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Returning Classical Virtue to Modern Civil Discourse

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Abstract
Modern citizens generally find it impossible to come to shared conclusions about moral disagreements in civil discourse. In this paper, I support MacIntyre’s thesis that the breakdown of moral dialogue is due to Enlightenment ethicists’ failure to rationally ground morality in any objective standard following their rejection of Aristotelian virtue ethics. As a result, public demonstrations of wrath against fellow citizens are common in our civil discourse because our virtuous conduct is less important than our irreconcilable ideological goals. I argue that returning to virtue is necessary and that virtues can be recognized initially by adherence to Aristotle’s standard of the Mean. I consider three virtues of the good citizen: wit, patience, and hope, and show that these virtues cannot be expressed under our currently preferred methods of civil discourse. An alternative approach is needed, one that looks more like citizens engaged in a ‘barn-raising’ and less like a ‘war.’

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Returning Classical Virtue to Modern Civil Discourse

by

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The report of the investigation undertaken as a Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in the Department of Philosophy

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For citizens
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I. Introduction

It is not difficult to find examples of hostility in modern civil discourse. In fact, it almost feels cliché to point out that citizens are deeply at odds with one another from an ideological perspective, and anger seems to be one of the dominant emotions that manifests as a result of this. Civil conversations about abortion, MeToo, immigration, and gender identity are not even expected. To some, those who support legal abortion and the MeToo movement are supporters of murder and male witch-hunts. To others, those who do not support legal abortion or the MeToo movement are misogynists and do not support prosecuting sexual misconduct.

At a 2016 fundraiser during the presidential election, Hillary Clinton called “half” of Donald Trump’s supporters a “basket of deplorables [with] racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic” views, to which she received laughter and applause (Reilly). Trump supporters responded with their own attacks and mocking nicknames for Democratic politicians, some of which suggest pedophilia, as in the nickname #pedosta for Democratic lobbyist Tony Podesta. Not to mention, a supporter at a Trump rally was seen wearing a shirt with the phrase “Hillary Clinton Killed My Friends” (Baker and Rogers). These are but anecdotal examples of the harsh way we view our moral and political opponents and their representatives — our fellow citizens. We see other ever-present examples of hostility not merely confined to the duration of public elections.

In her hit-piece “Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web,” New York Times columnist Bari Weiss attempts to discredit public intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris (two accredited doctors), calling them “renegade” members of a group of pseudointellectuals locked out of mainstream outlets because of what Weiss
implies are their unacceptable views (Weiss). These are the same mainstream outlets, I might add, that thrive on anger and disagreement rather than the productive discussions aimed at conclusions — conclusions which characterize the goal of the aforementioned intellectuals’ academic approach. It is no coincidence that Weiss, a representative for a mainstream outlet, attacks them so ferociously. We see examples of public intellectuals otherwise shouted down when attempting to give speeches at college campuses, we see threats, we even saw the social scientist, Charles Murray, physically attacked by students at Middlebury College (The Economist).

Anger and polarity does not simply affect impersonal relationships with people whom we do not know and disagree with. It has infected friendships and family bonds. Even before the 2016 presidential election, Hugo Schwyzer of The Washington Post seriously suggested in 2014 that it is morally permissible and understandable for an Obama supporter to terminate a friendship with a Romney supporter, simply for political reasons, because maintaining friendships with those we disagree with is made possible by “privilege” (Schwyzer). Civility, he argues, is not really about a willingness to engage in disagreements, but an unwillingness to sink to a particular level that one sees their opposition as occupying. It might seem laughable now to consider Romney and Obama supporters to be truly at odds (both men are very critical of President Trump), but this shows that even before polarization became so clear and vast among the citizenry, moderate candidates of opposing sides could be seen as morally unacceptable to one another. As a result, their supporters — one’s fellow citizens, coworkers, and family members — could be seen as unacceptable as well.
A commonly shared public joke in our society is that of the dreaded family get-together. Both conservatives and liberals can all agree that in a politically diverse and opinionated family, these gatherings can be unpleasant. Uncles get into it with each other over whether or not the President “speaking his mind” is inherently a good thing to do. Grandchildren scold their grandparents for holding archaic views, and grandparents roll their eyes and scoff at the sanctimony of those who are one quarter of their age.

Christmas, with no hint of sarcasm, has for many turned into the holiday coined by the TV show, *Seinfeld*, as Festivus — a time for people to air their grievances (“The Strike”). This represents the state of our civil discourse as citizens. We are not focused on coming to conclusions regarding our moral differences, but on condemning those who we see as morally repugnant or ignorant — people whose existence is something to complain about. Citizens who mourn the lack of constructive civil discourse as a method to reach moral conclusions: beware! The state of modern civil discourse is “Festivus for the rest of us” (“The Strike”).

It might be tempting to suggest that since moral disagreements have always existed, the problem of anger I lay out is not particularly modern, but a timeless inevitability of civil discourse. I do not contest that moral disagreements and the anger they produce have always existed and will always exist — that would be absurd. However, what I am suggesting is that our view of civil discourse has changed such that it is no longer focused on or capable of producing shared conclusions; this is a particularly modern problem.

In this paper I will show how this loss of conclusion-oriented dialogue is accounted for by Alasdair MacIntyre as the result of the failure of Enlightenment ethicists
to rationally and objectively justify morality. This ultimately leads to individuals accepting radically different conclusions about the public good that cannot be reconciled by any shared standard. I will then explain MacIntyre’s solution to this problem, which consists of grounding morality in a coherent conception of the purpose for a human life, and an ethical system based on virtue instead of opposing and irreconcilable moral commandments, rules, or principles. I then consider the public anger resulting from irreconcilable moral disagreements from a position of virtue ethics and show that excessive anger, the vice of wrath, is not a justifiable approach to civil discourse given the supposed purpose of civil discourse: to come to conclusions. The vice of wrath prevents us from coming to conclusions based on virtue, and if we cannot fulfill the purpose of civil discourse, which constitutes the basic activity of the citizen, then we are bad citizens with no legitimate conception of the public good. Given that wrath is the easiest vice to identify on a systematic level in civil discourse, I move into considering a standard by which we can determine what counts as a virtue in a way that directly addresses the problem of wrath. This standard, I argue, can be initially conceived of as Aristotle’s Mean, or, the idea that virtues can be thought of as a balance between excessive and deficient displays of a particular behavior or emotion. With a new standard to work with, I consider three virtues that I believe are most helpful to consider and apply to a conception of the “good citizen,” but they are by no means all-inclusive. These virtues are wit, patience, and hope, all of which I show adhere to the Mean even if Aristotle does not conceive of them in the same way — such as the virtue of hope. With these virtues to provide a preliminary guide to the good citizen and civil discourse, I then consider four metaphors that represent our approach to argumentation in civil discourse:
war, gift-exchange, therapy, and barn-raising. I conclude that the metaphor of barn-raising best supports all three virtues which ultimately provides the best chance for citizens to arrive at shared conclusions.

There are a few distinctions that need to be made between terms before I begin the argument of this paper. The first is a distinction between what MacIntyre calls “moral dialogue” and what I call “civil discourse.” To MacIntyre, moral dialogue is structured and academic. It has deductive and inductive arguments, sound reasoning, and is well-thought out with the purpose of constructing a convincing argument. As I will show, MacIntyre believes that even this academic dialogue is incapable of producing solutions, despite lacking the wrath I identify in civil society. By civil discourse, I refer to a more rugged moral dialogue between citizens. It is not focused on constructing beautifully deductive arguments, it is not focused on quoting Kant, Hume, or Aristotle at length to serve as textual support. Civil discourse is the non-academic moral dialogue concerned with the moral and political disagreements between the members of a civil society — the citizens, not just academic philosophers (although it certainly includes them as citizens).

This brings me to another distinction: my conception of the citizen. Throughout this piece I will refer to the quality of being a citizen as possessing “citizenhood” rather than “citizenship.” The members of a civil society, those who engage in civil discourse, may not all have the same legal relationship to the state in which they live. That is to say, a civil society consists of legal citizens, legal residents, and undocumented residents alike. All of these groups engage in civil discourse whether we like it or not, and so all must abide by the virtues of a “good citizen” if the activity of the citizen, civil discourse, is to be fruitful. This piece does not argue that undocumented residents be granted the
right to vote, but it *does* argue that these individuals possess the ability to engage in the main *activity* of the citizen, civil discourse. Therefore, their views cannot be discounted simply due to the lack of a legal relationship with a particular state. Citizenship, to me, is a legal term which recognizes only a majority of members in civil society, whereas citizenhood is *not* a legal term, and represents *all* members of civil society who, whether or not they possess voting rights or legal residency, contribute to the ongoing public discussions of the society, which is what I call civil discourse. It is important to remember that *whenever* I use the term citizen, I use it to mean a member of civil society, *not* a necessarily *legal* citizen.

With all that in mind, I can begin the argument of this paper. As I have acknowledged, this will require a discussion of MacIntyre’s diagnosis regarding the failure of modern moral dialogue. It is to this topic which I will now turn before providing my own account regarding how we might move forward as good citizens concerned with engaging in virtuous civil discourse for the purpose of reaching conclusions about the public good.
Chapter One: MacIntyre’s Diagnosis of Moral Dialogue

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral dialogue is interminable due to the fact that opposing assertions cannot be reconciled by referencing any coherent notion of “the good” which guides the purpose of a human life, and ultimately, morality. MacIntyre then provides a road map back to a coherent moral tradition based on a social *telos*, the attainment of which necessarily requires the moral primacy of *virtue*. This conception of virtue can be grounded in what MacIntyre calls ‘practices’ which serve as the mode of objectivity by which we can come to moral conclusions in reference to the goal of a human life. In this chapter I will explain MacIntyre’s argument to elucidate how a coherent moral tradition based on the virtues might be revived to solve the perpetual conflict which constitutes our moral dialogue.

The reason why citizens with different political perspectives cannot come to shared conclusions about moral issues is *not* because citizens are inherently irrational, stupid, or uninformed. Rather, MacIntyre argues and I agree that all moral dialogue consists of “rival premises […] such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another (8). It is often not that one person’s argument is valid, and the other is invalid. It is not that one person’s argument is sound and one person’s is not. Surely, it *can* be the case that one’s argument is invalid (as indeed, in civil discourse, it often is), but invalid arguments being held in the face of valid arguments are not the *source* of the interminability of moral dialogue. Furthermore, the invalidity of an argument does not necessarily entail that the conclusion is absolutely untrue — only that the particular way in which the conclusion is reached is illegitimate. Even if an argument has been ‘refuted’, that does not mean the conclusion has been proven false. I could argue
that “Murder is wrong because grass is green.” If one refutes this argument by saying that the greenness of grass has nothing to do with the moral implications of murder, this does not mean that one has shown that murder is not wrong. One has simply shown that the way I choose to go about arguing that murder is wrong is invalid; but murder can certainly still be wrong even if I am incorrect in my account of why murder is wrong. The one-who-is-‘refuted’ of course recognizes this upon being refuted, and therefore usually feels entitled to maintain his or her conclusion despite the invalidity pointed out in their argument. This, of course, leads to ceaseless debate. There is seemingly no rational criteria by which we can ultimately conclude moral Truth.

To illustrate with a more concrete example, MacIntyre regards an argument which states that the moral authority of equality demands that the government run a universal healthcare system, while another argument states that the moral authority of liberty demands a privately run healthcare system (7). Each conclusion is reached through a series of premises, but those premises do not address the concerns of the opposing premises. In each case, either equality or liberty is presupposed to be equivalent to Justice, and so conversations about the just ordering of society (such as how to administer healthcare) are necessarily interminable because each proceeds with assumptions about the good that the other disagrees with. Arguments in favor of government run healthcare begin with the assumption that all people are equally entitled to a certain quality of life, while arguments in favor of private healthcare begin with the assumption that all people are free to determine what obligations they will voluntarily take on. If one begins an argument from these assumptions, as defenses for such positions usually do, then any hope of coming to shared conclusions is hopeless.
MacIntyre argues that one’s decision to recognize the authority of Enlightenment-based ideologies such as liberty instead of equality, or utilitarianism instead of deontology and vice versa is not a rationally grounded choice based on a coherent notion of the good, but rather, a “criterionless choice” between rival ideologies with competing notions of what constitutes the essential components of human nature (39). Equality and liberty, utility and duty, rights and security, are used in moral dialogue as incompatible ideas that must be weighed against one another. Yet, it is unclear in any objective sense which value ought to be regarded as more authoritative, and arguments from premises which presuppose the moral authority of one cannot disprove the other. These opposing moral terms, MacIntyre argues, have been stripped of their traditional, coherent context as a result of Enlightenment ethicists’ failure to rationally ground them in an objective standard by which they can be weighed.

According to MacIntyre, this failure is because the Enlightenment annihilated any conception of the human being as a creature with an inherent telos by which moral language can be made intelligible (52). That is to say, neither utilitarianism nor deontology nor any other moral ideology based on Enlightenment thought provides a legitimate account of the purpose of a human life. Without a conception of the purpose of a human life, it is impossible to rationally determine what objective morality consists of. This is because the originally coherent study of ethics was predicated on such a telos as MacIntyre points out using Aristotle as the representative for this classical view. He explains that in this coherent system there are “three elements of the scheme - the conception of untutored human nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics and the conception of human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos” (53). Each of
these elements are supported by and presuppose one another (53). That is to say, to understand what our “untutored human nature” really consists of (our ‘carnal’ state uninformed by ethical reasoning), we must have a conception of “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos” (what we could be/what we would look like if we corrected our uninformed nature). These two elements will in turn dictate what specific corrections need to be made to one’s ignorant human nature in light of the purpose of a human life so that one can fulfill one’s true end and achieve the goal of morality. Though the first and last elements of this classical scheme are foreign concepts to modern morality, modern moral ideologies still certainly maintain accounts of the precepts of rational ethics. Utilitarianism’s account consists of cultivating the greatest good for the greatest number, deontology’s account consists of rationally universalizable principles which inform one’s duty, and so on. However, the problem is that none of these precepts gain their authority from a coherent conception of human nature or human purpose. None of these systems derive their legitimacy based on what a good human life looks like, so why should any of them bear any authority over one another? Is not a crucial aspect of ethics to enable a human being to move from a life-unwell-lived to a life-well-lived?

