

D1: Writing versus Speaking

Topic: In *The Phaedrus*, Plato frequently denigrates writing in relation to speech, arguing that writing is more a crutch than an inspiration to finding truth. Resolved that writing is inferior to speech.

Students who are not debaters should come to class prepared to ask questions. In particular, please have in mind one argument on one side or the other that you think is especially compelling or even decisive.

D2: International Cultural and Political Diversity

Topic: Resolved that it is desirable to tolerate a heterogeneity of political regimes and cultural values, even when that heterogeneity makes it more likely that democratic institutions will be attacked from without.

Background: (These notes help to explain the debate topic but are not part of the "official" resolution. Debaters are free to take these thoughts as a guide or to ignore them.) This resolution is an abstract issue that has lately been concretely instantiated in various contexts. Consider these three cases:

In Afghanistan, an oppressive regime treated its citizenry brutally and sheltered groups who trained and planned to commit murderous acts of terror. Should the United States have tolerated this regime or was our overthrow of this government justified? What if the Taliban had been democratically elected but had still behaved brutally? What if the Afghani government had been oppressive and brutal but had not been harboring terrorist organizations?

Iraq provides a second test case. Saddam Hussein was undeniably brutal but also (we now know) demonstrably weak, at least as far as his ability to wage war and commit atrocities in other countries. Nevertheless, he was ideologically committed to the destruction of the United States, Israel, and many democratic institutions, and his leadership of a large country helped to promote his values and spread them around the world. Was our invasion of Iraq and ouster of Saddam Hussein justified? Would it have been justified if he had been building weapons of mass destruction? Would it have been justified had he been an ideological supporter of Al Qaeda? This was a regime whose

worldview was not only incompatible with ours, but whose express goals include the destruction of our way of life. Should we tolerate such a regime in the name of heterogeneity, or are we better off imposing our own view of what's best?

Finally, there is the example of Saudi Arabia, a country in which Islamic orthodoxy is dominant and inscribed in the laws of the land. This country too is committed, at least implicitly, to the destruction of our way of life, but seems less supportive of radically violent means of achieving this change. Our administration maintains personal ties to the leaders of Saudi Arabia, but the ideological differences are dramatic and irreconcilable. Should we impose a democratic order on Saudi Arabia, ensuring the rights of women and protecting its population from what we consider to be unreasonable restrictions on their freedom? Or should we tolerate what we might regard as a morally reprehensible situation in the name of freedom of choice and heterogeneity?

In the United States, individual freedom is protected, including even the freedom to speak and act against the interests of the government and other institutions that uphold democracy. Though this freedom is not unbounded, we believe that our citizens have a right to hold and express views at odds with the views of our Constitution and other representatives of cultural and political authority. There are many reasons that we support this right to freedom of thought, expression, and action, but one of them is our belief that a free society encourages innovation and experimentation. That is, we want to guarantee the right to complain about the government partly because we want to make sure that the government changes when such change is warranted. Furthermore, this freedom makes it more difficult for the government to oppress its citizens; the freedom of the population is a check on the actions of the government. In some sense, this topic is asking you to consider whether this principle should hold in the world at large, applied to other countries and cultures rather than to individuals.

D3: The Value of Technology

Topic: Resolved that genetic engineering should be vigorously pursued as a means of improving the human condition.