

## Disputation CCLII

October 13th, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

Welcome back. I hope you all had an enjoyable fall break. Tonight, we explore rationality's limits...

**RESOLVED: SOME THINGS OUGHT BE BEYOND QUESTIONING.**

**Affirmative: Bayard Rustin '23**

**Negative: Vincent Han '24**

Before diving in, a clarification is an order on behalf of the Affirmative. It is not that some things ought escape questioning, but instead that some things be beyond. That is, certain beliefs or dogmas have a different level of importance or sacredness (though without religious implication). It is not to assume or take things for granted but instead for some believes to escape rigorous interrogation. In that sense, ideas are *grappled with*, but afforded a certain degree of reverence.

To say we ought not question everything seems so contrary to the Enlightenment values we have inherited. We are told it is our rationality that makes us distinctly human. Even the Classics, through their elevation of contemplation, emerge as this uniquely pro-philosophy force. It is the pursuit of absolute, evidence-based truth that is best for us – whatever the topic, whatever the stakes, whatever the consequences be.

Furter, the Negative brings up serious concerns that foundational values may come into conflict with the evidence-based truths that have been discovered. This cognitive dissonance of sorts is intolerable, damaging the expression of our rationality. The Affirmative shares a similar concern for the health of faculties, but concludes that *because of* this risk of overwhelming our rationality, we mustn't strive to interrogate everything. Instead, relief comes not from questioning *everything*, but by holding some things as given.

Yes, Rustin will take a somewhat Burkean approach to tradition. Things are sacred for a reason, the Affirmative argues. Tradition has value. Further, it is an insurmountable task for each of us to rebuild or reconstruct the values of our civilization from scratch. Or, if it not be too much for everyone, it is too much for most. The Affirmative fears the burden and psychological toil of having each of us make the world anew. Tonight, then, we also consider our relationship to cultural inheritance.

Further, one must consider philosophy's destabilizing influence on the regime. What does it mean to imagine a society where every truth is questioned, every value doubted? There seemingly is a real need for shared values, prejudices, etc. to unify a polity. Tocqueville identifies the usefulness of religion and desirability of dogmatic belief. What unifies the Negative's skeptic society? If it be an individual pursuit of truth, what of those who cannot adequately philosophize?

Recalling recent disputations, we may also venture into the realm of the extrarational. Can rationality fully explain the universe? Or, even if it can, is it desirable to believe so? Think back to our vote that belief in the human soul enriches our lives. Even if, say, free will cannot be proven, perhaps it be useful for man not to question its existence. Mr. Han sees great liberation in its exploration and interrogation; Rustin fears crippling if not destruction.

Further, we must also consider the power of rationality itself. Is it truly the catch-all some would have us believe? Can everything *really* be explained through science? Or must we instead turn to something *beyond* rationality? Further, it is perhaps that Freudian warning that civilization hangs insecurely in the balance, ever-threatened by passions that would otherwise tear it apart. I wonder how we'll make sense of that (and so much more) tonight around the Table.

See you soon.

**Peucinian Society Disputation CCLII**  
**Thursday, October 13th, 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](mailto: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.