If there is no identifiable purpose to a human life, then there is no way to tell which elements of human nature are in need of ‘tutoring,’ or moral education. There is no way to know whether or not utility should guide or moral views over deontological reason, or whether positive rights or negative rights should be more authoritative, because each appeals to a different aspect of human nature. These aspects of human nature—pleasure and pain which guides utility, one’s rational agency which guides reason, and one’s inherent dignity which guides rights—are mere “fragments” of the whole, whose
purpose in the moral sphere becomes absolute due to the absence of a *telos*. If one sees pleasure and pain as a moral absolute, then there is no reason why any argument which does not recognize utility as the supreme moral authority could be legitimate. The same is the case with the human being’s rational capacity, a claim which appeals to the authority of universalized moral principles. However, claims based which appeal to these duties and claims which appeal to utility cannot refute or address each other because neither recognizes the fragment of human nature the other recognizes. As a result of these opposing constitutive components of human nature, and no coherent vision for the purpose of a human life, we produce widely different moral conclusions which are fundamentally irreconcilable when weighed against one another.

The Enlightenment’s rejection of teleology, MacIntyre shows, did more to “fragment” the true content of morality than it did enlighten us on some objective standard. This teleology, however, was rejected on seemingly legitimate grounds. Enlightenment ethicists and scientists alike rejected Aristotle’s notion of the human as a being with a certain “metaphysical biology” (148). MacIntyre ultimately argues that though Enlightenment ethicists rightly rejected *Aristotle’s* teleology due to a faulty view of a human being’s metaphysical nature, teleology is an inherent component of a coherent and intelligible moral framework that provides for the possibility of terminating moral discussions (197). The modern rejection of teleology obscures the hierarchy of authority for moral rules. It confuses the relevance of concepts such as ‘duty’ and ‘utility’ which were once weighed *together as components* of moral consideration. In contemporary dialogue, instead of asking how we might approach the problem of, say, healthcare by both maximizing utility *and* fulfilling our duties, we seem to want to *pick* between the
two. Some argue for utility which is concerned with subjective happiness or efficiency, arguing that fewer people will benefit from this system. Others argue either that they hold a certain right to healthcare regardless of government performance because the government has a duty to figure out how to provide it. Instead of investigating what goods each view might be concerned with and accounting for it as a legitimate appeal to some moral good, such concepts are seen as competing notions of moral absolutes. This is incoherence is due to the fact that one’s telos, the foundational necessity of coherent morality, is traditionally achieved by (and morality traditionally consists of) adherence to virtues which informs one of the proper ‘moral rules.’ It is here that MacIntyre begins to undertake the reclamation of a grounding for the conception of a human telos.

To answer the question of whether or not Enlightenment ethicists were justified in rejecting Aristotelian meta-ethics (i.e. teleological ethics) requires an account of a legitimate conception of a human telos that stands up to the criticisms levied against the traditionally Aristotelian conception of such a concept: eudaimonia. MacIntyre defines it as, “the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man’s being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine” (148). The definition itself is vague as MacIntyre notes; Aristotle himself does not give many qualitative descriptions of this state other than it is only attainable through the cultivation of virtue (148). What is apparently meant is that eudaimonia can be cashed as a sort of fulfillment in one’s life that is self-sufficiently meaningful and pursued for its own sake as the goal of a human life. Aristotle’s eudaimonia has been almost universally rejected in the modern age due to its reliance on his metaphysical system, but MacIntyre argues that the concept itself can be saved through a reinterpretation that does not rely on metaphysics. The consequence of
this would be a road map back to a teleological conception of the human being, and therefore, a coherent moral framework based on the cultivation of virtues rather than incommensurable moral assertions, all for the purpose of realizing the human good.

MacIntyre argues that something like *eudaimonia* can be grounded in society rather than necessarily requiring metaphysics. He calls this view of the human being one that is “socially teleological” rather than metaphysically biological (196-97). To ground a telos in society, MacIntyre argues, requires a conception of what he calls “practices.” A practice is defined as:

. . . any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (187).

Practices are an important component of socially grounded teleology and virtue ethics because every practice has an objective standard by which one achieves or fails to achieve the standards of the practice. The practitioner of citizenhood (the citizen) is judged by how well or poorly she acts in the public sphere in an attempt to execute the public good. The practitioner of parenthood, a mother or father, is judged by how well they help their child become a capable human person, to whatever degree that is possible, based on a tendency to be present in their child’s life, to show love to their child, and to teach their child moral and life lessons effectively. The practice of citizenhood and the
practice of parenthood are cooperative activities because both rely on other practitioners and people outside the practice to meet their ends, but it is not for these other people that these ends are pursued, and one’s being a good parent does not rely solely on external means — far from it.

For MacIntyre, the purpose of fulfilling one’s role in a practice is sufficient in itself; the good parent wants to be a good parent not because of some external reward or good, but for the internal goods which are attained by fulfilling one’s purpose in a given role — a purpose which can only be achieved by the cultivation of virtue, in this case, parental virtue. The achievement of internal goods, being the purpose for which we engage in practices, is only possible through the cultivation of those virtues which allow one to be considered a good practitioner. The achievement of internal goods are the mark of a good practitioner, and therefore, a guide to a vision of a virtuous person fulfilling their purpose. Practices are pursued for internal goods because, as MacIntyre notes, these are the goods which are self-sufficient and in their achievement do not require anyone else to be worse off. He argues that internal goods are indeed “the outcome of competition to excel,” but “their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice” rather than a good which is “some individual’s property or possession” (190–91). Power and money are external goods, because neither can be gained without a cost to somebody else. On the other hand, a sense of belonging or a technological innovation is an internal good because everyone who participates in the practice can benefit from its realization. Internal goods are the “rewards of the virtues” and this makes them goods which are indicative of character, teleologically relevant, and unable to be ‘bought’ (198). Internal goods are open to practitioners that may even be less
skillful than experts in a given practice since they are the “outcome of competition to excel” and not the outcome of success, *per se*. To excel in a given practice, I must cultivate the virtues relevant to that practice, and achieve those goods which are particular to the activity and which extend to all those who participate. A good basketball player, perhaps, is industrious and honest, because in her industriousness she makes herself and others better players, and in her honesty, say, by calling her own fouls, she encourages the game to be played fairly. As such, she concerns herself with the internal goods pertaining to the game-going-well rather than purely the external good of victory. Victory — success — is of course the goal of a basketball game, and a good basketball player aims for victory and often achieves it. Yet, victory cannot be the goal above all other goals in basketball because wins can be secured through sinister means such as cheating or deliberately injuring an opposing star player.

The virtuous person does not pursue excellence for material success or worldly power, he pursues excellence because it self-sufficiently fulfills both him and his community. Without the community surrounding him, no practice could exist, because communities require a level of cooperation. Practices are inherently *cooperative* activities even if an essential component is competition. Victory is not the *only* reason we play basketball because: a.) plenty of practices allow for the possibility of victory and b.) the purpose of a practice cannot require others to fail since internal goods, the goods which practices are primarily concerned with, can be shared with *all* who participate in the practice cooperatively. Victory, an external good, requires failure and is exclusive; *despite* potentially being a mark of virtue, it does not always require it.
All this to say, if one is on the whole a good practitioner: teammate, son, daughter, father, mother, husband, wife, citizen, worker, and/or friend, all of which require the cultivation of virtue rather than allegiance to external goods or fragments such as utility and rights, then one is a good person, and one can be said to have achieved one’s social telos, or purpose. If virtues are traditionally the road to the achievement of one’s telos, and those virtues can be most easily cultivated and observed through the participation in practices where internal goods can be realized and are given priority, then it is clear that one’s virtuous or vicious participation in practices constitutes a large part of morality, and perhaps this is a standard by which we can understand and approach the moral dialogue which constitutes our civil discourse as citizens.
Chapter Two: Public Wrath Pandemic

In this chapter I will argue that since modern moral dialogue is legitimately incapable of producing terminable solutions in its current form of fragmented and irreconcilable assertions, the modern tendency to unleash wrath upon our fellow citizens in civil discourse is unjustifiable due to its inherently vicious nature. Such behavior is not conducive to a legitimate notion of the practice of a good, virtuous citizen, nor does it provide the possibility that the moral dialogue which our civil discourse is concerned with can be terminated. We are bad practitioners of citizenhood, and it is necessary to pinpoint where we are going wrong in our practice to determine what virtues need to be cultivated to correct a deeply polarized polity.

I must caution, first, to distinguish wrath from anger. I am not saying we ought not get angry when we witness various injustices. For it would seem to me very cold, emotionally devoid, and downright inhuman if when we witnessed clearly gross injustices such as domestic violence, animal abuse, or genocide we lacked any anger. In “Beyond Anger,” Martha Nussbaum identifies Aristotle’s conception of anger as the most helpful definition for a broad analysis. She writes that “anger is a response to a significant damage to something or someone one cares about, and a damage that the angry person believes to have been wrongfully inflicted. [Aristotle] adds that although anger is painful, it also contains within itself a hope for payback” (Nussbaum). Without this inherent desire for the offender to be punished in some way, the emotion we feel cannot be anger. Anger has a quality of both pain and hope, because it acknowledges the legitimacy of a victim’s suffering, which is itself painful, yet seeks refuge in the idea that the offender will at some point understand the suffering by suffering punishment himself.
Yet, Nussbaum demonstrates a problem with this through an account of Seneca’s position on anger in her book, *Therapy of Desire*. She states of Seneca’s view, “Anger hardens the spirit and turns it against the humanity it sees. And in turning against humanity, in evincing the rage and disgust of the angry, one then becomes perilously close to the cruel and aggressive types who arouse the disgust” (423). Despite the fact that anger may be a legitimate and necessary impetus to correct certain wrongs, if one takes a systematic approach to issues of injustice from a position of anger, this clouds the purpose of administering justice in the first place. A consistent harboring of anger necessarily develops into a pathological way of viewing the world. Consistent anger does nothing to solve the issues it sees, it merely exacerbates the tendency toward cruelty which the angry person supposedly wants to reject. Though, to avoid being committed to views that negate the legitimacy of anger in cases of extreme injustices, where Nussbaum uses the term ‘anger’ to mean a state which ultimately “hardens the spirit and turns it against the humanity it sees,” I use a slightly more exclusive term, *wrath*, in a way that refers to the systematic harboring of anger and its product rather than controlled anger in particular cases. That is, it is completely acceptable (and likely desirable) to be angry when we hear someone defend unjustified police violence, but to commit violence against police (or encourage it) ourselves is a rejection of the humanity in officers we see in those who suffer violence at their hands. By wishing for violence and abuse to be inflicted ourselves, even against those who perpetuate oppression, we are not defenders of virtue, we are harbingers of vice, and we are indistinguishable from our enemies.

It seems indisputable to me that unleashing wrath in civil discourse is *unjustifiable*, not just because it is vicious, but especially given the interminability of
moral dialogue as a result of the failed Enlightenment project of justifying morality that MacIntyre identifies. Anger in civil discourse can seen as a main contributing factor to the rise of populism, but I use extreme caution in identifying populism as an example, because it is certainly not that case that only populist citizens harbor anger or wrathful tendencies. When Hillary Clinton called all Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables” and received widespread crowd approval, this was a wrathful condemnation, but Clinton and her supporters are no populists.

Nevertheless, populism can be seen as but one unfortunate effect of interminable moral dialogue and ultimately the wrath which occurs within the context of systematically failed civil discourse because it oversimplifies moral and political debates into battles of good and evil. Both left and right wing populisms are characterized by this very worldview, despite holding very different political policy views. Cas Mudde, a scholar of populism describes it as a “thin-centered ideology,” meaning it is more of an approach, a mind set, rather than a highly developed and specific ideology (543). The worldview consists, basically, of two “homogenous and antagonistic” classes of people. On the one hand, there exist the morally blameless and pure “people,” whose ‘general will’ is obstructed by its opposite and antagonist class, the corrupt “elite” or establishment as it is commonly called (543). This is an oversimplification of socio-political dynamics which delegitimizes any view that does not come from the “pure people” who favor things like ‘common sense’ over civil discourse. The false sense of homogeneity and purity among “the people” gives rise to the belief that a righteous general will can be discerned, but this is surely a fallacy given the plurality and diversity of views that exist in our society among ‘average’ people. On the other hand, for those
who are not populists (‘the elite,’ in populists’ eyes), to dismiss populists as ‘dumb’ or ‘just angry’ is clearly fallacious considering the truly irreconcilable nature of moral assertions, and ultimately, civil discourse. This is of course not to mention that populists seem to evoke a lot of anger in non-populists as well, which delegitimizes the notion that populists as disproportionately angry people.

The populist is an important case study for anger, however, because unlike the non-populist, civil discourse is viewed as a tool that the corrupt establishment uses to manipulate the morally blameless and victimized people. The fact that citizens engage in civil discourse is not taken, for the populist, as a evidence that moral disagreements exist between the true people of a polity. When Bernie Sanders, commonly thought of as a left-populist, delegitimizes the political opinions of black South Carolinians by accusing “corporate Democrats” of stealing their votes in favor of Joe Biden (Rubin), he negates the existence of political diversity in the African American community (who Bernie sees as members of the ‘pure people’) and appeals to a nonexistent standard of political common sense. Surely, Sanders thinks, since black South Carolinians are people he is trying to defend from white supremacy, disenfranchisement, and income inequality, any reason why they would not support him must be because of nefarious elite establishment influences. Sanders, like all populists, sees himself as the keeper of the public good, and this is why populism serves as a good example of the wrath that results from interminability. When Donald Trump tells supporters to “knock the crap out of” protestors (White), he sends the message that civil discourse is not worth engaging in because the morally blameless people need not justify themselves to the elite apologists, or those who defend, in his words, ‘the swamp.’ Populism, the symptom of a public
wrath pandemic, rejects the very activity which constitutes the solution to moral and political disagreement: discourse. The job of a populist citizen is no longer to work together to find truth, it is to enforce a pre-established (yet empty) notion of the good (the will of the people) against an empty notion of evil (the will of the elite). Before we know it, if we get much further down the path of interminability in our civil discourse, we run the risk of letting populism dominate our sense of the political good, and if our anger is not dealt with, the populist citizen just might become the citizen.

The rise of populism and the conception of a ‘common sense’ political good vs. ‘common sense’ political evil is a direct result of the breakdown of civil discourse. For the populist, disagreements are illegitimate and obviously the result of evil. Disagreements could not possibly result from the acceptance of irreconcilable moral fragments, as MacIntyre suggests, because the will of the people is easily realizable and always correct. Mudde points out that populists see a “normative difference between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’, not [an] empirical difference in behaviour or attitudes” (544). Mudde explains that one is morally vindicated by one’s identity as a member of “the people,” and as such, need not be concerned about the moral implications of their conduct, for that is not what separates them from the elite. Where civil discourse fails, wrath and sheer power may succeed because the pure people must be defended at all costs.

