back! After scattering far and wide for winter break, I hope you all are well rested and excited to reconvene. The freezing climate of my home in upstate New York always leaves me with plenty of time for reflection, and it sounds like this was the case for many of you too, as there are already so many great disputation proposals for the semester.

This week, we shall enter into an ancient discussion about the best among us and their claim to success and power. We begin to see hints of this even in the funeral games of Homer's *Iliad*, and find a position boldly proclaimed in the person of Plato's philosopher king. Thinkers such as Aristotle and Confucius provide recommendations for the elevation of the virtuous within society, and these find a degree of application in the civil service administrations of the Roman Empire and Han China. With the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeois class, economic power emerges more distinctly from the political, and humanity is faced with additional questions about success and justice in the private sphere. Tomorrow night, we shall consider whether the American Dream rightfully occupies such a large place in the national consciousness.

RESOLVED: BELIEVE IN MERITOCRACY

Affirmative: J. Robert Oppenheimer '22

Negative: Just Pat '21

A belief in meritocracy is a belief that success can and should come to those who apply themselves. Parents feel a sense of this whenever they opt not to disabuse their children of wildly unrealistic life aspirations. If the greatest members of our society, or those who have had to overcome many obstacles, had been overly pessimistic on their odds, would they have done so at all? Our leaders should not be representatives of the mediocre or the dishonorable, they should come from the best among us and stand as virtuous examples to be emulated. We can grant that a number of disadvantages, outside of our control, weigh variously on different people even from the start. But it would be wise to take Machiavelli's advice: to strive and prepare as much as one can regardless, for there is always some province of our affairs unreserved to chance and deterministic forces. Excellence here can make all the difference.

The initial difficulty arises with our understanding and measurement of "merit." Should we esteem the wise? The morally virtuous? And do these qualities subsequently equip one to handle the reigns of power? Societies which ensconce meritocracy in government, including our own, tend to support large bureaucracies—often populated by technocrats out of touch with reality. Beyond the obvious point that we are each of us dealt uneven hands, the *belief* that effort underlies the difference between yourself and the most successful person induces great distress. You can waste away contemplating all the always you might have worked harder, when in reality there was nothing more to be done. Additionally, meritocracy supplants feelings of stewardship and responsibility for our fellow man with a deadly cocktail of competition and envy.

If we abandon meritocracy, do we abandon our dreams for stagnation and acceptance? How might one envision an approach to life which is harmonized with his absolute capacities? What is the relationship between our ideal beliefs and how we practice them? As always, I look forward to considering these questions with you very soon.

Thursday, January 30th, 7:45 PM
Massachusetts Hall, Third Floor*
Semi-Formal Attire†

Sincerely yours,

✉✉✉✉✉

Gilgamesh

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus

* This room can be reached only by stairs. Please contact me if you wish to attend and this presents a difficulty for you.

† A note on traditional semi-formal dress: this means a dress or a shirt, jacket, and tie if you have these items. We dress up out of respect for each other and to celebrate this occasion during the week—as one might for a performance or a wedding.