

## Disputation CXCIX

March 7, 2019

Dear Peucinians:

Last week we asked whether marriage (as an institution) harms society. We could not make up our minds, and like the last time we debated marriage, we split the vote. This Thursday night, before taking our brief spring recess, we will hear from two veterans on a topic no less important than it is timely.

[“Veterans!” you object, “Surely the disputant in the negative is a Stranger!” Overruled. Peucinians may become lost, but our motto isn’t *Pinos Loquentes Interdum Habemus*. Welcome back, Camus.]

### **RESOLVED: COLLEGES SHOULD END RACIAL PREFERENCE IN ADMISSIONS**

**Affirmative: Reinhold Niebuhr ’19**

**Negative: Albert Camus ’19**

This topic is indeed timely: right now a federal court in Massachusetts is deciding *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, a case about whether and to what extent private universities can consider and use race in their admissions processes.

But here we are not concerned with constitutionality or headlines, though these should prompt reflection. The two disputants have a genuine philosophical disagreement about what colleges should do. Their disagreement implicates differing views on the nature of race itself, the role of colleges in society, how to compensate for the injustices of the past, who deserves what, and the effectiveness—in terms of policy outcomes—of racial preference in college admissions.

Do racial preferences help the people they are meant to help? (Who are they meant to help?) Are they good for colleges themselves? Are they fair? Do they perpetuate a mode of thinking which categorizes people on the basis of their skin color? Is ‘race’ a category meaningful enough to stand as a practical proxy for social justice goals? Is ‘merit’ a coherent concept? Who today is liable for the wrongs of yesterday?

Peucinians, all this and more is up for debate. I do not dissuade you from expressing your passion (always bring the fire), but I do encourage you to leave behind your political priors and what you think you believe about affirmative action. Minds do change at Peucinian disputations, and these two disputants have compelling arguments. We’d all be wise to give them each a fair shake.

Yours in the cause of radically free inquiry,  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

**Peucinian Society Disputation CXCIX**

**Thursday, March 6th, 7:45 PM\***

**Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall**

**Semi-formal attire encouraged**

\*Since I’m expecting lengthier orations, we will start orations at 8:15. **I mean it**. So come earlier if you want to have a refreshment and hang out.

*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*

**P.S.** This isn't a bad philosophical primer on affirmative action:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/>.

I won't expect anyone to have read it, but you may find it helpful if you have the time before tomorrow night. The last section, "Desert Confounded, Desert Misapplied," briefly presents one of the key lines of disagreement underlying the resolution.