Yet, if we do not possess the tools to rationally terminate moral dialogues with our opponents as MacIntyre suggests, then this is a systematic problem, not a problem stemming inherently from our ‘evil’ opponents. No amount of wrath or populist oversimplification of civil discourse will set before us a coherent moral framework with
which to terminate conversations about moral issues and solve problems which pain us
and incite our wrath in the first place. We simply do not have acceptable claim to become
enraged and lash out when our assertions from utility do not refute assertions from rights,
or when our assertions from liberty do not refute assertions from equality. There is not a
common sense political good as the populist believes, because as it stands in modern
discourse, there is only an empty sense of the political good; we have no idea what it
consists of.

We cannot label a person a ‘misogynist’ simply for believing a fetus possesses
personhood, and we cannot label a person a ‘murderer’ simply for believing a fetus does
not possess personhood. Neither of these assertions strike the core of what the
conversation around abortion is about from a philosophical standpoint, namely, the
virtues of a good parent, the constitution of personhood, and, taking these into account,
whether or not abortion in both general and particular cases amounts to a justified killing.
Calling someone a ‘misogynist’ does not refute the argument that a fetus is a person with
a right to life. Calling someone a ‘murderer’ does not refute the argument that a woman
has a right to bodily autonomy. Neither do either of these ‘rights’ address the actual issue
at hand. Both assertions vastly oversimplify the issue into a convenient slogan relating to
arbitrary entitlement over one another. Therefore, neither side speaks to the other in any
intelligible manner. Even when these assertions of rights are expressed in their most
developed and sophisticated forms, their only clear function is to war against each other
for the hearts of potential supporters without providing any rational meta-ethical or
normative criteria with which to judge their legitimacy.
Crying “racism” at those who oppose immigration or “snowflake” at those who support safe spaces only further entrenches others in beliefs they do not have the rational tools to justify in reference to a coherent vision of the public good, because we have no coherent vision of the public good. Both the staunch opponent to immigration and the supporter of safe spaces believe themselves to be good people defending good ideals. Attacking opponents without referencing why their beliefs fall short of virtue provides no rational justification for the abandonment of such views — if anything it shows an inability to vindicate one’s own position in the face of scrutiny. If I call an individual who believes themselves to be a good person ‘racist’ or ‘weak,’ I have not refuted them or given them a reason to abandon their belief which is intelligible to them. I have merely confirmed their bias that I, their opponent, am a bad person incapable of rational discourse.

To illustrate this point further, let us take the timely example of police brutality. I believe that while it is true that racial bias among law enforcement leads to undue targeting and force against racial minorities, it is impossible to convince those who do not believe this that this is the case without addressing the issue what a good police officer looks like. Our conversations are never about what virtues may be necessary for the good practitioner of law enforcement (a police officer), but instead, consist of arguments that rely on preconceived assumptions (or lack thereof) of racism or civil liberties. Civil liberties, or rights, I have already shown to be irreconcilable when weighed against each other in both a positive and negative sense. That is, if I claim I have a right not to be stopped and searched, someone could reply that the police have the right to stop and search me. These arguments do not address one another. Conversely, if such rights-based
arguments are used against notions of duty or utilitarian arguments, there is not way to rationally determine which moral fragment ought to hold more authority. It is obvious that the good police officer will not be racist; even those who do not believe police bias exists in any systemic form do not believe the police should be racist. It is simply the case that excessive force in the eyes of police advocates is justified. In other words, our conversations should be reimagined as a discussion regarding the proper role of force and the virtue of restraint as it pertains to the good police officer. Conversations which revolve around racism and not ‘the good police officer’ are futile, because if in a case of police brutality an advocate for the police does not believe excessive force was used, then how can they concede the force used was racially motivated? To them it was a due response to a threatening situation, but to others it is wrathful, so herein lies the true discussion which can lead to a desirable conclusion. We must ask ourselves something like: In what situations and to what extent does the good police officer use force? This is not an abstract discussion about force in general, but force as it pertains to a specific practice, policing, which we can concretely imagine someone doing well.

Yet, even though we do not recognize our miscommunication and the irreconcilable assumptions we bring to civil discourse, we can feel morally superior knowing the other side is “racist” or “ungrateful” without feeling the moral responsibility to engage opposing viewpoints past mere assertions that often devolve into ad hominem attacks. This, of course, is a subconscious realization of the impossibility of reaching shared conclusions which we blame on our opponents rather than a systematic inability to contextualize opposing appeals to different moral fragments (MacIntyre, 8).
Instead of considering opposing moral and political concepts such as “the people” and “the establishment,” security and rights, utility, and duty as interdependent aspects of virtuous morality and a coherent political society, we consider them as goals inherently opposed to one another. This is the source of our wrathful behavior toward our moral opponents since rational reconciliation of these opposing moral concepts necessarily fails. The conversation becomes, “a good society enacts policy X, and a bad society enacts policy Y,” rather than “how might a good citizen aiming at a conception of the public good weigh the goods that policy X is concerned with between the goods that policy Y is concerned with?” In keeping with the example of police brutality, policy X may be a policy which requires that all police officer wear body cameras, while policy Y may be a policy which allows police to prevent subjects from filming them if, in their eyes, such filming is obstructing their ability to do their jobs properly. Both of these policies are concerned with a particular good whether one rejects X, Y, or both. Policy X is concerned primarily with safety and transparency, ensuring that both officer and subject are held accountable for their actions through video documentation. Policy Y is concerned primarily with efficiency and expertise, ensuring that annoying bystanders with no criminal justice experience do not get in the way by shoving cameras into the faces of well-meaning officers who are just trying to do their job. Again, either one of these policies can be rejected, but it is clear that neither is intended to be evil, but in fact, both aim at particular goods that the good police officer does need to be concerned with (safety, transparency, efficiency, and expertise). Both transparent and efficient law enforcement are good and must be weighed together rather than opposed to one another. The understanding that opposing viewpoints are all concerned with goods seriously
undermines the simplistic worldview of populism, as well as our anger with each other in general since determining how we ought to weigh these goods is not common sense.

We will not arrive at conclusions with our moral opponents by shouting obscenities at them. Unleashing wrath through *ad hominem* attacks, doxxing, and publicly shaming those we find disgusting and unintelligible is not how we will come to a shared conception of the public good. Inflicting wrath on our moral opponents will never *solve* any issues in civil discourse, it can only destroy our polity by encouraging perpetual enmity which leaves nobody better off and benefits the public none. All we can do in cultivating and unleashing wrath is feel a sense of moral superiority over others while ignoring how our conduct might preclude the legitimacy of our conceptions of the public good. All the while we neglect addressing legitimate and possible solutions to the issues we see as pertinent by viewing *others* as the divisive ones — *surely* it is others. For if our individual conceptions of the public good involve unleashing un-tempered wrath in its verbal defense, perhaps it is the case that we, as individuals, do not *know* what is in the interest of the public good, and this is why we as a *polity* do not have a conception of the public good. Our moral and policy positions based on the moral fragments of failed Enlightenment philosophies are viewed as moral absolutes, the achievement of which is ‘the good.’ That is to say, we think respecting ‘rights,’ however they may be defined, is ‘the good.’ Conversely and in irreconcilable opposition, we may think that respecting the moral authority of utility in all policy positions is ‘the good.’ Yet, loyalty to these ideas as the supreme public good ignores the primacy of the moral relevance of our *conduct* in pursuit of our preferred policy positions. This conduct is entirely morally relevant given
that it is indicative of our character, and therefore, colors our conceptions of what a good citizen looks like.

Our wrathful condemnations of moral opponents do not imply that we are virtuous protectors of the public good. When we label someone’s views as “racist,” “misogynist,” or that of a “snowflake,” even rightly in many cases, we preclude any possibility of sparking legitimate dialogue which might serve to analyze the basis for such views. Immediately, our moral opponents are put in the position of being a “bad person” in need of either punishment or serious condescending help. This implies a power dynamic in the relationship of moral opponents in which the “bad person” is lowered below the status of the “good person,” the one who makes the initial accusatory assertions against the other. Nussbaum identifies the lowering of status as “down-ranking” (Nussbaum). Being down-ranked by a moral opponent does have a clear solution, and it is to down-rank the other person so as to even the playing-field (Nussbaum). Yet, down-ranking does not build up discussions aimed at conclusions, it can only obscure them. Each interlocutor perpetually retaliates with wrathful assertions upon the other’s character or the character of the other’s ideas, each of them ignoring the real goal which should be at hand: to come to an agreement regarding the issue causing the conflict, not attempt to verbally humiliate each other. However, in post-Enlightenment modernity, we do not have the means to rationally terminate moral dialogue with reference to a shared notion of the good, as MacIntyre shows. Our most intelligent assertions owing their allegiance to different moral concepts such as rights and utility do not even possess these means. Therefore, our incessant demand to engage in this volatile relationship with our fellow citizens who hold “deplorable” or “weak” views
does not mean we are virtuous defenders against these things. We *are*, in fact, these things: deplorably weak. At a time when we are most in need of virtue to ground moral dialogue in something intelligible to solve the problems which invoke our wrath, we forsake it. We are not even *trying*, and if that continues, we will *never* come to shared conclusions. We will never end police brutality by being brutal ourselves, and we will never delegitimize rhetoric surrounding safe spaces by reinforcing the obvious need for emotional support following *ad hominem* filled attacks against them which amounts to nothing more than bullying. At a certain point, we must accept our own moral responsibility in the way we deal with interminable civil discourse.

We wrongly believe ourselves to be morally blameless. While we demonize others and engage in the ever-increasing polarization of society, we remain convinced that it is someone *else* that is the problem. Surely, if I hold all the right policy positions, then I must be a good citizen with the right conception of the public good. Yet, if what it means to be a good citizen who aims at the public good simply consists of one’s policy positions and political attitudes with no reference to *right conduct* in moral dialogue or our attitudes and behavior toward our fellow citizens, then I question whether this conception of the public good cannot actually be that: *good.* If I am a bleeding heart liberal, but every chance I get to insult my opponents I take, then from where is my sympathy for others coming from if not my own sanctimony? Am I a *good* person if I cannot control my tendency to insult? Am I good person if I believe that a woman has a right to choose, that the wealthy should pay their fair share in taxes, but that Trump supporters should be publically harassed? I think not. Such behavior promotes perpetual wrathful conflict, not the ability to reach shared conclusions. The moral implications of
our policy preferences cannot be the crutch of our moral legitimacy in civil discourse if we do not possess a shared notion of the public good by which to actually articulate those preferences in a coherent way that addresses the core concerns of our opponent. Civil discourse is supposed to be an arena where conclusions can prevail. We have, however, come to see civil discourse as an arena where individuals are meant to approach with their own preconceived conceptions of ‘Truth,’ ‘Truth’ they must defend at all costs while attempting to refute the others’ conclusions — sometimes in as aggressive and humiliating a way as possible. Our civil discourse is not concerned with discovering for ourselves what abortion policy a good society enacts. We believe we already know this ourselves a priori civil discourse, and we engage in discourse merely to attack those who dissent from our view; we do not expect to reach an agreement. If one is supposed to come to a conclusion before approaching civil discourse, as we often do, then what exactly is the point of dialogue? I cannot know what is good for myself or my society without receiving input from the other members of my society, because I am not an omniscient being. If we shame those who say something ‘stupid’ or wrong in civil discourse, are we not ignoring the very purpose for which it exists? How is one supposed to know what is ‘stupid’ and wrong, on any specific level at least, before engaging in civil discourse with others who have opposing views? Furthermore, why because others are ‘stupid’ and ‘wrong’ do we believe this makes us ‘smart’ and ‘right’?

There are not two answers, one right and one wrong, to any moral or political issue. One ‘side’ of an argument may be wrong, but this does not mean that the other ‘side’ is right, because there are a multitude of other perspectives that can be taken regarding any issue. Indeed, the positon of ‘pro-life’ can mean anything from a belief in
the absolute prohibition on abortion in all cases, to something that resembles many self-proclaimed pro-choice positions, except perhaps more rhetorical focus is given to the personhood of the fetus than the autonomy of the woman. The pro-choice and pro-life dichotomy is not a useful one for this reason, and merely shows we do not have a proper way to address moral disagreements without grossly oversimplifying them. This oversimplification occurs to such an extent that our discussions are no longer addressing the core of the issue at hand, but are instead excuses to unleash wrath on those we believe to be morally depraved, whether they are or not.

Our conduct becomes what Nussbaum pointed out to be “perilously close to the cruel and aggressive types who arouse the disgust” (423), rather than actually helping to bring the polity closer to a notion of the public good in any meaningful way. If we are not being helpful in this capacity in any meaningful way, but in fact harmful, then it would stand to reason that we are bad citizens who actually do not truly know what it means to aim at a genuine conception of the public good. We believe ourselves to be morally blameless in the face of cruelty and unfairness, but this vision of ourselves is inaccurate. I argue that we are actually more akin to modern representations of the Biblical prophet, Jonah, resentful and pathological — hoping for the destruction of our enemies rather than aiming for the achievement of public goodness.

To illustrate what I believe to be an apt depiction of the modern participatory bad citizen (as opposed to the non-participatory bad citizen who shows a complete lack of participation in the public sphere), I will summarize the Book of Jonah, using its namesake to represent the wrath which constitutes our unhelpful and vicious behavior toward our moral opponents. The Book of Jonah opens with God telling Jonah to go to
the city of Nineveh and preach against their sinfulness and offenses against Him (New King James Version, Jnh. 1.2). Jonah is not excited about this prospect and attempts to “flee from the presence of the Lord,” taking a ship manned by pagan sailors headed to Tarshish — opposite the direction of Nineveh (Jnh. 1.3). Seeing this, God conjures a huge storm to prevent the ship from reaching Tarshish and Jonah from shirking his divinely mandated responsibilities (Jnh. 1.4). The crew eventually discovers that Jonah’s disobedience toward God is the cause of the storm (Jnh. 1.7). Jonah’s solution to this problem, seemingly noble to some at first, is for the crew to throw him overboard (Jnh. 1.12). The crew, however, does not want to do this, likely for somewhat obvious reasons; they figure God does not take kindly to his prophets being thrown off a ship to their certain deaths (Jnh. 1.13). Yet, when the crew realizes they will not make it back to land, despite the fact that they are pagans, they pray to God for forgiveness before throwing Jonah overboard where he is swallowed by a large fish (or whale) and held in its belly for three days and nights (Jnh. 1.17).

   Jonah repents for disobeying God and is ultimately vomited up by the fish so that he can fulfill God’s mission to go and preach against the Ninevites and warn of their coming destruction (Jnh. 2.10-3.1). Upon reaching Nineveh, Jonah begins his preaching. Unlike other prophets such as Amos or Jeremiah, however, Jonah does not explicitly charge the Ninevites with any specific offenses or provide solutions to such offenses, he merely walks around shouting, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jnh. 3.4). This, surprisingly, causes every Ninevite, even the King, to fall to his or her knees and repent before God that they may be saved from their impending doom and judgment (Jnh. 3.5-7). Upon seeing their repentance, God withholds his plan to cause a disaster, for
the Ninevites are reconciled back unto him (Jnh. 3.10); they no longer live in sin and cannot be punished for the wickedness they abandoned immediately when its existence was brought to light by Jonah.

