

## Disputation CXCIV

January 31, 2019

Dear Peucinians:

Welcome back. It's been too long. I hope you got some rest, because we've got some shit to figure out. I'm excited to see you all on Thursday evening for some considered reflection on a question whose relevance recedes not at all, even if metaphysics is mostly out of fashion. We're not afraid to turn back the clock around here, so come through even if it's your first time at Peucinian. (Eliminative materialists can stay home.) No background reading required, but if you have some free time this afternoon, you might enjoy reading Plato's [Phaedo](#) or Aquinas's [Summa Theologica](#). (If you want to bend your mind a bit, check out [What is it like to be a bat?](#)) Of course, whether there is a soul—a *psyche*—isn't our only question tonight. We are interested in the human things, so we ask how ought we live our lives...

### **RESOLVED: BELIEF IN A HUMAN SOUL ENRICHES PEOPLE'S LIVES**

**Affirmative: Abigail Adams '21**

**Negative: Olympe de Gouges '21**

We are probably in some agreement that humans are beings with minds. By that I mean we have consciousness: we can feel sensations, interpret sensory data, and have thoughts. Our minds also privilege us with beliefs, desires, opinions, and memories. Presumably rocks don't have these things, and we imagine this has something to do with our brain—and soul. The soul (*psyche*) is a common explanation for what permits us these mental phenomena, and the soul is what gives human beings moral weight. The soul also allows for the possibility of life after bodily death and reincarnation, ideas central to some religions and cultural practices.

Without getting us mired in the many weeds of the mind-body problem, I want to point out to you that physical science has a tough time explaining these phenomena (beliefs, etc.) in anything but physical terms. And even physical terms are rather limited in what they can describe about the mind. I'll be up front about my own view: I don't think the mind is a soul, but I don't have a good explanation for mentality either (I'm not sure anyone does). The question "what is the mind?" is open for the purposes of this disputation. The same for "what connection do we have to the cosmos?"

Our task tonight, though we may spend some time debating the nature of souls if we wish, is to determine whether we should live like we have souls. What would that mean exactly? In some sense it's to go through life with a certain set of feelings: that we have a greater purpose than bodily pleasure, that other people have intrinsic moral weight, that the universe makes some sense, that there is a self more fundamental than the affinities we are born into, that we can improve ourselves. By believing in a soul we can become closer to ourselves and others, more humane, and see life as something significant instead of accidental. Adams will tell us more about what a soulful life looks like.

If you follow the cold logic of science far enough, you'll reach some harsh conclusions. The world is an accident, we're made of the same stuff as rocks, there are no "intrinsic" values, there is no Creator or grand purpose, the self is mostly an illusion, and so on. It is no secret that certain kinds of reasoning usher us to a position of total neutrality, but we don't have to end there. Out of the rubble we can build systems of morality that are good for human beings without appeals to magic or mystery in itself, systems that are not human-centric or teleological. We will recognize the beauty in the world as that much more precious for its serendipity rather than its design, as de Gouge will show us. The good life is not incompatible with—indeed it follows—openly accepting that the human soul is a fiction.

Adams and de Gouges confront the unknowable chaos of the universe with two solutions: resist or embrace.  
Which course ought we take?

Yours in the cause of radically free inquiry,  
Rousseau

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**Peucinian Society Disputation CXCIV**

**Thursday, January 31st, 7:45 PM\***

**Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall**

**Semi-formal attire encouraged**

\*We will be starting orations promptly at 8:10.

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*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*