

Disputation CCL

September 22nd, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

I hope all of you have had a soulful, obligation-filled week. After all, that *is* the conclusion we have come to in our most recent sessions: a belief in soul enriches our lives, and it is not our own. (A most peculiar waste land we are building for ourselves! *la la*) Now, we turn to how we best fill this social obligation, all while carrying the longings and desires of our soul. Yes, for this 250th disputation since our Refounding, we consider life *after* the Table – how will we live? What will we choose? Indeed, our new Society has come of age (250 disputations and Supers later) and must finally answer “*What do you want to be when you grow up?*” Without delay, we rise tonight to formulate the answer:

RESOLVED: LOVE YOUR LABOR.

A Roundtable Presented by Alyosha Karamazov ‘23

First, a reminder of the roundtable format: Tonight’s session will be largely identical to that of a regular disputation. However, there will only be one disputant, and they will present various perspectives on the resolved. Voting will still occur at the conclusion of the session. That being said, I hope the explication that follows will be *particularly useful* this week for jumpstarting the discussion.

Tonight’s resolved is the perennial question (or, rather, it is for the CXD office). Ought we love what we do? Or should we sell out and take that corporate law job? Indeed, tonight’s resolved mustn’t be a distinction between a life that is socially productive and one of self-interest. On the contrary, the Table is reminded of those who may, say, take a high-paying tech sector job and use their financial resources to better society. Instead, we interrogate the role of *passion* in our work. But to answer that, we seemingly must investigate something more foundational: what role ought work play in our lives? That is, is it a ‘main event’ of sorts, your fulfillment coming from production or meaning making? Or is it a mere enabler, a necessary evil of sorts?

In his *Ethics*, Aristotle tells us “we choose *everything*... for the sake of something else – except for happiness, for it is an end.” Happiness is to be found in pleasure, and the highest pleasure to be found in leisure spent in contemplation. After all, “nobody chooses to wage war, or even prepares for war, for the sake of waging war.” Analogously, we do not work for work’s sake but to escape from the necessities of the human body and to enjoy the fruits of our intellect, that most “divine [thing] in comparison to the human being.” In one of the most moving passages, Aristotle urges us not “to think only about human beings because one is a human being, nor only about mortal things because one is mortal.” Instead, we should yearn and aspire to most embody this divine aspect of ourselves. That is, we ought strive “to make oneself immortal, insofar as that is possible, and to do all that bears on living in accord with what is the most excellent of the things in oneself.”

Work, then, is a *means*, not an end. The lesson appears to be that our labor ought not to be itself loved. In fact, loving this state of necessity for the would-be philosopher might pose a challenge, as he lusts not for his proper end but for mere means. Yet, we seemingly must also consider if man come in different *types*. Are some meant to labor? Aristotelian slaves come to mind, lacking a sufficient rational element. They instead must look to a master for rational guidance. Yet, perhaps even this guidance puts labor in a most subservient role. A unit of the master-slave arises, and it is the slave's labor through this most peculiar "friendship" that allows the highest happiness in the life of the master. Where do we – Peucinians and Bowdoin students - land on the hierarchy of labor in our life? Are we destined for middling middle management, a higher life ever out of reach? What's so bad about selling out anyway, if it is most conducive to escaping the realm of necessity?

Of course, we mustn't take such a negative conception of labor. Instead, it perhaps can be an opportunity for creation, for making meaning, for discovery, etc. (But is artmaking labor? Or is it, following R.G. Collingwood's model, a form of expression, communication, self-discovery, that perhaps resembles contemplation itself?) Indeed, in labor we *build* and *create*. Think of the Medieval Cathedral. What a mighty, most dignified endeavor. Shouldn't they be most proud? Or, perhaps to not love our labor creates a most odd compartmentalization of self. Executive search, consulting, etc. may just be material compromises (or, worse, cowardice). Hawthorne didn't give a damn it seemed, as he struggled along throughout his life in hopes of making the dream of a seaside cottage a reality. Loving one's labor, then, seems to bring us the great gift of Hawthorne's corpus, along with those so many other authors and creatives (a quick plug for reading *The House of the Seven Gables* and then *East of Eden* in quick succession – a whiplash-inducing experience).

There's a specter haunting this email: that of Karl Marx. Marx conceives man as an inherently *productive* creature (indeed, a great ill of capitalism is the denaturing to that of a *consumptive* being). Contradicting Aristotle, it is man's *chosen labor*, free from any necessity, that makes human nature distinct. Further, we meditate on our designs before actualizing them. Aristotle is inverted: the material fulfills the contemplative, opposed to the contemplative being the teleological end of the material. "...A bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already exists already." Why not love our (productive, premediated) labor? After all, it may be what makes us human.

Yet, in our industrialized capitalist society, it is naive to assume that most of us actually get to decide what we labor towards. Even the most successful of Bowdoin alumni receive directives from some higher power. So what, then, if we wish to revolt? That is, to continue down this Marxist rabbit hole, what if we wish to call forth a revolution? What of loving labor then?

Marx argues that the capitalists are their own gravediggers and that the very conditions they peddle will bring about their demise. To despise (or at least not love our labor) appears to be a reminder of the (arguably) horrible conditions man lives under. Pursuing our passions, our hobbies, become a sort of revolt against a capitalist elite that seeks to control all our productive

tasks. As in Lefebvre, man is constantly reminded of his *alienation* under capitalism, not blinded to its horrors. Despising labor becomes the most effective means to resist. Alternatively, loving our labor could allow us revolt within the system. That is, it undermines the elite who seek to control us. Pick a job that is indeed your passion, not one based on salary or pay.

A less explicit option for revolt becomes available. But is this just coping? Are we not just assimilating ourselves into the capitalist order? And, struggling for our own subsistence, can we *really* pretend to not be influenced by market forces? Capitalism's coercion provides only an illusion of choice. How best do we overcome the ills of capitalism (or do we not even need to)? The contradictions of this inquiry perhaps reveal a deep need to *progress the dialectic* through class revolution.

Or, are such revolutionary endeavors futile? And in an age of mass industrialization and standardization must we instead just imagine Sisyphus – I, you, we – happy?

I look forward to deciding our fate tonight during what promises to be a fiery, thought-provoking disputation. See you soon.

(No suggested readings tonight – though I encourage the uninitiated to explore the Marxian conception of ‘alienation.’ It seems most relevant to our discussion...)

Peucinian Society Disputation CCL
Thursday, September 22nd, 7:45pm*
Faculty Room, 3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall**
Business Casual Attire Encouraged***

Sincerely yours,
Abraham Lincoln
PRESIDENT, Peucinian Society

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus

*Members are encouraged to socialize beginning at 7:45; orations will begin promptly at 8:10.

**Like many of the College's activities and classes, Disputations are held in an inaccessible space, reachable only by stairs. If you would like to attend and this poses a challenge for you, contact the Society President at hredelma@bowdoin.edu

***In the spirit of Machiavelli, members have traditionally “take[n] off [their] clothes of day... [and] put on [their] regal and courtly garments” to demarcate Thursday evenings as a special time to “enter the courts of ancient men.” Interpretation of elevated dress varies widely by identity and culture. While encouraged, it is never required nor expected. Above all else, whatever form it may take, come dressed in garments that allow comfortable participation in a rigorous intellectual conversation amongst friends.