Jonah is not happy that the Ninevites repent and change their ways or that God recognizes it as sufficient to stay His punishment (Jnh. 4.1). In fact, he is so distraught that a people’s prior wickedness would be reconciled rather than punished that he asks God to, in His mercy, just kill him (Jnh. 4.2–3). It is here that God asks Jonah, “‘Is it right for you to be angry?’” (Jnh. 4.4). We do not hear Jonah’s answer to this question. Instead, he takes to a hill overlooking the city where he waits and hopes to see the Ninevites revert back into sin that they may be destroyed by God (Jnh. 4.5). God, in His mercy, grows a large plant to shade Jonah from the sun. This causes Jonah to be the happiest we have seen him yet (Jnh. 4.6). Then, God sends a worm to eat the plant and kill it (Jnh. 4.7). Without his shade, Jonah is absolutely beside himself. He once again asks God to just kill him since it is better to “die than to live,” again, ultimately an appeal to Jonah’s conception of God’s mercy (Jnh. 4.8). God asks, once again, if it is right for Jonah to be angry, but this time, specifically about the plant. Jonah replies, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!” (Jnh. 4.9). The book ends with God pointing out that Jonah had nothing to do with the actual cultivation of the plant, but cared for it as if he did, much in the way that God cares for and cultivated the city of Nineveh. Where Jonah laments the destruction of a plant, God would lament the destruction of a city which He cultivated and desires to see succeed rather than fail (Jnh. 4.10–11). Jonah sees ‘the good’ as retribution, whereas God sees ‘the good’ as reconciliation.
Jonah is, at first, the non-participatory bad citizen. He runs away from the responsibility set before him and wants nothing to do with the difficulties of dealing with a crumbling society, albeit one that is not his own. It is only when he realizes that his responsibility to deal with sin is unavoidable that he becomes participatory. Though, of course, Jonah is resentful that he has to bear the burden of rectifying a broken society, and he still remains a bad citizen even in the pursuit of the correcting injustice since his wrath causes him to see ‘the good’ as retribution and retaliation rather than reconciliation. Jonah is in fact upset that the Ninevites were reconciled and ceased engaging in the activities which were the source of his anger and belief in their injustice. Where he should have seen this reconciliatory result as a win for justice and everyone, he sees it as a loss for himself. He would rather employ the ‘nuclear option’ than target the source of wickedness to solve the problem. This, however, is a representation of Nussbaum’s idea that, “in evincing the rage and disgust of the angry, one then becomes perilously close to the cruel and aggressive types who arouse the disgust” (423). Jonah would rather see the Ninevites destroyed than live uprightly after sin, or in a secular context, immorality. He would, therefore, rather things go poorly for them than see the problem fixed in a way such that his anger with the Ninevites to begin with is unnecessary. Jonah does not hate the Ninevites because he is a more virtuous person than they, he hates them because it is his responsibility to deal with their sin, just as the modern citizen hates his moral opponents because it is his responsibility to face their dissent. This does not show that Jonah (or the citizen) is better than the Ninevites (or moral opponents), it simply shows Jonah has allowed moral rules to guide his notions of the good, just as we have in the modern world.
Mercy, the virtue God is concerned with, does not owe allegiance to moral rules, but instead informs moral rules. Jonah’s infatuation with punishment and retribution shows that he prioritizes the rules that result from the virtue of mercy over mercy itself. Instead of wanting to allow the Ninevites to provide a better environment for the poor, he wants to destroy them for not doing so in the first place. To Jonah, there is a moral rule to tend to the poor, and mercy is good because it allows one to tend to the poor. However, he has this logic backwards. Tending to the poor is good because it is, in a sense, merciful; those who are not poor have the power and ability to completely ignore or stomp them out. The primacy of mercy over the rules it informs allows for the possibility that breaking moral rules can be dealt with virtuously, for virtue is the justification of our moral rules and conduct. Jonah, placing moral rules above virtues, does not have the ability to deal with deviance from moral rules virtuously, because virtues like mercy and love are not the reason behind his actions. This is what MacIntyre means when he says virtues must no longer be seen as a “secondary concept” (185). For if we let moral rules inform virtues rather than the other way around, we end up with incoherent virtues based on the achievement of external goods. The purpose for engaging in this end is unclear since only the pursuit of internal goods maintain the potential for bettering oneself and one’s community.

Jonah, like the modern citizen, is a character primarily concerned with external goods. He is concerned with, of course, material comfort evident in his deep attachment to a day-old plant that serves only utilitarian purposes. He does not admire its beauty and it does not inspire him to be grateful for God’s mercy, he simply likes what it does for him. When the plant withers, Jonah does not wonder how he might help the plant, which
one would expect from someone in possession of the virtues love and mercy, he simply gives up and wishes for destruction. When the Ninevites repent and are morally reconciled, Jonah loses his feeling of ‘moral superiority’ and elevated status – both of which are external goods — and he wishes for death. When the Ninevites live in sin, just as when the plant withers and dies, Jonah does not lament degeneration for its own sake, but instead he laments it because of how it inconveniences him. He would rather the Ninevites maintain their evil and be punished, but this shows his ill-will and a sole concern for both externals and moral rules which do not aim at a public good.

We often wish to see our ‘morally corrupt’ political enemies destroyed. We call them ‘deplorable’ and ‘treasonous,’ we question their patriotism and intelligence, we compare them to clear examples of historically oppressive figures, we assume life would be better if they just disappeared. This is completely in line with a Jonah-like frame of mind. Instead of figuring out how we might shoulder some of the responsibility to understand the goods that others are concerned with, we maintain arguments from our own assumptions about the moral rules and condemn others as unequivocally evil for not sharing them. We are not concerned with the internal goods of political participation which require us to be virtuous, but in the external goods which do not require us to be so. I do not have to be virtuous to maintain a pro-life or pro-choice position, I simply have to decide which moral rules I want to arbitrarily observe. Whatever behaviors allow for the establishment of my particular position, then, are virtues, even if those behaviors are grossly vicious. When we place being ‘right’ as the goal of civil discourse instead of developing more coherent positions in which virtue prevails as the guiding force over and above moral fragments, we place external goods over internal goods. We are simply not
doing enough to establish agreement (an internal good), because we focus too much on the external good of being correct. While being correct is good, it is certainly externally good since we can lose our sense of correctness to others. Therefore, it is not the object of goodness which our discourse ought to be concerned with but instead: agreement — a good which comes at no cost, but immense benefit to all involved. The internal goods we ought to be concerned with, such as agreement, can only be realized by focusing on public virtue in civil discourse through a renewed practice of citizenhood. We must determine which virtues produce the internal goods of citizenhood that wrath does not produce. To do this, we will need a standard by which we can initially judge behavior to see whether or not it is conducive to the cultivation of goods internal to the practice.

MacIntyre, unfortunately, does not provide such a clear standard. To find a coherent and legitimate standard within the framework of teleological virtue ethics, it is helpful to return again to Aristotle and determine if not only his teleology can be revived, but also his standard of judgment for what constitutes a virtue.
Chapter Three: The Standard of the Mean

Some tangible standard of reference for the justification of what counts as a virtue must be discovered if we are to approach the possibility of terminating moral disagreements. MacIntyre’s account of virtues necessarily leaves this standard open to interpretation, because each virtue must be contextualized within a given practice and cannot be identified in any conclusive way from an abstract perspective. Virtues on this view will differ from practice to practice, and appeals to concepts like ‘courage in general’ will be meaningless devoid of practically applicable context. While I agree with this sentiment, I believe that a standard for what the virtues of a good citizen are must be immediately determined in at least a primitive form. This is because it will be those virtues that dictate how we begin to engage in coherent, terminable civil discourse. The traditionally Aristotelian standard of the Mean by which virtues can be determined is not accepted by MacIntyre. This is primarily because as Aristotle presents it, there does not seem to be much room for two virtuous people to maintain fundamental disagreements. I argue that the standard of the Mean is in fact another aspect of Aristotle’s virtue ethics that can be reinterpreted, much in the same way as his telos. While being an authoritative standard of virtue, the reimagined standard of the Mean as I will present it here recognizes the legitimacy of virtuous moral disagreement. In this chapter, I will explain Aristotle’s standard of the Mean in its traditional form. Then, I will show how we might revive the Mean as a standard method to initially determine the virtues of a good citizen without allowing it to dictate all of our moral conclusions.

Aristotle explains in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that, “we must consider this fact: that it is the nature of moral qualities that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess,
[...] just as we see in the case of health and strength” (1104a, lines 11–15). Here Aristotle outlines two objective qualities pertaining to one’s mind states, deficiency and excess. He uses their existence as the standards by which we can judge bad dispositions and actions. The excess and deficiency he is concerned with is that of a particular emotion. Take courage for example. Courage is a virtue concerned with the emotion of fear; it is the measure of how willing one is to put oneself in harm’s way for a particularly justifiable purpose. An excessive amount of fear lends itself to the vice of cowardice, whereas a deficiency in a healthy amount of fear, which is still necessary for the virtue of courage to exist at all, is rashness (1115b, lines 29, 34). It is not virtuous to have an excessive amount of fear such that there is no room for courage, and it is not virtuous to lack the fear which is necessary to gauge whether or not one’s conduct is just stupid, futile, and unhelpful or actually based on realistic expectations of success, and therefore courageous. Each virtue works in much the same way as courage: each is intelligible within a continuum based on an emotion which, when balanced appropriately, produces a state that orients one toward eudaimonia — happiness, or what I prefer, self-sufficient fulfillment. Morality thus necessarily consists of finding a balance between excessive and deficient feelings and actions produced by those feelings (1106a, lines 28–29).

Yet, Aristotle is careful to distinguish a Mean from what can be thought of as a median, or, ‘middle-ground,’ since it is not the case that an equal amount of cowardice and rashness equate to the virtue of courage. Rather, the Mean is a state which recognizes that “one of the extremes [excess or deficiency] is always more erroneous than the other,” and therefore, usually leans toward whichever extreme is less destructive and that we are less inclined to cultivate (1109a, 33–34). This is why Aristotle says that the virtues are
“not the mean of the thing, but the mean relative to us” (1106b, line 7). To be truly courageous, it is the case that one must have a tendency to overcome fear rather than a tendency to succumb to it. Expressions of courage, therefore, seem closer to rashness than cowardice, but it is in fact a harmonious balance which recognizes that for one to be courageous, one will be more fearless than fearful.

Because morality consists of attempting to strike a balance, Aristotle argues that “to feel or act towards the right person to the right extent and the right time for the right reason in the right way — that is not easy” (1109a, lines 27 – 29). Yet, it is not impossible for Aristotle, in theory, despite his acknowledgement that such perfect moral precision is almost never achieved in even particular cases. Nevertheless, the balance between two states consists of one state. There is one true conception of each virtue and therefore one right action in every case; one only needs the right application of the right conceptions of the right virtues at the right times. It is clear that in Aristotle’s system, there is little room for the level of moral relativity which the modern world is comfortable with.

MacIntyre notes that, “Aristotle treats [moral conflict] as an eliminable evil. The virtues are all in harmony with each other” (157). This harmony, the unification and coherence with one another under the standard of the Mean, necessarily admits that there exist right answers to every moral case whether or not those answers are clear to us. Those right answers, however, can be approached by maintaining the right view and cultivating the virtues. MacIntyre notes that the observance of the Mean as an absolute standard entails that “conflict is the result either of flaws of character in individuals or of unintelligent political arrangements” (157). MacIntyre does not want to preclude the
possibility of tragic conflict between two ‘good people.’ This is because many coherently organized societies can engage in a variety of different practices where different virtues are realized depending on the character and culture of the society (163). I believe this is why MacIntyre does not see the Mean as a standard by which virtues are necessarily realized. He therefore leaves much of the content regarding the virtues open to discovery. We are given relatively little that can immediately inform how we might ground initial judgments of the good in practices such as citizenhood.

I argue that the standard of the Mean can and must be salvaged in a way that allows for tragic conflict so that we as citizens have a model which outlines how we might acceptably engage in the immediate conflicts we face given our irreconcilable moral assertions. To show this I will first argue that a conception of the Mean can be grounded in MacIntyre’s conception of practices without altering the form of his normative moral structure. This will be in order to provide a coherent vision for a standard of behavior in practices which do not currently possess a clear standard, namely, citizenhood and in turn civil discourse. Then, I will show that the observance of the Mean in the performance of these practices does not necessarily entail the impossibility of conflict between goods; in other words, there can still be moral disagreement under the Mean, especially in the initial stages of discourse. This is due to the fact that when applied to practices, the Mean can serve merely as a foundation for what is required for virtuous behavior in a given context, but it need not be strongly prescriptive in any ideological sense. In this new framework, the pursuit of the Mean can potentially be reconciled with a variety of opposing moral assertions. This guide for virtuous behavior in the pursuit of shared conclusions initially allows for disagreement. We can only hope
to terminate this disagreement, however, through virtuous moral dialogue based on a standard of the Mean, which we might ultimately develop later to fit our particular modern culture, but in a way that is purposeful and coherent.

The standard of the Mean must be grounded in MacIntyre’s conception of practices if it is to be an intelligible and authoritative aspect of moral judgment within a system of virtue ethics. By this I mean that in order to validate a conception of Mean-guided virtue, it must be shown that the Mean can produce those qualities which when applied in practices produce and extend the attainment of internal goods for the purpose of eudaimonia. The Mean must be that thing which the observance of produces the possibility of excellence. Aristotle certainly believes this to be the case. He holds that “every [practical] science performs its function well only when it observes the mean and refers to its products […] good craftsmen, as we hold, work with the mean in view” (1106b, lines 8–9; 14–15). A craftsperson does not want to add excessive features to perfection, nor do they want their creation to be deficient in features it requires to render it a sufficient tool for the fulfillment of its intended purpose (1106b, line 13). The car maker does not add flashing strobe lights or rim blades to his cars because it would serve no purpose other than unnecessary and harmful excess. The car maker also does not produce cars without windshields or air bags because they would be deficient in qualities we would say make for a sufficiently safe and functional car. Through the cultivation of virtues relevant to the craft — perhaps industriousness, diligence, and creativity — the car maker balances even more complicated deficiencies and excesses than obvious features such as windshields and strobe lights. Through this process, the composition of a
‘good car’ is realized, and the one who makes cars according to these standards can be realized as a ‘good car maker.’

