PHILOSOPHY BEGINS IN WONDER.

— PLATO
Yet we must look into this further, for the argument concerns no casual topic, but one’s whole matter of living. — Look into it then.

— PLATO, REPUBLIC

The 2022 CSB/SJU Philosophy Capstone students set their sights on the slippery task of defining the notion of “public philosophy,” with a plan of subsequently engaging in some of the same. However, at the behest of one member, the class first stepped back to consider how best to think of philosophy itself. At first glance, this request might seem puzzling. After all, these seven philosophy majors had already engaged in a good deal of philosophy in their college coursework. Unless they simply didn’t know what they were doing previously, did they seriously need to figure out what it meant to do philosophy?

However, by the very act of asking this basic question, the class epitomized the pursuit of philosophy as a deeply self-reflective inquiry, one rooted in curiosity and a relentless desire to understand
things fundamentally. Turning their attention on philosophy itself, they highlighted how philosophical inquiry invariably aims at getting to the bottom of whatever it considers with clarity, precision, and as much completeness as possible. Moreover, they emphasized how philosophers wish to know, not only because knowledge can be useful, but because knowledge and its pursuit are valued intrinsically. As they noted, the etymological roots of “philosophy” are no less than the “love of wisdom.”

Turning their attention to public philosophy, the class decided that the activity shares the core goals of philosophy, but public philosophy’s questions and issues should be both accessible and engaging for a general audience. Thus, academic jargon and off-putting allusions to “experts” must be avoided by public philosophers. Everyday people should be able to participate actively in the inquiry, rather than simply observing passively as amateurs devoid of the requisite background and vocabulary to take part in the philosophical exercise. Practitioners should join together in the shared pursuit of a deeper, better understanding of the world and themselves. Ultimately, public philosophy aims to sow habits of the heart and mind, along with critical thinking skills, but without squashing engagement and a sense of wonder. Good public philosophy should leave everyday people intrigued and interested in a more deliberate life.

With their sights set on engaging in some public philosophy, the class then turned its attention to civic virtue. They sought to flesh out some vital habits of heart and mind for citizens in any well-functioning “democratic” community, one characterized by robust attachments to the ethical ideals of liberty, equality, and a sense of fraternity. In a democratic community, citizens should be free in meaningful ways, they should matter equally in key respects, and they should be committed to sharing a fate together in ways that go beyond merely sharing physical spaces. Such a community relies heavily on many habits of the heart and mind, including the ones in this collection. The seven habits examined here are not only complex, but they also bear subtle relations with each other, so this collection seeks to embody philosophical collaboration, with class members
bearing special responsibility for individual chapters, but with the group sharing a collective investment in the whole.

The best collaborations pull off the neat trick of the whole somehow being more than the sum of its parts. This collection is simply the part of the philosophical iceberg that one sees above the waterline, leaving far more below the surface and out of sight. The underneath mass makes it possible to see the part above the water, and so it is with these seven takes on civic virtue. Each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon this spring semester of 2022, we met and put our minds to thinking carefully together about things that matter, striving our best to get to the bottom of things that were difficult to capture. Those daily efforts ultimately made this collection possible.

Without further ado, I present Public Philosophy: On Civic Virtues.

- **Justice** — Addison Bellor
- **Courage** — Max Varela
- **Civility** — John Cerritelli
- **Respect** — Jonathan Trude
- **Trust** — Thomas Nemanich
- **Confidence** — Michael Pohlad
- **Discernment** — Carter Howell

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When you think of the term “justice,” what comes to mind? Is it equality? Fairness? Getting what we need or deserve? Maybe an image of the scales of justice comes to mind, but what does this mean? Maybe you imagine a court room, protestors in the street, or something else entirely. Justice may seem like an umbrella term once you begin to ponder all its nuanced variations and applications.

Something worth noting is that we seem to have some innate sense of fairness and decent interpersonal conduct. We may say, “Hey, give that back it’s not yours”--”I shared some of mine with you, why can’t you share some with me?”-- or “Leave it alone, it’s not hurting you.” You may hear these words from an educated adult, and uneducated adult, or even a child. Most of us have an ability to recognize what seems unjust because we have an inherent sense of what is just; we cannot recognize the error of a crooked line unless we first have a sense of a straight line. One may argue that cultural and other societal differences allow for differences in conceptions of right and wrong. I would counter and challenge anyone to imagine a society in which being a traitor to your country or association is lauded or harming the innocent is praised. Variations between cultural values create nuance,
but they do not undermine our conception of morality altogether. So, the question becomes, what is justice and how is it a civic virtue?

