

Disputation CCLIII

October 20th, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

Its hitting that time of the semester where a certain... feverish quality... becomes abundant on campus. Yes, as papers and readings and discussion board posts and group projects and research and honors projects and parent weekend plans and jobs and the beginnings of internship searches and application writing and writing Disputation emails all begin to make demands on our time, perhaps we need to touch some grass. Or do we?

A philosophy major, political theorist, and DCS minor walk into a bar...

RESOLVED: EMBRACE VIRTUAL REALITY.

Affirmative: Henry A. Wallace '24

Negative: St. Damien of Molokai '23

Tonight, we do not consider transhumanism. The disputation is not a consideration of some technological unification of mankind, nor a transcendence of our corporal rind into, say, little jars of brains floating in space. [Sorry, JD Bernal](#). By embrace, Wallace proposes its integration into everyday life – we all need our own VR labs

The Affirmative isn't arguing for a detachment from reality necessarily. Instead, Wallace will cast doubt on the very distinction between the experiences made possible by virtual reality (VR) technology and the experiences provided by the natural world. Life, so he says, is interpreted through symbols. VR becomes but a mere subset of reality. It is no different, he assures me, than when I step out of a sports stadium.

The distinction from 'mainstream reality' provided by the headset, the coffin, the body sensory suit, etc. isn't wholly dissimilar from the preparatory liminal spaces and darkened rooms we enjoy theatre, film, and art in. Yes, those long movie theater hallways serve a function to detach the patron from the everyday and enter the artworld. The Negative perhaps worry of some form of escapism, how can the anti-VR crowd enjoy art and make the escapist critique?

The Negative objects to the equating of VR with the natural world. Damien insists, however complicated and perfect the technology, it remains merely imitation. No one looks at *White House in a Lupine Meadow* (Lisa Kyle, 2022) and thinks they *actually* see a white house in a lupine meadow. Or, rather, the Negative shudders at the proposition that some would view VR as a *genre* of reality. Damien insists they are different. We know who creates our VR; nature is a product of her god.

To embrace VR, then, is to bask in human edifice under a spell of technological artifice. In its embrace, at least for Damien, is the shrugging off what is real for the imitative. The Affirmative will attempt to blur this distinction. How radical would this embrace, be though? Think of all the time we already spend on screens. What is VR but a bit more immersive of an experience? What

really is the difference between spending all day emailing (or binge watching Netflix) and VR programs?

It is this extra-immersive power, though, that Damien worries will only lead to addiction. If we can't get off our phones, then what will we do with our headsets? Yes, the kids really ought stop playing those damn video games an- *now they want to live in them?! The Affirmative will have to show that VR is not just productive and good, but that it also may be controlled. That is, we will have to chart a path for VR's responsible use.*

Or maybe we don't. Maybe the addiction, the departing from the natural isn't a horrible thing. Henri Lefebvre and others, though, would disagree. What of VR's power to alienate us? That is, VR (as do movies and literature and twitter and theatre) appears to have the ability for us to forget reality. Or, more insidiously, it may make us more apathetic about our material lives, able to escape into some digital utopia. Perhaps we need to confront our quotidian experience. Only then will we have the willpower to engage politically, to push for issues that matter, etc. not having the option to scurry off into our corner of the metaverse. VR perhaps is a recipe for political apathy.

Or, is the radical reimagination and reshaping at the click of a button liberating? That is, does it finally perfect the liberal project, man being able to not just live and act as he pleases but also inhabit the world he pleases? It is this ability that might allow the oppressed to escape persecution and express themselves fully. Or, the Negative may object, does it provide an easier way out compared to the long and necessary work of political reform?

We, too, must consider the individualism seemingly inherent in this project. Yes, VR may allow for interaction with others from across the globe – but it may also mean departing from our familial ties and the local. How does one govern effectively when VR's great escapism is not just made available but embraced? Or does VR serve to quell popular demands of the masses, the statesmen now having to deliver less to remain in power?

As we finally have 'post-pandemic' life feel not just normal but routine and taken for granted, I remain so curious about how that will inform our discussion tonight. What are the limits of the virtual? Or, rather, what are the merits of the physical? Indeed, what is it about the headache we get after using VR for some time, our brain realizing *something* is off?

I look forward to seeing you all (physically present in person) later tonight.

Peucinian Society Disputation CCLIII
Thursday, October 20th, 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.