I argue that Aristotle’s standard of the Mean is a helpful guide to the reclamation of a conception of citizenhood which recognizes the primacy of internal goods. In a time of unhinged civil discourse lacking in proper behavior, perhaps starting with the standard of the Mean to guide behavior in discussions, rather than the conclusions themselves, is a good idea. We have to start with the fundamentals of how the citizen ought to approach civil discourse, just like the car maker must start with the fundamentals of how he ought to approach making a car. Wrath in civil discourse can be compared to the flashing strobe lights or rim blades on a car — entirely unnecessary, distracting, and running contrary to the possibility of a job well-done. Removing obvious excesses such as wrath allows for the possibility that a discussion might produce fruitful results, i.e. a conclusion. Tempering the vice of wrath through the Mean will push us closer to a clearer vision of what constitutes a civil-discourse-gone-well, and ultimately, what virtues the good citizen ought to pursue to achieve this end. Knowing how a citizen might go about engaging in civil discourse for its own sake will give us a better understanding of how to have a conversation that serves the public good instead of further entrenching ourselves in polarity.

This is what I believe to be an update of Aristotle to fit the MacIntyrian framework: two people who temper their wrath but hold different moral positions regarding an issue like abortion can still observe the Mean and be considered good citizens. The Mean, as I understand it and intend to apply it, does not preclude legitimate disagreement about applied moral issues. That is to say, other than to point out the moral
ineptitude of the shared vitriolic anger common on both sides, the Mean cannot be used to argue that pro-lifers’ moral conclusions are incorrect or that pro-choicers’ moral conclusions are incorrect. The Mean cannot be used to refute rights-based arguments or arguments from utility. What it can be used for, however, is a standard of behavior in discussions about abortion. Without such a standard, any honest and open discussion is impossible. Furthermore, if the Mean can be agreed upon as a good standard for the virtues of a good citizen, then perhaps it will guide civil discourse regarding issues like abortion toward basing its conclusions on virtues rather than irreconcilable moral principles — without delegitimizing those moral principles entirely. These conclusions might be focused more on maintaining a cohesive society as the focus of the public good rather than an undying loyalty to one’s personally absolute and uncompromising moral rules and ideologies. Different moral fragments such as rights, duty, and utility may work together to produce conclusions that attempt to observe the legitimacy and moral relevance of each other, since each fragment does concern itself with a particular good (negative rights are concerned with personal autonomy, utility with subjective happiness, etc.) With this new direction, pro-choicers and pro-lifers could recognize the failure of relying solely on rights-based arguments for and against abortion, both being concerned with goods albeit different ones. In recognizing this they may abandon the tendency toward wrathful condemnation of what might be, in some sense or another, appeals to other goods that are not inherently opposed to one another for the purpose of coming to a shared, intelligible conclusion. This is to say that appeals to rights can in fact be a coherent component of our moral conclusions, but to only observe the goods rights may
be concerned with (either entitlement or autonomy) is to ignore other relevant goods that are not rights-based but which must also inform our virtuous decision making as citizens.
Chapter Four: The Virtues of a Good Citizen

It is now necessary to discuss Mean virtues in particular to determine which are most necessary for a good citizen to cultivate in order to temper the wrathful nature of civil discourse *promptly*. In doing so, these virtues will provide the best groundwork for the potential to reach shared conclusions based on a shared notion of the ‘conversational-good.’ Discerning some notion of the conversational-good, the objective standard by which we can judge whether or not conversations such as those that constitute civil discourse succeed or fail, is the first step in determining the public good. This is because to determine the public good requires successful conversations between citizens who observe standards that dictate *how* to engage in civil discourse (conversation) in a meaningful and helpful way. The virtues I will discuss here are by *no means* the only relevant virtues for a good citizen, they are simply what I believe to be the most helpful and pressing given the modern predicament. Two are Aristotelian virtues, and one is a non-Aristotelian virtue which I believe still observes the Mean. This will ultimately show that the Mean is a helpful tool for the contextualization of what counts as a legitimate virtue, particularly within discourse, but it is not a doctrine which mandates that all virtues be interpreted within the ancient Athenian context or any other ideological structure.

The first virtue I wish to discuss is an Aristotelian virtue that has a specifically conversational character: wit. The virtue of wit sits in between the two vices of buffoonery (1128a, line 5) and boorishness (1128a, line 10). It is the virtue concerned with one’s disposition to humor in both regular conversation and civil discourse. The buffoon, Aristotle explains, “cannot resist a joke” (1128a, line 50), and says “things a
man of taste would never dream of saying, and some that he would not listen to, either” (1128b, lines 1 – 3). The buffoon does not engage in moral dialogue or, in our modern context, civil discourse, for the purpose of determining a public good. If he ‘engages’ at all, it is to upset people he believes it is amusing to upset. This can be seen in the buffoon’s modern incarnation as a “troll.” Trolls are commonly thought of as a phenomenon of the internet, but it is certainly the case that real life trolls exist in civil discourse. This is a person who enjoys making radical claims around those he knows will disagree, just to watch them get flustered and struggle to rationally vindicate their moral position regarding a deeply complicated issue within a few emotionally-charged sentences. He makes the existence of honest people who hold views similar to his seem unfathomable, and he stokes greater wrath from the side condemning his nonchalant but radical assertions. Self-proclaimed “politically incorrect” comics are buffoons, not because they offend people or necessarily hold offensive views, but because they seem to get such a delight in evincing rage and disgust; it seems to be their only purpose. The buffoon has not earned a moral justification for asserting anything he says because he never attempts to legitimately put his assertions to the test; he spouts them boldly, and when confronted with counterarguments he asserts his right to free speech instead of analyzing his view and engaging another. As such, the vice of buffoonery to which the modern troll and “politically incorrect” comic owes its origin lends itself to an individual who is incapable of achieving any goods internal to the practice of citizenhood. The buffoon’s success requires that others be shamed, insulted, or provoked; he does not engage in the practice of citizenship to cooperate and compete toward a common goal — the character of all practices. He engages for the purpose of fulfilling a vicious desire to
elevate his own self-centered humor above all else — ultimately stifling the goods internal to citizenhood such as the formation of solidarity between communities across ideological boundaries or the realization of one’s purpose and role in a community. The immediate and pleasurable reward of humor is an external good, one that necessarily comes at another’s expense. Even still if one wishes to make a case that some people just ‘deserve’ to be trolled, the external good of immediate comedic pleasure cannot be the goal of the good citizen, and this behavior is therefore unacceptable. Buffoonery produces none of the goods internal to citizenhood, and as such, must be marked as a vice.

The boor, on the other hand, is the opposite of the troll. A boorish person is “useless for any kind of social intercourse, because he contributes nothing and takes offence at everything” (1128b, lines 2 – 4). The boor genuinely believes himself to be engaging in civil discourse, unlike (usually) the buffoon, but his belief is unfounded. At the first sign of what he deems an unacceptable thought, the boor pounces. There is no room for the boor to entertain the idea that he may be wrong. The boor can be compared, in a modern sense, to what has been called the “snowflake.” Humor is a concept foreign to the snowflake in civil discourse because its presence implies that conversations can be undertaken in good faith between opponents. The boor contributes nothing to civil discourse because he believes everything which runs counter to his views is tantamount to wrong-think. His views should be taken, in his eyes, as the standard for human behavior. Yet, he did not earn the views he holds, just as the buffoon does not. The boor’s views are not the result of a keen understanding of the views held on opposing sides. The boor’s confidence in his positions is therefore unwarranted — he has never
actually put them to the test with a moral opponent. Just like the buffoon, he refuses to actually engage opponents. Even if he does ‘put his views to the test’ by engaging in civil discourse, he will never abandon them. Abandoning his views would be to take others seriously, and to admit that he needs others to help him come to his conclusions. Because the boor does not believe he needs others, and because the boor believes himself in this respect to be morally superior, he does not see the possibility of finding humor or friendliness in civil discourse since, in his eyes, doing so may require a degree of “privilege” (recall Hugo Schwyzer, see Introduction). Therefore he does not cut anybody any slack—he can only shame. He emotionally reacts to every view he comes into contact with, and as such, is incapable of contributing to rational civil discourse. Only certain views are acceptable to the boor, and those who do not accept those views are clearly enemies of the public good. As a defender against these perceived enemies, the boor feels superior. Superiority is by definition an external good—the more someone believes they have, the less there is for others. It is therefore not the case that we can accept boorish behavior in civil discourse. Its existence and our allowance of it in civil discourse will never enable us to approach the possibility that goods internal to the activity will be realized; the boor participates purely at the expense of others.

The buffoon and the boor, the troll and the snowflake, are obviously not helpful models for the cultivation of virtue and ultimately the behavior which constitutes a good citizen. This is because neither approach allows for the possibility of genuine discussion and terminable dialogue, which will produce the goods internal to the practice of citizenhood. The buffoon uses humor to provoke others, and the boor does not have any
sense of it at all, and this dynamic creates perpetual, wrathful, interminable conflict. The solution to this is Aristotle’s virtue of wit.

Wit stems from the idea that “relaxation and amusement seem to be necessary in our life” (1128b, line 4). Only by cultivating wit, a balance which dictates the right attitude toward humor, can civil discourse proceed with any possibility of termination. Yet, amusement should not be the only thing we reach for, obviously. The buffoon entrenches his opponents in their views by deliberately representing himself as a ‘bad person’ in their eyes whether he realizes this is what he is doing or not, all because he thinks it is funny. The boor discredits any point of view he takes on because nobody reasonable will give moral authority to someone that simply cannot contain their anger. A subsiding of anger comes when one understands the assumptions behind the assertions our moral opponents make, because this allows us to address them and not feel helpless doing so since we understand the root of our disagreements. Understanding the assumptions which inform the (il)logical premises behind an assertion is to understand the thought process of one who holds these views, and if we understand a thought process we can somewhat sympathize with the individual in an effort to engage in discourse that will address our own concerns and the concerns of others. This sympathy is what gives rise to the legitimacy of humor. It admits imperfection in ourselves and others,. It permits us to stop taking ourselves so seriously since we, as individual citizens, do not have all the answers given that the the public good as it might be fully realized has yet to be determined. Humor allows us to see each other as human beings first, and opponents second. On this logic, it is an incredibly humanizing feature of civil discourse which lets us see a person as more than just the views they hold. We might see them as fellow
citizens who genuinely wish to reach a helpful conclusion regarding whatever issue is at hand. It puts interlocutors on equal ground; neither is morally superior to the other in any profound way, because neither is fully clear on what constitutes the public good. They do, however, have a vague idea that perpetual wrathful conflict between moral opponents is not a constituent component of the public good; nobody reaps any internal goods from wrathful conflict. Wit, the balanced application of humor, allows citizens to feel a sense of camaraderie in disagreement; it permits one to ‘not take themselves so seriously,’ but in the process, allows others to actually take them seriously. The witty person is not so humorous that his comments are unnecessary provocations or sarcastic and unhelpful, and he is not so un-humorous that nobody wishes to engage with him or his views seriously such that he is immediately discounted. Wit provides a peaceful coping mechanism for the stressors of civil discourse; it makes for a graceful discussion rather than a brutal battle. It is this internal good, an ability to gracefully engage with those we disagree, which makes wit one of the most important Aristotelian virtues that we must apply in the modern era to approach the possibility of virtuous civil discourse aimed at shared conclusions. Now, I will turn to another Aristotelian virtue: patience.

Patience, as I conceive of it, is the virtue which most directly addresses the problem of wrath. Wittiness is indeed a virtue, but not every virtuous person is particularly witty. That is to say, not everyone we identify as a good person is funny or has a sharp sense of humor. I am not convinced in any sense that humor is a sufficient remedy to the ills of civil discourse — far from it. I see patience as far more immediately helpful. Patience, Aristotle says, is the virtue relative to the emotion of anger. Excessive anger is the vice of “irascibility” and the deficiency “lacks a name” (1125b, lines 26–
The vice of irascibility (that which is closer to what we might commonly think of as ‘impatience’) is defined by Aristotle in exactly the same way I define wrath: “excessive anger,” and the deficiency of anger which “lacks a name,” can be thought of, on this reinterpretation, as slavishness. I have already explained why wrath is a state of vice: it is unjustifiable and unhelpful given the interminability of moral dialogue. As such, wrath does not lead to the achievement of the internal goods in any practice. Civil discourse, the moral dialogue of citizens, is a constituent component of the practice of citizenship, and it must be engaged in virtuously to reap the goods internal to the practice. This requires conclusions to be reached based on a shared notion, or attempting to reach a shared notion of the public good — the public good in general falls into the category of internal goods because it can only be achieved by participating in the practice of citizenship, and it does not come at anybody else’s detriment. Rather, its pursuit and realization aids all those who are engaged in the practice of citizenship. An attempt to pursue the internal goods of citizenship cannot be made by unleashing wrath upon each other.

Yet, I have said before and I will say again, I do not believe that anger as such is a problem; the problem is wrath. Therefore, a complete lack of anger gives rise to the vice opposite wrath: slavishness. Slavishness can be thought of as an unwillingness to stand for the good; one is essentially a ‘door-mat.’ The slavish person does not defend himself when he is attacked by others because he is unwilling to feel negative emotion. He may or may not be politically informed, but his willingness to engage with others is non-existent. The slavish person does not allow debates on his social media, and he prevents people from speaking about politics around him. People he agrees with remind him of all the things he is unwilling to muster anger over, and people he disagrees with
are so intolerable that even reasonable discourse with them is soul crushing. The slavish person sees anger itself as an unpleasant evil, so he is unwilling to do anything about the things that make him angry, but this is certainly not helpful! An unwillingness to do anything about what one sees as an injustice is a denial of one’s moral position as a citizen, and it ensures that one will always submit to whatever arbitrary authority exists to control them. By doing this, the slavish person places the importance of emotional comfort over fulfilling his responsibility as a citizen. All people, by my definition, are citizens because all people are members of a community through which civil discourse can be engaged — civil discourse being the primary way that citizens express virtue, which therefore, makes civil discourse a necessary component of cultivating the goods internal to the practice. A slavish refusal to participate in discourse is the sign of vice because it denies the legitimacy of the defining activity of the good citizen — to engage in civil discourse with other citizens based on, or in pursuit of, a shared notion of the public good.

Again, a useful Mean virtue to consider for these extremes is patience. One’s moral position is essentially nullified when engaging in wrathful conduct because it is this un-tempered behavior which suggests one’s failure to understand the proper role of civil discourse — not to humiliate or verbally harm our opponents, but to come to conclusions. Yet, if we avoid feeling the anger that produces wrath entirely, we are incapable of fulfilling our purpose as citizens by refusing to engage in dialogue. We must realize that it is inevitable that anger will be felt when discussing moral issues. These discussions are often about deeply sensitive things, especially between citizens within a polity. We must not be unwilling to feel anger, which is potentially the best way to
initially react to certain situations, but we ought to be unwilling to let that anger fester
and turn into wrath. This is patience. It is understanding that certain things are
unacceptable from a virtuous perspective (brutality, discrimination, and debauchery to
name a few), but to combat those things one must both actually confront the issue while
at the same time recognizing the solution will not entail perpetuating more wrath and
enmity. The goal of civil discourse in the vaguest possible terms is to make things better.