One can begin the arduous task of understanding justice by breaking down justice into four categories we frequently see in our everyday lives: distributive justice, procedural justice, retributive justice, and restorative justice. You may not be familiar with these exact terms, but you have likely encountered these general ideas before.

Distributive justice deals with this question: how and what material goods should be distributed to members of a society? Should these governing principles be equality-based, that is, concerned with the fact that everyone gets the same amount and type of goods and resources no matter what? In response to this, someone may say, “Wait, a type 1 diabetic is going to need a glucometer and insulin, but I am not a type 1 diabetic and I neither need nor want those things.” This person would fall into the need-based justice circle of thought. Someone else may counter with, “Say, shouldn’t a person just reap the rewards of what they sow in society?” This line of thinking would be referred to as merit-based justice. In our current system, we operate with a variety of these principles in mind when making policy decisions. If we didn’t consider the needs of citizens, then we wouldn’t have a disability program that gave people paid leave from work in times of need. If we didn’t consider merit, then everyone would get paid the same salary, no matter their line of work.

When you thought of justice earlier, a picture of the scales of justice or a courtroom may have popped into your head. The image of a scale illustrates the idea that once a wrong has been done, or injustice incurred, then the world must be placed back on its axis. In other words, justice is the idea of restoring a natural order when it has been altered, thus bringing the scale back to balance. There are two main schools of thought at play that aim to deal with this question. One is retributive justice, also known as criminal justice. Retributive justice holds that a wrongdoer should be punished in proportion to their wrongdoing. This would be your eye-for-eye type of justice. The notion that two wrongs don’t make a right does not hold water in this
methodology. This is also the primary rationale behind capital punishment—a life for a life. Before institutionalized court systems took over, vigilante justice or small-town democratic trials took place. There were no measures to guarantee someone the benefit of the doubt, a principle captured by our moniker, “innocent until proven guilty.” Today, instead of vigilante and often violent justice, we dole out justice through our institutions in civilized forms of fines and prison sentences. This systemized justice aims at removing bias from those doing the sentencing as well as any forms of cruel and unusual punishment to the offender.

The other school of thought regarding the restoration of a broken natural order is known as restorative justice. Restorative justice holds that the offender can make right his or her wrongs. One common form of this we see on a regular basis is community service for criminals. This idea of restorative justice has been further broken down into two ways to treat offenders: welfare maximization and deterrence. The welfare maximization theory holds that there is no good incurred by doing harm to wrongdoers, but some degree of consequence is still warranted. Proponents of this idea would advocate for the rehabilitation of criminal offenders, which is intended to use education and therapy with the intention of cultivating a better character within the wrongdoer. Supporters of rehabilitation assert that two wrongs do not, in fact, make a right. Another similar method for societies to deal with offenders is deterrence, which assumes that punishment will deter criminals from further crimes and will prevent others from wanting to commit crimes as well. Deterrence is more for the good for society as a whole, and less focused on the individual. Both methods aim to restore justice by way of righting one’s wrongs.

Both retributive and restorative justice seem to have their place in our society. Some folks at extreme ends will argue that one form should be used all the time. They would say that we should become completely retributive or completely restorative. One case would result with every infraction, no matter the circumstances, leading to retributive punishment and doing away with community service programs. The other case would result in the most violent and
unapologetic criminals walking free on the street. However, most people fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of opinion and say that each form is appropriate in certain cases.

To get us thinking about our last form of justice, I would like to begin with a vignette. You are driving home from work. It's been a long day and you are exhausted. You turn left onto a side road about three blocks from your house. You can smell the sweet aroma of comfort awaiting you. Suddenly, a flashing banner of red and blue appears in your rearview mirror. You are stunned. Your mind begins spinning. What did you do wrong? You are a good driver and are fairly certain you used your blinker. The officer walks up to your car. He asks for your license and insurance. You obediently hand it over and wonder what you did wrong, so you ask the officer. Now, this could go a couple different ways. The officer could respond respectfully, give you a chance to explain your side of the story, be objective in his reasoning, and convey motives worthy of the communities' trust. Or the officer could speak to you rudely and treat you with no dignity, give you no chance to speak up, be biased in his reasoning for pulling you over, and convey questionable motives.

