

Disputation CCXLIX

September 15th, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

Last week, we decided that a belief in the human soul does enrich our individual lives. Now (with the help of some new friends visiting with the Explore Bowdoin program), we take up our individual identities and ask how we relate to the collective. Chiefly, what is the extent of our liberty (or is it license) – to choose, to create, to act? The Registrar kindly reminding us that we *are indeed* stuck with our course selections (and all their ~~looming papers, miseries, and group projects~~ joys) now that Add/Drop II has ended, I'm eager to see what we will make of our choices and that perennial liberal arts question: "and what are you planning on doing with *that*?" Bring your Locke for what should be a most entertaining dispute between two of your favorite Atwood residents...

RESOLVED: OUR LIVES ARE NOT OUR OWN.

Affirmative: Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz '24

Negative: Charles Stewart Parnell '24

Tonight's resolved is not necessarily an investigation into political authority or the just confines of political power. Instead, the disputants frame the disagreement primarily as a question of personal morality: in what way (and why) should we act? However, though we may start on the individual plane, questions of enforcement remain open. Answering this requires a deep investigation into the source of political society's power and a return back to the nature of the individual in community. "Is man his own?" is the question the disputants ask of us (and one we must answer) before considering paternalism, enforcement, shaming, et cetera. That is, to engage in such activity, we must answer if we have a *right* to do so. It is not enough to either fear authoritarian implications OR decide it is of great efficiency to centrally plan, lest we be cast to the tyranny of *those other* 'practical' Government majors who decide all matters solely on the results of *MeTrIc-BaSeD pErFoRmAnCe ReViEwS* – horresco referens!

Yes, we will answer tonight's resolved genuinely, abstracted from dislikeable implications and fear of authoritarian regime, and *then* its implications will follow. However desirable that sweet, sweet Brutalist communist aesthetic may be, we must first ask if they be justified. Matters of *if it be prudent* to rule by societal pressure, centralized planning, et cetera, is of a different sort than that which we take up tonight. Now, to the arguments...

There is a way of viewing our lives as a constant accumulation of debt. We are born into a family who has, at least for most of us, provided us with constant food, shelter, and (hopefully) adequate moral education. We were taught by teachers who likely identified us as 'gifted' or 'above average' or 'at least not mediocre' and they propelled us to Bowdoin College, an elite selective institution that promises to provide us with the skills necessary to lead for the Common Good. Take a moment to think about the countless individuals (some who you might not have ever met) who guided and willed you into this exact moment: reading this email (from your soon-to-be-delirious president) presumably from the confines of a *decent* dorm bed (or perhaps at a table in

one of the nation's finest dining halls) for a Society with [a rich tradition](#) of world-changing leaders at a College whose offerings are [anything but conventional](#). We can't help but feel grateful.

This gratitude, the Affirmative argues, mustn't stop at a simple "thank you" note to a parent or school teacher or the like. Instead, our debt to them is quite literal: we *owe* them and, with that, have an *obligation* to provide a return on invaluable gifts and opportunities we have been given. It becomes unacceptable, immoral even, to choose lives of private, self-interest. It is as if our (potential) creditors have mixed their labour with us and set us aside from that in common. We should work hard – with dignity and with passion – towards advancing the cause of the communities that have nurtured us. A certain element of *noblesse oblige* arises.

Indeed, it seems dishonest to contend that man was ever truly individual. We inherit wealth from our forefathers, are born into a family, likely will marry and mate for life, before dying surrounded by the care of our ancestors. To say our lives are solely our own is perhaps to ignore this reality and risk denaturing the social element of man's nature.

The Negative disagrees. Our forefathers have no right to recall a debt we never agreed to accept. Further, while our lives perhaps should be of service to society, man ought not feel obligated to do so. Service remains freely chosen – done out of love and self-sacrifice, not duty and moral obligation. (Set down your MCAT prep books: you needn't be a doctor.) Instead, liberated man is free to live for himself. It is this choosing for one's own that the Negative believes is the best service to society. Where would we be if eccentric artists, painters, and writers were forced into the corporate cubical? What if Frank Lloyd Wright did not follow his passion for architecture? Society, Parnell cautions, would be at a loss... not of some effective allocation of economic resources but of [the very things that make life worth living](#).

Further, if all are acting in service for others, then who is actually living? Parnell, then, would have us go out on an odyssey to find joy, happiness, and fulfillment. Our passion projects – however eccentric, unconventional, and useless – are key to this.

But the Negative perhaps forgets that it was Wright's mother who most encouraged (read: told him) to be an architect. It was this very guidance that after her death surely gave the architect peace of mind. To serve, to love at the sacrifice of our own interest, is to find a brand of fulfillment that the Affirmative finds most resonant. Indeed, we are plagued by a 'strip mining' of our nation's elite, drawn to coastal circles in pursuit of their own "happiness." No, the Affirmative says, stay where you are. Happiness can and will be found in the little things, in community, in deep connectedness to place. Inherit and work your father's farm; it whispers good things.

Of course, this is limiting. Man is shackled, committed to the good (or mere service) of others. In some ways, Nietzsche seems at play here. Perhaps Parnell is our Zarathustra (consider: is this a compliment?), offering us a life of meaning-making and exploration. The Affirmative becomes the prophet of last men, urging us for the mere familiar. I do not doubt Leibniz would take issue with this characterization. It might be the point that service *is* actually at times painful and so far from the uninspired comforts of the last man.

Another issue arises, this time for the Negative: how does one control the Ubermensch? Crises – climate change, racial injustice, populist revolt – all demand unified response. Can the Negative muster such a response? The Affirmative may call, in a most Burkean way, for the practical considerations of, say, a guiding and pseudo-paternalist force to combat this challenge. Yes, “you began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you.”

And what does this mean for the political community? Perhaps the Affirmative becomes allies of dear “[Sir Robert F.](#)” and the Negative a friend of – to quote Proteus – “boring ole Locke.” Or, what of implications for acts of charity? Of relationship? What do we lose in the Affirmative’s dogmatic command to serve? What do we risk in the Negative’s meaning making?

I attach as suggested reading an excerpt from Joseph McKeen’s inaugural address as president in 1802. Some of it you no doubt will find familiar. It is a presentation of education as fundamentally a preparation for a life of service. I wonder if his words still resonate with us today and if the College remains committed to his Mission. As always, completing them is neither expected nor required, and discussion is never intended to be of the texts themselves. It is my hope, however, that they may serve as a springboard for those interested or who have not encountered these questions and their implications before. That is, to quote Oakeshott, it is intended to educate us so as to be better “inheritors... of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries.”

Enough of this Presidential missive; you have not shewn you own my life (yet).

Peucinian Society Disputation CCXLIX
Thursday, September 15th, 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.