In patient conduct, there exists this possibility; it actually allows one to stand for the
good, and recognizes that concluding what might be good in particular situations requires
discussion, and this requires a willingness to take the time to have the discussion and
produce a shared conclusion. Allowing anger to consume is a destructive path, and
denying its legitimacy neglects the severity of certain moral issues and the impetus to
instigate change. Civil discourse is not easy, so a certain amount of willingness to push
through difficult impasses is absolutely required. This is the first step for citizens in
coming to moral conclusions and approaching a more robust notion of the public good
than simply what constitutes good behavior in civil discourse. Patience, like humor, is a
virtue which acknowledges one’s own limited perspective, and the need to weigh the
perspectives of others, but it obviously does not leave room for the moral vindication
gross injustices such as brutality and discrimination, as being unable to defend oneself
and others against these things is slavishness. I am not suggesting we entertain views that
require such excessive and arbitrary behavior, since they clearly fall outside the bounds
of discourse based on the Mean.

Nevertheless, it would be better if people who hold views that allow for brutality
and discrimination changed their minds, and this will necessarily involve engaging with
them in non-wrathful ways. It is helpful to think of patience as taking an ‘aesthetic distance’ from the discussion at hand. The question becomes, “Is this conversation going well?” rather than, “Am I right?” It would behoove opponents of brutality and discrimination to take this aesthetic distance and actually understand the thought process behind those who hold such views, people who likely do not see themselves as brutal or discriminatory. Even accurate castings of people as simply “racist” are reductionist explanations for one’s disgust with a particular idea, and they are not compelling arguments for those who are the target of such terms. Shared conclusions are a good that is in everyone’s interest, but we will only get to them over time through maintaining a patient aesthetic distance which recognizes the legitimacy of anger but does not allow it to overcome us and prevent a conversation from going well, being aimed at a shared conclusion.

The last virtue is not Aristotelian at all: hope. I see hope on a spectrum of anxiety, the deficiency of which is optimism and the excess of which is pessimism. The pessimist cannot help but think negatively. His level of anxiety is such that he expects the worst of every scenario. The pessimist is someone we say is hopeless; he does not believe that things can get better. Because of this, the pessimist has no real incentive to participate in public solutions aiming at positive change. If the point of civil discourse is to come to conclusions, then this attitude is certainly unhelpful. The pessimist sees perpetual conflict in civil discourse and assumes that there is no solution to it. All hope is therefore lost, and there is no point engaging with those who will never agree. However, I have argued for the MacIntyrean view that the interminability of our moral dialogue (and therefore civil discourse) can begin to be solved by grounding our moral views in virtues rather than
moral rules. The source of our conflict is in the irreconcilable moral rules we hold, not in moral dialogue or civil discourse as such. Since this conflict can begin to be solved with virtue, there is no rational ground to fall into the mind frame of pessimism, and it does not assist one in their responsibility as a citizen to engage in civil discourse.

The optimist, on the other hand, cannot help but think positively. He has no anxiety, because he expects the best in every scenario. In the citizen, optimism can be seen as the overestimation of the current effectiveness of civil discourse. The optimist might think that our disagreements are simply a matter of perspective — that moral views are something to empathize with rather than examine critically. He diminishes the depth of our conflicts, partly because he believes civil discourse is just a place to share opinions, and conclusions need not be the goal. The optimist might support phrases such as “love trumps hate” and drive around with a “Coexist” bumper sticker, because in his eyes, if everyone was just nicer to each other then we could all get along. Moral disagreements are not important or meaningful to the optimist, we only need to empathize with people’s perspectives and treat them with kindness. This, however, solves the problem of polarity by rejecting its fundamental existence. The optimist lives in a fantasy where morality is equated with kindness. This, however, is not the case. Moral disagreements as they currently exist consist of rival moral fragments such as utility, rights, and duty. Being kind to each other will not allow us to decide which fragments to give weight at what times and in what ways (if any at all) so that real issues which concern citizens’ livelihoods can be solved. Coming to conclusions in civil discourse and focusing on that as the goal possesses the potential to cure the infectious wrath, whereas being kind without focusing on conclusions simply puts a bandage over the festering
wound. The wound will still continue to fester, but we will just choose to ignore it and maintain a positive attitude until it finally kills us.

Hope, not optimism or pessimism, is the right balance of anxiety and therefore a necessary virtue for the good citizen. Again, virtues are not halfway points between vices, but reasonably tempered balances. Hope will appear closer to optimism than pessimism because like optimism it maintains the view that things can get better. Unlike optimism, however, hope does contain an element of anxiety because it acknowledges the fact that things often times seem to go poorly, particularly in civil discourse. This tempered anxiety motivates the hopeful person to seek change in a realistic way. He does not live in the fantasy of the optimist, because he at least implicitly recognizes the depth of our moral conflict. It does not stem from us being unkind to one another, it stems from our acceptance of irreconcilable moral rules. But these rules, as MacIntyre has argued and I agree, ought to be seen as secondary to virtue (185). We need to reimagine what a good citizen looks like, and ultimately, how civil discourse is pursued. This ought to make a citizen hopeful, because our conflicts can be appealed to a source higher than the authority of utility or rights, which are inherently at odds. They can instead be appealed to the authority of virtue and the practice of citizenhood. The hopeful person has the ability to conquer the anxiety of things going poorly and take responsibility for his role in working toward a solution. Hope supports all the virtues of a good citizen in a critical way: without hope, there is no reason to try. There is no reason to be patient and willing to push through a difficult conversation if one does not have hope that it can reach a conclusion. There is no reason to maintain a virtuous sense of humor, wittiness, if we do not hope that humor can enable a feeling of camaraderie for the purpose of a
conversation-gone-well. Hope that things can go well in our pursuits if we do the right thing at the right time for the right reasons is an impetus by which we are compelled to discover solutions to the problems we face and share as citizens. Hope is what we must have if we are to even believe that the concept of a good citizen can be reimagined for the purpose of beginning terminable conversations about what the public good might look like.
Chapter Five: Metaphors for Approaching Civil Discourse

Citizenhood is a practice, and the main activity of the citizen is engaging in civil discourse. We must have some standard of excellence for civil discourse through which virtues can be displayed so that the purpose of engaging in civil discourse, reaching shared conclusions, can be realized. If we blindly enter civil discourse armed with virtue but no conception of a desirable structure to guide the conversation (i.e. a conception of the conversational-good), we will be very well-intentioned yet completely aimless, and this does not achieve any purpose for the citizen or the polity.

In considering the structure which will guide virtuous civil discourse, it is useful to turn to the philosophers, Catarina Dutilh Novaes and Daniel H. Cohen. Novaes and Cohen each make reference to various metaphors that represent the way we engage in argumentation. First, I will present Cohen’s conception of argumentation as war and support his view that this approach is undesirable. Then, I will turn to Novaes who, being in agreement with Cohen, entertains two potential alternatives — one of which, therapy, I believe can be effective in cases of dealing with extreme and hateful views, but not for normal civil discourse. The other, gift-exchange, I will show is neither capable of addressing extreme views nor moderate views, and is ultimately insufficient. Then, I will turn to the alternative metaphorical conception of argumentation that Cohen provides, ‘barn-raising,’ which I believe is the most helpful guide to ground a virtuous and coherent civil discourse with the potential for reaching shared conclusions. For the first three metaphors I will show how each fails to support at least one of the three virtues of a good citizen which I illustrated. For the last metaphor, barn-raising, I will show how this
approach supports all three virtues and as a result, should be a starting point in our conceptualization of what civil discourse should look like.

In “Argument is War … and War is Hell,” Cohen notes that metaphors which equate argument to war are “dangerous” (187). It is common, however, to view civil discourse in this way because it is clear that there are two general and opposing sides which battle against one another with animosity, for example, the left and right wings. Cohen states that in this relationship “There is [. . .] a victory to be won” (178). We do not talk as if both sides can leave the conversation better off after reaching a shared conclusion. We see someone who concedes a point as having done poorly, but in fact, it might be the case that conceding points and reaching shared conclusions leaves everyone better off, and doing these things makes one a good citizen engaged in a good conversation. We expect that citizens should construct an argument or view before one approaching discourse instead of using discourse as a way to mutually construct a view with others. A civil discourse ‘warrior’ “insists on simple answers to complex questions” (180), much in the same way populists do, a fact which was noted in Chapter 2.

Populists are a good example of civil discourse ‘warriors’ because they see the world as a battle between good and evil, the pure people vs. the corrupt elite. This is war language, and it precludes the possibility of consensus: those who do not accept the populists’ views are not merely in disagreement; they are corrupt, and they need to be defeated. It is easy to cast blame on the populists, but as Cohen points out, “Wars can be prevented by diplomatic efforts, so they represent a failure of diplomacy” (185). In other words, war-like arguments represent a failed civil discourse, the result of which I have identified as wrath, wrath being a key element of war. Cohen rightly asserts, “It takes
more than one party to start a war or an argument, it takes more than one to finish a war or argument” (186). Retaliation against populists is not fighting against evil, it is resentfully and wrathfully perpetuating a war. Denigrating the “ungrateful and stupid” college kids who “just want everything for free” positions one as an enemy rather than a fellow citizen engaged in attempting to solve issues such as student debt and soaring healthcare costs. This is the case even if those “ungrateful and stupid” college kids’ solutions are indeed over-simplistic, purely ideological, and uncompromising.

Conversely, people who denigrate ‘anti-immigrant’ and protectionist factory workers by responding to their fears with “your jobs aren’t coming back” or “what kind of job do you have that you’re worried about an illegal immigrant taking it?” do not position themselves as the compassionate and humanistic individuals that they likely think themselves to be. Such denigrations completely ignore the reality of struggling middle Americans from the comfort of a relatively comfortable or otherwise outside perspective. This is the case even if such the workers do harbor xenophobic or tribalist attitudes, because these harmful attitudes do not preclude the existence of legitimate economic concerns which must be addressed.

Our moral disagreements, as I have explained MacIntyre argues, stem from a failure of the Enlightenment project of justifying morality. We appeal to various different moral fragments to justify our views based on a “criterionless choice,” and those fragments cannot coherently terminate disagreement. Even if our views are not informed by these fragments but instead personal experience (as is the case with most citizens), we still use them in civil discourse to justify our views, and therefore we cannot reconcile our views with one another. This systematic issue is not the fault of any group in
particular, so the sense of assured moral superiority we feel over others is false, and it damages the potential to achieve the purpose of civil discourse and one’s responsibility as a citizen, which is to attempt to reach terminable conclusions based on a shared conception of the public good.

Therefore from a perspective of virtue and the practice of citizenhood, the war approach to civil discourse is rife with vice and ought to be altogether abandoned. It is remarkably difficult to maintain a sense of humor — to be witty — within the context of war. The buffoon and boor, however, thrive in this environment. The buffoon is able to provoke others to anger, creating animosity and finding amusement in this. The buffoon is essentially incentivized to war, because the more anger he creates the more amused with himself he is. The boor also thrives in this environment, not because he gets amusement or finds humor in it, but because it is the only context in which his complete lack of civility can be justified. A war is to be won (almost) by any means necessary. There are very few things which are off limits; the point is to defeat your opponent, because your opponent is inherently bad. Therefore doxxing, public shaming, and *ad hominem* attacks, tools which can only be used to dominate opponents rather than create consensus, are not only seen as always acceptable in every case, but obligatory to engage in for the purpose of fighting against those who are seen as inherently bad. It is obvious at this point, but wrath is another vice which is given free reign in war discourse. We believe our rule-based moral views, based on irreconcilable fragments, to be the uncompromising good. As a result, the conversational-good is forsaken in pursuit of ideological goals. By focusing on domination, we neglect the purpose of engaging in civil discourse, and therefore this method must be abandoned by virtuous citizens.
A tempting alternative to conceiving of argument or civil discourse as a war is to conceive of it as a kind of therapy, as Novaes notes in “Metaphors for Argumentation.” She agrees with Cohen that the war metaphor is an undesirable one, and she hopes to discover a conception of “‘virtuous adversariality,’” defined as, “an attempt to show that a certain element of adversariality, thus understood, could be combined with a generous dose of cooperation in fruitful, productive ways” (Novaes). The goal of civil discourse, after all, is to come to shared conclusions. Coming to shared conclusions implies we do not already share the same moral conclusions, obviously, so civil discourse is in some sense inherently adversarial — people are going to disagree. Any legitimate conception of virtuous civil discourse needs to be able to handle disagreement in a productive way such that the ultimate goal of discourse, coming to shared conclusions, can actually be realized. Some, Novaes notes, point to the metaphor of ‘therapy’ as a desirable framework for argument and civil discourse because a therapist relationship is one that is ideally non-judgmental and cooperative. On the therapy account, an interlocutor is “purged of false beliefs” (Novaes). This differs from war in that the goal is not to dominate, humiliate, or focus on ‘victory’ over one’s opponent, but to genuinely engage and attempt to connect with their ideas to find falsehoods and refute them. Novaes points to the Socratic Method as being a good example of a therapeutic approach to discourse, but herein lies two problems.

The main problem with the therapy approach, which I see as a sort of Socratic method, is a critique I share with Novaes. The “asymmetry” between interlocutors in a therapeutic approach is clear (Novaes). One person is put in the position of the ‘moral authority’ and the other in the position of the ‘morally inept.’ While I believe this
approach may work for certain extreme cases, such as ideological de-radicalization, I do not believe this asymmetrical power dynamic is desirable for average citizens due to the lack of any shared criteria by which we can weigh moral fragments and come to shared conclusions, again, recalling MacIntyre’s thesis. It is true that this model is definitely kinder than the war model, but it is certainly condescending to one side as the conversation is structured around them being ‘healed.’ Do coal miners and factory workers losing their jobs to a modernizing economy need to be healed or do they need to be listened to and have their concerns addressed? Instead of treating these people as a nuisance or pitying them, perhaps it would be beneficial to understand the goods they are concerned with — most immediately, employment, but perhaps more abstractly, a sense of familiar community. The answer: “You can just become a computer programmer” is not reassuring or concretely viable to a 40 year old man who has been mining or manufacturing his whole life — and why should it be? More creative solutions must be discovered, and this is impossible without equal input from and consideration for those workers affected. We cannot prescribe, like a therapist, what is best for others because we do not actually know until we engage in civil discourse with them on equal ground.