These scenes would be opposites from each other in terms of the officers' motives and behavior, but they vividly illustrate four key points of what procedural justice looks like. If the officer were to act in the first way, you would likely go home and accept your ticket as a result of a mistake addressed by due process of the law. If you were treated by the officer in the second manner, you would likely feel more inclined to fight your ticket or pay it to the city in nickels. In the former case, you would probably feel that you've been treated in a procedurally just way. In the latter scenario, you might think that you were treated unjustly.

Procedural justice speaks to the idea of fair processes. This idea is crucial to the functioning of societies. Think of different interactions, such as police to citizen, employer to employee, or professional to client. There is an assumption that these interactions will abide by a certain code to ensure that each party is treated fairly. When studied
in the context of legal encounters, individuals’ perceptions of procedurally just interactions have been characterized by four main pillars:

1. Whether they were treated with dignity and respect.
2. Whether they were given a voice.
3. Whether the authority, or decision-maker, was neutral and transparent.
4. And lastly, whether the authority conveyed trustworthy motives.

These points characterize fair interactions with authorities and citizens. If these standards were to diminish in a society, then people may feel a sense of injustice. Citizens wouldn’t feel respected, nor would they trust the motives of authorities in a society. We have recently seen this kind of tale play out with the cop-free zones in Seattle and Minneapolis following the death of George Floyd. Citizens were enraged because they felt that a procedural injustice resulting in the death of an individual had occurred, so they eliminated police authority altogether in certain geographical areas. Most would argue that police are supposed to be good for a society, so the elimination of them is not the best conceivable thing. However, police are assumed to be good for a society only when their interactions with civilians are procedurally just.

Given these four manifestations of justice in our daily lives, we can distill from them one central idea: that people are owed what is due them. Distributive justice maintains that people receive what they are owed in terms of resources. Retributive justice gives criminals what they are due in the form of punishment for their crimes. Restorative justice gets at the notion of offenders paying the community its due by doing good deeds in proportion to their crime. Lastly, procedural justice pays people their due by way of respectful and fair and processes. We have now seen various expressions of how we can pay people their due, but the question now becomes: who decides what people are due or owed, and why should societies care about this? These are not new questions and philosophers have been pondering
them for centuries. Their views often differ on what is owed to people. In the United States, we have a Constitution which grants us a Bill of Rights. We value our natural rights highly. One could consider an authoritarian regime where it is not the case that citizens have natural rights and thus cannot expect any sense of due process or “fair” treatment by their officials. This seems bleak and apparently many have thought so too. Philosophers have been pondering this question of what is owed to people for centuries and have come to some different conclusions.

Two prominent schools of thought on justice belong to the thinkers Aristotle and John Rawls. Aristotle was an ancient philosopher who lived during the classical period of Ancient Greece, during the birth of democratic government structures. He considered the topic of justice and proposed two different senses of the word: the moral virtue and the sense of proportionate fairness. Someone that possesses the moral virtue of justice follows the rules of their community for the sake of the common good. It doesn’t matter what those rules are, they just need to be followed. Aristotle does not fail to account for the fact that the rules may be unjust in themselves and may need revision. When Aristotle says “proportionate fairness,” he is really dealing with the question of distributive justice. Recall that distributive justice asks the question of how we should distribute. Earlier, we talked solely about material goods being allocated to members of a society. Aristotle considers not only material goods, but also the allocation of responsibility and position to citizens. Who should get what? And who should bear what burden?

Aristotle views justice as he does any other virtue: as a mean between extremes. He believes that one can have too much or too little of something, but just the right amount is appropriate and virtuous. In this case, one can have too much or little of a resource or they can have too much or too little responsibility handed to them. Consider someone who works 60 plus hours a week in a demanding job. One might say that they deserve a higher wage than someone who opts out of working and chooses a life of couch surfing. This would seem like a relatively fair scenario. However, life is not always
that clear-cut. Some folks put in an equal amount of work, but have different aptitudes. They should be proportionately rewarded, but they may have different roles and responsibilities. Consider a group project, where you find yourself in a group tasked with creating a podcast. Your group is diverse in its skill sets and you’re going to delegate tasks. You’ve got a tech guru, a public speaker galore, and an English major who loves nothing more than to write. You think that it’s reasonable to ask the writer to do the bulk of scriptwriting, the public speaker to speak most of the time, and the tech guru to do the editing. Aristotle would say this is fair because everyone involved is receiving their due. People are handed a burden to bear based on who is best suited to bear it, and they are rewarded in proportion to their merit. In other words, people get what they deserve.

