

Disputation CCLIV

November 3, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

Last time, we rejected virtual reality. Tonight, we consider our mortality. Five years ago in President Rousseau's email introducing a disputation on the same resolved statement, he recalled with "horror and curiosity" the notion that modern medicine could make our shared death-filled fate a feature of the past. Now we are perhaps closer than ever, and a growing transhumanist movement have made Bernal's prospect of mind-in-a-jar more real than ever. What should we make of this? Read on -

RESOLVED: LIVE FOREVER.

Affirmative: Lady Margaret Cavendish '23

Negative: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz '24

As ever, a few clarifications are necessary. Tonight, we do not consider some sci-fi, *Gattaca*-inspired superhuman. Instead, to vote in the affirmative would be to wish to live forever as we live now in our humanly body, though without aging, disease, et cetera. That is, we consider if we ought to wish we could extend our *human* life beyond our mortal limits. This, though, is where our disagreement begins. What does it mean to be human, if take away our grave-ful fate?

For the Negative, life – however unpredictability short – is sufficient as it is. Midlife (or is it quarterlife, o discontented Bowdoin student) crises are a result not of life's insufficiency but that we misuse it. You *could* have spent time reading that book, caring for that beloved, exploring that place... but it was instead squandered. How hubristic and arrogant it may be to respond to one's miscalculations by simply demanding 'more!' Further, Leibniz reminds us that life's problems will not simply disappear in the absence of death. Instead, they may be amplified. Indeed, you'll be stuck here. Forever. Not only will you be surrounded by the 'nice' things we perhaps wish we could enjoy more, but also those dark dreaded episodes that sprinkle our human existence. Again, Forever.

But isn't there something cowardly about this? The Affirmative sees things differently. Perhaps infinite time releases us from the horrors of life's unpleasanties. Further, think of all the new experiences, all the things to do, that suddenly are within reach. Forget premature specialization; you can have it all. There is nothing good about death and the slow decay of the body that invites it. Why would we wish to tolerate it and the mad scramble and urgency it brings to each healthy moment? Think of the joy (or was it horror?) that we felt this week looking at classfinder, coming up with lists of interesting classes exponentially longer than we know we can take. Why should we want it to be this way?

Hidden somewhere in the disagreement, too, is a difference on the nature of our valuation of moments. Does value merely come from a recognition of the fleeting nature of the moment? Do we not cherish our friends more in the waning weeks of the semester, do we not cherish the beach more on that last sunset of vacation, because we know we must move on? Or is this just a

misunderstanding? Do we instead value moments, people, and [places](#) not because we know we must let go but because they are inherently good themselves?

If the disputants won't make this ask of you tonight, I will: let us attempt to move past that fearful nagging concern we have that our life – and all its triumphs, its bittersweet loves, and beautiful mundanity – might lose its significance in its infiniteness. What if we push beyond that (perhaps conditioned) concern and consider life itself. Do we wish to live forever? Do we hope we could expand this experience not just as long as we can, but *forever*?

Yes, consider possessing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful – those things that, if we take our philosophy seriously, should be fulfilling in themselves. It seems to follow, as the negative will argue tonight, that we should strive to hold on to them forever. Or is there some claim the negative can make to temper this? Is there some reason why we should let ourselves depart from it? Is there not tragedy but virtue in goodbye?

What of boredom, immortal-longing man? If four years (or even just a couple months) is enough to tire of a place as magical as coastal Maine, what would an eternity be like? Yes, we may have an infinite number of books to read, topics to explore, sights to see, but wouldn't we tire of it all? Wouldn't we ever reach the threshold where we are satisfied – not by having seen all that there is, but by having seen *enough*? Perhaps the Affirmative will remind us that we will forget – yes, 'do you remember the first time you tasted chocolate?' Surely we forget the nuances and intricacies of our favorite story, of our favorite places, of our favorite people when we have departed from there for some time. This may be enough to make life tolerable.

Yet, isn't that forgetting most painful? What of places that we have lost, people that we have moved on from, art that has been ruined by tomato-can wielding activists? Sure, our forgetting may make them a new experience, but isn't the act of forgetting itself not one of the most horrific things possible, of *moving past* what one once valued? What is beautiful about a life made tolerable only through forgetting? What would prevent an April that is not just cruel, but devastating?

Where, too, does our artistic muse come from? How does one sacrifice, or does one even need to? Why not shrug off the ugly realities of death?

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these questions (and many more) tonight.

Peucinian Society Disputation CCLIV
Thursday, November 3rd, 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.