

Dear Peucinians,

The slowly accumulating pile of readings, commitments, meal invitations, and eCampus Bookstore boxes can only mean one thing: summer has ended, and with that, the 3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall calls us back to begin another year of Peucinian disputations. I sincerely hope each of your summers were as restorative as they were fulfilling and look forward to hearing how your experiences and reflections enrich and deepen discussion around the table.

We begin our year with one of the most fundamental inquires of them all: that of the soul.

RESOLVED: BELIEF IN THE HUMAN SOUL ENRICHES THE LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL.

Affirmative: Saint Damien of Molokai '23

Negative: Lady Margaret Cavendish '23

Tonight, we step beyond *proving* the soul's existence (though that certainly is still on the table). Instead, we investigate how a *belief* in its existence changes how we live our life. Further, we do not consider the human soul as some noble lie intended to remedy the ills of society. Instead, we ask ourselves individually if a belief in the immaterial is conducive to our own happiness, fulfillment, and, ultimately, our flourishing.

It is the belief in the soul that seems to enable Socrates' willful acceptance of death, as beautifully depicted in Plato's *Apology*. "For the state of death is one of two things," he tells the jury, "either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead has no consciousness of anything, or it is, as people say, a change and migration of the soul from this to another place... If death is, as it were, a change of habitation from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what better blessing could there be?"

A belief in an immaterial dimension of existence, specifically that of the human soul, appears to allow an escape from our material conditions. The tragedies, misjudgments, and oppressions of our circumstances appear to wash away. We can, at least in belief, hope for the just reward of life well lived – whether in Beatific vision or the satisfaction of a life ornamented with virtue.

But a belief in the soul seems to be beneficial beyond just relief from momentary despair: it also affects our relationships and pursuit of Beauty. To have an immortal soul is to have the object of our *eros* be more than that of fleeting material beauty; it permits a finding of eternal Beauty. We find ourselves with the promise, if we labor hard enough, to become truly and fully satisfied. This is, of course, the lesson of Diotima in the *Symposium*. A soul enables us to climb the Ladder of Love, to find timeless Beauty in our romantic partners and platonic friendships. Oh how we must long for the timeless eternal commitments permitted by the position Damien will put before us tonight.

There is a separation from the material world that occurs, then, when we believe in the soul. Fr. Damien would say that this is the point: we *are* different. Cavendish, on the other hand, views this separation as counterproductive – not just to our flourishing, but also that of the world around us. Surely this is analogous to the argument of Marx when he calls religion the "opium of the masses." Does belief in the soul just help us cope with the gross injustices in our world?

Perhaps Socrates was blinded from the unspeakable grief he inflicted on his students through martyrdom by his belief in something immaterial. Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* most definitely seems at play here. The soul (and its domain up [in the Clouds](#)) might not only serve to cast a blind eye upon our alienation, but also, Cavendish warns, may only enable a sort of supremacy over the (rest of the) natural world. Rising sea levels and human-accelerated climate change become symptomatic of the hubris facilitated by soul belief.

Indeed, a sort of externalism arises from this position. This absurdity could/should be surrendered to, instead of the meaning-making inherent in the Soulful Project, the Negative claims. We must confront *and embrace* the grounded, the scientific, the physical as what and all there is – and make do with it. Indeed, this position may help propel us to action (revolution, anyone?), but I wonder if it can make up for the romanticism of the soulful relationship peddled by the Affirmative or the lessening of the stakes of, say, revolutionaries.

The 'belief' aspect of tonight's disputation is also most fascinating. Why do we return to myth at the end of Plato's *Republic*? What good is myth, is poetry? Perhaps it is some lie, some aesthetic, that provides a glimmer of hope and the promise of meaningful choice. Or that might just be the problem.

I'm sending along two suggested readings in the form of PDFs attached to this email: the conclusion of the *Republic* (the Myth of Er) and *Phaedo*'s death scene. Completing them is neither expected nor required. Indeed, 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 my hope that they will 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."

I so look forward to seeing (and, for the new folks, meeting) you all tonight. Do reach out with any questions or concerns.

Thursday, September 8th, 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.