If there is one vice that the therapy model enables citizens to fall into in relation to the virtues I listed in the last chapter, that vice would be optimism. Whereas the war approach is pessimistic in its belief that seeking agreement is a futile enterprise, the therapy model is too confident in the ability of ‘education’ and kindness to enlighten people’s moral views. It is not simply a matter of ‘having the right facts’ or treating someone’s defects. Though, of course, sometimes having the right facts can change someone’s mind if they indeed previously held wrong facts, it is much more commonly
the case that disagreements stem from the irreconcilable moral authority of opposing fragments, combined with the incomplete knowledge that all citizens necessarily have. I cannot prescribe the public good as a citizen to other citizens, because it is other citizens who I rely on to discover what the public good is. I cannot come to conclusions about in issue before engaging in civil discourse about it, but the therapy model suggests that I can, and must, for the purpose of mending those who do not hold right views. Therefore, it is the case that therapy cannot hope to terminate moral disagreements because even when structured as kind and well-intentioned ‘education’ or ‘healing,’ civil discourse still does not possess the tools to reach shared conclusions.

Novaes then moves to entertaining the idea of ‘gift-exchange’ as a good metaphor for argumentation. Gift-exchange, unlike therapy, can be characterized as a “transfer of reasons” (Novaes). This is a mutual endeavor where both opponents provide their reasons for accepting or rejecting a particular view, rather than one person attempting to ‘educate’ the other person which creates an asymmetrical and unjustifiably sanctimonious framework for civil discourse. Novaes explains that this seems to be something that is commonly thought of as a desirable way to engage in dialogue; many would agree that sharing opinions back and forth in a civil way is the best way to engage in a productive civil discourse. There is an attempt to listen to the other person, and there is supposed to be an absence of hostility. Novaes explains that gift-exchange allows an interlocutor to reject the “epistemic goods,” or standards by which we can say we supposedly ‘know’ something, which in this case would be appeals to morally authoritative terms.

Yet, this to me shows why the noble idea of gift-exchange fails. Gift-exchange, and argumentation in general, Novaes argues, operates on the assumption that “my
reasons for believing [view] P are likely to be the reasons for you to believe P too” (Novaes). The goal is not to dominate one’s opponent, but to provide reasons that one hopes are compelling and true. While this may work outside civil discourse in areas such as metaphysics or biology, we must recall that the “epistemic goods” of moral dialogue, those fragments such as utility, duty, and rights, are irreconcilable. It is not the case necessarily that my reasons for believing view P are going to be another person’s reasons for believing P, nor is it necessarily grounds for a person who does not already believe P to abandon their current view and accept view P, because the acceptance of one moral fragment’s authority over the other is arbitrary and criterionless.

Imagine a political talk show where there are three commentators discussing universal healthcare (H). A states that he believes every American, due of their inherent worth and dignity as a human being, should have the right to access the highest possible standard of H. B assents to A, but says she believes it is important to note that if the consequences of H are medical supply shortages or poor implementation, then another system, not H, will have to be discovered. A and B both agree on view H in principle, but they do not share the same reasons for accepting H. A appeals to positive rights while B appeals to utility. The host then brings on C, and C does not accept H. C laughs and remarks that he cannot believe people think they have a right to his labor as a doctor. Healthcare is not a right, he says, because nobody is entitled to anybody else’s labor. Each go back and forth, providing reasons for accepting their views, albeit respectfully, and after about four minutes, the host interrupts, moving the show into a commercial break.
This is the gift-exchange model in action. A and B believe in the same view, universal healthcare, but their reasons for accepting it are not the same. A cannot accept B’s utilitarian appeal to universal healthcare because utility negates the moral authority of rights. If universal healthcare, it turned out, did not provide the greatest utility for the greatest number because, then B would reject the legitimacy of it as a moral requirement. A cannot do this because the fact that universal healthcare is a right, something guaranteed by nature of one’s personhood, precludes considerations of effectiveness or supplies. At the same time, C’s appeals to negative rights cannot address the core concerns of the others. His conception of what constitutes a right is entirely different than A’s, and B’s utilitarian appeals cannot override the moral authority that C gives to liberty.

By simply stating the reasons why each of them accept their views, they are not addressing the source of their disagreement, but merely talking at each other with the preconceived idea that their line of reasoning is the sound one. A’s reasons for accepting H are not the reasons B accepts H, so simply stating the reasons behind their preconceived decision only energizes people listening who already agree with them — they are in no way addressing the disagreement at hand in a way that can be conclusive. By merely producing their irreconcilable opinions to one another, no coherent conversation is undertaken between the commentators, and neither is given any rational criteria by which to abandon their views. While the open sharing of opinions and reasons for accepting or rejecting particular views is certainly a necessary and crucial aspect to any civil discourse, it cannot be all that it is focused on if our reasons for accepting different conclusions are irreconcilable.
Gift-exchange fails not because it is full of wrath, not because it lacks the ability for one to practice the cultivation of patience, and not because it lacks any sense of humanity in the way of tasteful humor. Gift-exchange fails because it, like therapy, is far too optimistic about the realities of reconciling irreconcilable moral disagreements. It is not the case that my reasons for accepting a particular view will be coherent reasons for another person, because my reasons are based on choosing to observe the authority of one moral fragment over another for no particularly important moral reason — a criterionless choice. Providing explanations of why they are coherent to me but not appealing to a shared notion of the public good or the goals and virtues of a good citizen is utterly useless.

How, then, might we engage in civil discourse such that we approach the potential to cultivate goods internal to the practice of citizenhood through which a clearer conception of a shared public good can be realized? It is certainly not the case that since two seemingly appealing alternatives fail, therapy and gift-exchange, that we must resort to war. The existence of virtue-based practices and the resulting possibility of cultivating the internal goods of such practices like citizenship (which possesses internal goods just as community-solidarity, belonging, and social purpose), assure us that it is possible to identify behavior and even policies that are in the interest of the public good and can be justified objectively in this way. Therefore we need not resort to attempts at humiliating, dominating, or otherwise coercing our moral opponents into accepting our views. We must figure out a way that civil discourse can fulfill its role as a sort of time-consuming and demanding project which requires the cultivation of certain skills and a degree of cooperation with others for the purpose of reaching or approaching an end — all of this
this being that which satisfies the requirements of civil discourse ‘going well.’ I believe
that Cohen’s metaphor of “barn-raising” satisfies the requirements I have laid out (186).
The barn is a representation of a finished product, or for civil discourse, a consensus. The
metaphor of barn-raising “combines the transformative-constructivist aspect with the
multiple-agency aspect of arguments” (187). Like therapy, it attempts to transform a state
of disagreement into agreement and construct a final product in the form of a view. Gift-
exchange attempts to do this, but of course, it is unsuccessful given the irreconcilability
of opposing assertions. Gift-exchange’s strength is its respect of multiple-agency, or the
need for moral opponents to have equal ground, something therapy lacks. Barn-raising as
a metaphor for civil discourse, or anything of the sort which is cooperative and pursues a
final product, combines the strengths of these views but leaves out the weaknesses. To
illustrate this further, I will show how this metaphor facilitates the three virtues which I
believe work to begin shaping the conversational-good, and therefore, the good citizen.
This will enable us to approach civil discourse with the potential to terminate our
disagreements, which is indeed its ultimate purpose.

Wit is likely not the first virtue one might consider important in barn-raising, but I
will argue here that in seeing barn-raising as a metaphor for civil discourse, wit is
certainly helpful. Barn-raising is a cooperative activity (it is not a practice; farming and
ranching are practices, but barn-raising is to farming and ranching as civil discourse is to
citizenship). As a cooperative activity, this inherently requires maintaining relationships
with other people. The two vices opposed to wit, buffoonery and boorishness, when they
exist in a group of farmers trying to raise a barn can create unnecessary issues that
ultimately prevent the barn from being raised — so too as I have shown in citizens engaged in civil discourse. 

Take the buffoon: someone who is amused by getting a rise out of other people. What is typical of a buffoon is that he upsets even sensible people because he says and does what is extreme and unnecessary. The buffoon is the one who points out that one farmer cannot carry as much weight or talks with a lisp and makes that the center of focus when said farmer makes a suggestion about how to get the job done. He wastes time and resources playing pranks on people because he is really only there to have a laugh. Barn-raising is simply the arena in which the true goal of the buffoon, extreme and insensible amusement, can be pursued to no true internal end — it is solely for the purpose of immediate pleasure, not in pursuit of doing something, in this case barn-raising and civil discourse, well.

The boor on the other hand is also impossible to work with in barn-raising, but for a different reason. The necessity of humor in labor is a reality which absolutely cannot be ignored, but the boor has no sense of it. The boor refuses to admit when he makes a mistake or otherwise takes it extremely personally, as if it would make him defective. Should anyone bring up his mistake as a light-hearted collegial jab, the boor takes deep offense to this. The boor also finds no humor in the mistakes of others. Whereas the buffoon may deliberately waste paint by dumping it on the boor to get a rise out of him, another farmer may accidentally spill paint on the boor, and this will cause the same response. The accident has in it a quality possessing the potential for humor — it is unexpected and in a moderate and harmless way, comes at the expense of another person. We have paint spilled on us by a coworker, especially on accident, and we laugh. If we
are mildly annoyed in the moment, then later after cleaning ourselves off, we will likely look back and find it amusing. The boor does not have this sense of humor. He fixates on what kind of idiot would spill paint on his clothes. Perhaps this accidental spilt paint can be compared to, in a civil discourse context, something like accidentally citing a bad statistic. If done by accident, it is an easy and harmless fix which can be chalked up to a silly human error.

Wit, a virtuous sense of humor, creates a cooperative environment in which people can pursue a shared goal. It is not focused on external goods such as the immediate amusement of the buffoon or the pride of the boor which causes him to be always offended. A sense of wit allows one to focus on the task at hand in a way which recognizes that unexpected circumstances will arise, and sometimes they will come at someone or one’s own expense, which as I’ve suggested is the ground on which most humor stands. Witty people are able to see the job through because they do not get sidetracked fooling around for their own amusement at the expense of others’ time, but they also do not impose strict and unattainable expectations of behavioral and circumstantial perfection.

The next virtue to consider is patience. It is clearer how patience plays into an activity such as barn-raising and ultimately civil discourse. Even though a barn is a relatively simple structure to construct architecturally, one can imagine a more complicated barn or a simple farmhouse since it does not matter what the structure actually is, the metaphor is the same. Mistakes will happen in the process of construction and sometimes a full day of work may be entirely undone with one realization which changes the frame of reference of the group. A patient person maintains the goal in sight
and is able to cope. They have an understanding that getting to the product takes time and

care, because a solid product requires an understanding of what does not work. This
requires failure, on the part of oneself and others. Yet, while the patient person is not
quick to rage, they are not content with failure. Failure is a chance to improve, not
something to be tolerated repeatedly. Failure without improvement is purposeless, and its
toleration is not patience, but slavishness which is aimed at nothing in particular. A
slavish person ensures the barn is not raised, and in civil discourse, a conclusion not
reached, because they are content to keep entertaining and running with the same failing
ideas. A patient person knows when to move on to see that a goal is achieved, but they do
not treat failure itself as an evil in need of punishment. Rather, the patient person sees it
as an opportunity to cultivate better knowledge of what might constitute the road to
potential success.

The idea that there is an opportunity to discover what might constitute potential
success in a cooperative activity, both in barn-raising and civil discourse, is predicated on
the virtue of hope. This hope is again not to be confused with optimism. Optimism is
usually painted in a positive light, but what I use it to mean is a state which believes that
the outcome of a particular scenario is likely to be better than they have reason to believe
it will be. Optimism is not helpful in barn raising because it can overlook problems in
favor of what is going well ultimately to the detriment of the finished product. Optimism
can cause people to pursue futile efforts long after it is clear that they will not work.
Raising a barn on a shaky foundation does not show hope that it will stand, it shows
optimism — there is no reason to believe what one thinks is going to happen is likely to
happen. Conversely, pessimism is of no help because it rejects the reality that the end is
in sight. A farmer engaged in barn-raising who does not believe that a finished product is possible might as well just quit immediately. In the case of civil discourse, it is necessary to recognize that shared conclusions, a finished product, are possible to arrive at. If there is a standard of behavior which we see as conducive to civil discourse going well, and therefore a relatively reliable outline of what a good citizen might look like, then this means we can better understand an objective standard by which public goodness can be realized, in other words, what is in the interest of a polity. I am not saying we will always be able to agree on everything — far from it — but what I am saying is that with the standard of a good and virtuous citizen we have a better idea of what constitutes extreme deviations from this behavior. This will ultimately inform, in a basic way, the fundamental grounding of basic moral views which are produced as a result of this virtuous civil discourse. This is cause for hope, because while it does not imply that conclusions are simple, common sense, and staring at us in the face, it does imply that they are attainable if grounded in a coherent notion of what concerns the good citizen.

How might we structure civil discourse in a format that resembles something like barn-raising so that the virtues can be best supported? In other words, how might a specific debate in civil discourse be restructured in a way that produces the internal goods of citizenship and achieves shared conclusions? I will now turn to an issue which forms the basis of a lot of populist anger: trade. How might a conversation between citizens be restructured in a coherent and virtuous way such that a conclusion regarding how a good society ought to approach trade policy can be potentially reached?
Chapter Six: Beginning a Virtuous Civil Discourse

I will now provide a brief sketch of how I envision the barn-raising metaphor working in action through the lens of a civil discourse regarding trade policy. I will not, in this chapter, come to any conclusions concerning what trade policy the good society or good citizen pursues, because this is the job of real civil discourse between citizens. Rather, my aim is to lay the foundation for beginning civil discourse and show how the virtues can be applied to and support conversations for the purpose of reaching shared conclusions.

An adversarial relationship between two interlocutors discussing trade policy in civil discourse will not aid in the potential to terminate the disagreement, as seen in the war model of argumentation. I do not believe the adversarial dichotomy we often draw in debates regarding trade policy between free and fair traders is a useful one, much for the same reason I do not find the pro-choice and pro-life dichotomy useful. First of all, these labels are not very informative, because some ‘free traders’ and some ‘fair traders’ may be indistinguishable from each other. It is not the case that if I state my views are most easily described as ‘free trade,’ that one is able to glean anything of substance regarding my specific views. A ‘free trader’ can both support and oppose deals like NAFTA. From a neoliberal perspective, such trade deals open up the possibility for new and better trade opportunities between nations, but from a libertarian perspective, trade deals such as NAFTA interfere with natural market forces, being government coordinated and not properly ‘free.’ Yet, despite these opposing viewpoints, most neoliberals and many libertarians would describe themselves as free traders, ultimately showing the uselessness of such descriptions.
When approaching civil discourse regarding trade policy, it is important to remember that there are multiple factors which must be taken into account, and those multitude of factors cannot be easily summed up in two opposing viewpoints. We ought to approach the conversation with as few preconceived notions as possible. Our model civil discourse about trade policy should start with a question being posed, rather than an assertion about a particular policy such as NAFTA. Suppose our interlocutors are named A and B. A and B want to have a genuine discussion aimed at the pursuit of a shared conclusion, so instead of beginning their discourse opposed to one another, they work as members of a team to accomplish a goal. A might pose the question to B: what is a sound approach to trade policy in a good society? B, if she is a good interlocutor and patient, will want to clarify the question, of course, to make sure her answer will actually address the question A poses. They might settle on this interpretation: to ask what a sound approach to trade policy looks like in a good society is to ask how to best consider each of the ‘goods’ that opposing views are concerned with such that a coherent solution that addresses all of these goods can be reached. By goods, I do not mean material goods as in commodities, but rather I mean those things which are desirable and worthy of aiming at as features of good trade policy, though not all in the same amount: job security, profit, innovation, cooperation, etc.

When A asks how we might best consider each of the ‘goods’ that opposing views are concerned with, B might start by identifying a good that she believes should be a priority. A should not expect B’s response to be perfect or take her response as the answer B is providing that ultimately sums up a good approach to trade policy. Instead, A should take B’s response as a suggestion pertaining to something that the good society
pursuing sound trade policy ought to take into account. Acknowledging this distinction requires a measure of patience; A has to be willing to allow B to put forth a good to be concerned about. He must also be willing to keep moving with the discussion toward the end even if the good that B references is not A’s main priority. Discussions are not finished with one question and answer, but require an examination of the topic at hand in length. “Whatever a good approach to trade policy is,” B might say, “it ought to focus on keeping domestic jobs.” This is to say, B is concerned primarily with job security, or preserving opportunities for citizens to keep and maintain jobs that support their livelihoods and communities. B might say that this is a perfectly reasonable concern, because trade policies which minimize medium to low-skilled domestic labor do not allow for a diverse set of jobs in which citizens with different skill sets can thrive to the best of their respective abilities. Largely financial and tech-based economies where most living wage jobs require degrees of training or education cannot support a working class or lower middle class, because there are simply not enough jobs which cater to these groups. Not everyone can be a computer programmer, stock-broker, or analyst, B might state.

We might usually hear responses to B which consist of, “Those jobs are becoming obsolete!” or “Manufacturing does not account for a significant portion of the economy — who cares?!” Instead of responding in this wrathful way, A should stop and consider B’s point, patiently. A wrathful response contributes absolutely nothing to the conversation, because it simply points out a problem and assumes no solution. B is concerned with job security — a coherent and reasonable good. The responses above do not address B’s appeal to the legitimate good of job security. The fact that B is concerned
with a legitimate good should be cause of hope that the conversation can reach a conclusion. B is not trying to stand in the way of progress or hold the economy back, she is concerned with an aspect of her own and/or fellow citizens’ well-being. Any good approach to trade policy will necessarily have the grapple with this fact. It should not be assumed that a concern for keeping domestic labor opportunities in a financial and tech-based economy is directly at odds with progress or sound policy. Of course, A and B can only have hope that their conversation might reach a conclusion if both are patient enough to reach an understanding that B’s appeal to job security cannot be dismissed by crying “isolationism.” Instead, B’s claim references a genuine concern for the welfare of working citizens who have fewer viable options for employment in a modern Western economy than do most college graduates or high skilled workers.

A and B need not yet agree to give job security the same weight at this point, but must base their discussion around shared goods that can serve to contextualize their interaction in a manner that resembles barn-raising instead of war. They will need to be working with the same components, tools, and materials to achieve the finished product, and they can only assemble them correctly into that finished product if they do it together. A ought to accept B’s appeal to job security as an appeal to a legitimate good whether he agrees with B about the extent to which it should be prioritized over other goods or not. Continuing with the discussion and not getting caught up yet in minutia, B might then ask A to provide another good that a sound approach to trade policy ought to be concerned with. When raising a barn, one does not install the stables before the support beams. Specificity and detail should be reserved for the end, not while trying to construct a basic shape. Job security may be thought of as one support beam, but there
must certainly be others, and if the barn only relies on the support of one beam then it will come crashing down.

A might respond that another good to consider in trade policy is efficient resource management. A might say we must consider the point at which it makes sense to import products, outsource work to other locations, or resort to automation. Autarky and relying on human labor without technological assistance are not effective approaches to dealing with complex and diverse economies, so some degree of cooperation and coordination among other nations, as well as technological development to aid in production, must be involved in any good trade policy. B is not in a position to reject this, since mismanaging resources clearly does not make for sound trade policy. There is no sense maintaining thousands of jobs that can be done by a few robots if it unnecessarily inflates prices due to the need to pay human laborers; consumers end up with far more expensive products, and this does not stimulate much growth. An updated and more specific question can now be asked: How do we best weigh and reconcile the need to ensure job security for workers while also maximizing the efficient use of resources? Another way of phrasing this, A or B might suggest, is how might we consider balancing these two goods in a way that meets the main goals of each good and does not impede the achievement of other goods? Perhaps job security and efficiency, as support beams in a barn, can be seen as beams that hold different parts of the roof. One may be longer or thicker than the other because of the roof’s varied height and weight at different points. There will not necessarily be “equal part security” and “equal part efficiency,” but instead, just the right amount, and both are required to keep the barn standing.
From this basic but meaningful point of agreement, A and B are in a position to begin a discussion that each can participate in and make sense of. There exists a coherent basis upon which to build other goods in relation to the ones they already share and believe to be necessary. The beginning of the conversation places A and B on the same team, as fellow citizens aiming at a shared conclusion, even if they do not at the moment share the same ultimate views about sound trade policy. By focusing on the foundations of good trade policy in general, the two can discern their disagreements through considering the goods each is concerned with, rather than relying on unproductive contrarianism.

A and B, like the rest of us, are certainly not perfect. B may, at some point, accuse A of being an elitist. Likewise, A may accuse B of being an ignoramus. Each of them get to choose how they respond to this. Do they walk away claiming they do not have time for such conversations? Do they fire other insults back at each other until one of them has had enough? Let us assume that both of these things happen; both A and B are insulted by each other, and each has to determine how they will move forward. Perhaps the first time, they will both ignore it, exhibiting the virtue of patience with one another, moving forward with the conversation at hand because they have a willingness work through minor mistakes — just as a farmer might silently correct the mistake of another farmer during a barn-raising to avoid making a big deal out of nothing. This is certainly best case scenario, but to keep ignoring insults, other people’s mistakes, at a certain point ceases to be the exhibition of patience and becomes the exhibition of slavishness. For this reason, remembering the virtue of wit when faced with insults is absolutely critical. Being a virtue concerned with humor, wit allows one to effectively deal with insults without
escalating the situation in doing so. Perhaps A makes a self-deprecating joke about renting a tiny studio apartment when he is called an elitist, and perhaps B makes a joke about herself when she is called an ignoramus, not by calling herself stupid, but jokingly reminding A that nobody has all the answers. It might be the case as well that increasing insults in a conversation signal the need for a break. Nothing says that A and B need to arrive at an answer immediately; no genuine discussion can be feasibly finished with a few sentences back and forth between two people.

A and B will require far more patience than what we are used to in modern civil discourse. If we want solutions, we cannot be aiming to get a leg up on our opponents, but we must reconcile the goods with which we are concerned with those of our fellow citizens. Since our fellow citizens are concerned with goods, even those which we see as less important, we should be hopeful that such goods can be reconciled with each other, even if we must one day ultimately concede that a particular good we concern ourselves with is less important than we previously thought. This does not mean we were wrong to believe in its importance, it simply means that until now, we did not understand how to communicate those goods to one another without relying on adversarial and irreconcilable moral principles. From the standpoint of two shared goods, job security and efficiency, and the mechanisms through which insults can be dealt with, patience and wit, there is hope that a conclusion can be reached. This is but only one possible beginning for a coherent discussion regarding one issue. If we want to coherently talk about specific issues such as NAFTA, Roe vs. Wade, and carbon taxes, we need to first have discussion about what particular goods we are concerned with and are worth aiming
at on all ends. Only then can we weigh our appeals to them in a way that might produce a
notion of a shared public good.
II. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the state of modern civil discourse is one of interminability and wrathful conflict because, as MacIntyre shows, the non-virtue based ethical systems which were produced as a result of the Enlightenment make no reference to the purpose of a human life in order to justify their ethical perspectives. Therefore, citizens with conflicting views have no shared standard by which to resolve their moral and political disagreements. This perpetual conflict causes rampant wrathful behavior between citizens who feel that they are involved in a battle *exclusively* between good and bad, rather than a shared pursuit of truth. In order to help civil discourse realize its true purpose, which is to come to shared conclusions, it is necessary to reimagine discourse as a pursuit of truth. This requires an actual conversation to be had, and such a conversation can only be supported if the interlocutors — citizens — enter into it virtuously with the intention of *concluding* the disagreement instead of dominating each other. Virtue, rather than vice, will support such an environment in pursuit of truth. I explained how Aristotle’s standard of the Mean is a sufficient way to identify a virtue with respect to a particular practice, but that the Mean need not necessarily be an ‘end-all-be-all’ standard of ethics; it can merely serve as a guide to our conduct in civil discourse which may also inform more tempered moral positions. I identified three virtues which the good citizen should consider: wit, patience, and mercy, and explained how these virtues are Mean states which support a new conception of how we ought to engage in civil discourse, all for the purpose of reaching shared conclusions which will elucidate a better understanding of the *real*, non-ideological public good. This requires teamwork, so its
pursuit will resemble something closer to a ‘barn-raising’, rather than a war, therapy session, or gift-exchange.

Though I have hope, I am not particularly optimistic about the possibility of modern citizens abandoning ideological conceptions of the public good in favor of conceptions supported by virtue. Even if we come to a better understanding of a public good supported by virtue, there is no reason to believe ideological beliefs will be dropped. The Enlightenment tradition and its emphasis on moral rules has had a profound impact on the modern psyche and our society’s perceptions of right and wrong. But if we could see, for example, that our appeals to positive and negative rights can be reimagined as appeals to differently weighted virtues, solidarity and self-reliance respectively, then we might be in a position to reconcile opposing views. If instead of demanding, “Positive rights don’t exist!” one asked “Why do you believe solidarity to be more important than self-reliance?” an actual coherent discussion can occur. Both can address each other’s concerns in a productive way toward the completion of a finished product—a conclusion. It may not be a conclusion to conclude all discussion on the matter forever, to expect this to occur regularly is naive. It might be the case, however, that if a few citizens try to do this, things will get better. If a few citizens try to re-cash the debates of modern civil discourse such as abortion, immigration, and healthcare as in fact debates regarding the relative importance of different virtues in different situations, we may open new avenues toward termination. If we open more avenues toward termination, we necessarily understand our opponents and fellow citizens in a more coherent way. This diminishes the necessity of inflicting wrath upon them, because we can engage with them more effectively if we cultivate public virtue and focus on its centrality in civil discourse.
As I write this, the Covid-19 pandemic has swept the world. Cases are increasing dramatically, particularly in the United States, while Europe and Asia have previously been centers to the crisis. It is a time of great anxiety, pessimism, and in some cases, outright panic as people are asked to stay in their homes and refrain from both socializing and even working in most cases. Covid-19 has left in its path a great deal of sickness, death, and economic damage. I bring it up, however, to recognize one key point: by staying in their homes and limiting unnecessary travel, poor environmental situations have gotten relatively better in locations affected by the virus. Air pollution is down 10-30% in parts of China compared to last year, and the figure is even higher in Italy (Tercatin). Public parks and other locations, particularly in Jerusalem where the article I am referencing was written, have seen notable decreases in litter and waste due to lower traffic (Tercatin). Is Covid-19 or yearly quarantines the answer to climate change? Certainly and obviously not. What I am suggesting is something far simpler: the cliché that individual actions matter is true. If even half of the people in these locations stayed home, the environmental impacts would be noticed. If everyone realizes this and after this pandemic chooses to walk to one place a week that they would normally drive, the impact would still be noticed. Things can still get better even with minimal effort, but it does require effort — from more than just the people who currently want to put it in.

Compare the environmental improvements, which will admittedly go away if people do not heed this lesson, to virtue. If a few people choose to begin engaging in civil discourse from a position of virtue, then maybe a few conclusions can be reached which were impossible before, and this may inspire or influence others. Individual effort is the only way to move forward. We absolutely must stop relying on the idea that we can force
others to agree with us without \textit{at least} changing the way we express our beliefs, just like we absolutely must stop relying on other people to change the environmental catastrophe we face without \textit{at least} changing our own ways in the most minimal ways possible. The fantasy that we exist in a moral vacuum as individuals is the reason why we can blindly deny our moral responsibility as \textit{citizens} — whether we are denying our responsibility to the environment or virtuous civil discourse. We see ourselves as individuals, not as the citizens we are, because being a citizen has moral implications toward positive responsibilities, whereas being an individual clearly does not. Yet, our role as citizens is inherent given that we all live in civil societies, and we simply do not get to ignore this inconvenient fact. To ignore it would make one a bad citizen, and one cannot be a fully good person if one is a bad citizen. The cultivation of virtue is not an admirable choice an individual can make, it is a \textit{moral imperative} of the human being due to their position as a practitioner of citizenship, brotherhood, architecture, or anything else. It will be harder to change the state of modern civil discourse than it was to make basic improvements to the environment in the wake of Covid-19: we will not cultivate public virtue by sitting at home alone. Nevertheless, the time for allowing inaction (or wrathful overreaction) is over. Total disaster awaits the inevitable end of perpetual wrathful conflict. Virtue is the one way to save irreconcilable forces from devolving into a relationship of sinister enmity. The public good does not consist of any ideology, but in the cohesion of citizens despite disagreement. This is certainly for the better, for devoid of virtue there is no reason to restrain our ideological pursuits. Without virtue, we are no better than Peter Baillish of \textit{Game of Thrones}, who Lord Varys describes as willing to “see this country burn if he could be king of the ashes” (“And Now His Watch Is Ended”). We must ask
ourselves: Am I willing to see my country burn to rule over the ashes? If the answer is no, which any good citizen concerned with the public good ought to answer, then it is imperative that the health of the polity be placed over and above loyalty to the irreconcilable ideologies we insist on slamming down the throats of those we know will never agree to them as currently presented. At a certain point, we are the problem, along with our opponents. At a certain point, we have to decide to be the solution or else our country will burn, and it will be completely our fault as the citizens whose civil discourse was incapable of solving even the most basic moral issues.
III. Works Cited