This model of justice may seem intuitive. However, the lines get blurry when we consider the nature of merit. It is obvious in the case of the diligent worker that they should get compensated more than their fellow couch-surfers. However, what about the case of an MVP award in baseball? How does one discern the most “valuable” player on a team when all members put in equally hard work? Do you give it to the pitcher who threw a perfect game? Or do you give it to the slugger who hits the ball out of the park? The standards for merit are not so crystal clear anymore. What about the case of children? Children have not lived a whole lot of life yet, so they haven’t had time to prove themselves per se. So, can we justify differences in the quality of children’s educations by saying one deserves better schooling than the other? Most people would say no.

This forces us to ask: what is merit? Aristotle assumed that we should be delegated things based on this merit-system. However, throughout the years, thinkers have varied in their definitions of merit. Aristotle lived at a time when slavery was conventional and women were not given a real voice, much less political influence. Only certain people were privy to this notion of merit-based justice because they were already deemed equal by certain factors. There was no underlying conception of shared humanity or citizenship which guaranteed everyone basic liberties. In other words, Aristotle’s theory
of merit-based justice only applied to a privileged few and lacked the idea of basic human rights.

A more contemporary 20th century philosopher, John Rawls, sought to remedy this issue in his theory of justice. He thought that individuals have an inviolability founded on justice or natural rights. To put it another way, all individuals have rights and freedoms guaranteed to them based on their human condition. Rawls considered this principle when conceiving his idea of a model society. He proposes a hypothetical scenario, asking you to imagine you are part of a committee deciding on what fundamental principles will govern the way society works. You must come to a rational agreement with one caveat: nobody knows who they will be in this society. You could be born into the lowest caste or the highest royalty. You could be given wicked smarts or be born with a severe learning disability. Your neighborhood could be riddled with violent crime, or it could be ranked top ten most safe neighborhoods on US News. These are all viable possibilities, and you must design a society that would best accommodate each scenario, assuming you want to give yourself the best shot at a good life.

With these parameters in mind, Rawls concluded two basic principles for how a just society ought to be governed. The first principle states that each person should have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal, basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all. Think about the liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. We are free to think as we will because we are human beings. This is a right shared by all that is equally accessible to all in a just society. Rawls’ second principle states social and economic inequalities can only be considered just if they satisfy two conditions: (1) They are attached to offices and positions that are open to all through equality of opportunity, and (2) these inequalities are to the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of society.

What does Rawls mean by this? With the first condition, he is saying that a just society can only contain positions and offices that pay different wages and allow more opportunities if everyone has an equal opportunity to obtain that position. He would detest pre-Civil
Rights Movement America where multiple groups, women and African-Americans for example, were excluded from the chance to obtain certain positions. His second condition is known as the “difference principle.” To illustrate it, consider the process of taxation. It is a means of redistributing wealth for the benefit of the least well-off. Too much taxation would cause everyone, including the least well-off to suffer. Too little taxation would cause the least well-off to suffer, so we avoid both scenarios and strive for a balance that maximizes the benefit for all parties, including the least advantaged in society.

Both Aristotle and Rawls’ thoughts about justice deal with the question of paying people their due. Aristotle would say that equal people get to play on the level field of merit-based justice. Rawls would contend with the fact that not everyone can play on this equal field but still have intrinsic value as humans. Despite their differences in opinion about substance of what people are owed, their arguments aim to answer the same question. What are people owed?

There is another important element to consider in this discussion, the ideas of positive and negative rights. Some believe that we are entitled to have our basic needs fulfilled, typically by a government or some other institution. Think of ensuring everyone access to food and basic healthcare. These would be considered “positive rights.” An advocate of positive rights would say that someone who is unable to obtain what is necessary to live incurs an obligation from others to help. For example, if someone is unable to afford food, then the community has a moral obligation to help their neighbor, whether it be in the form of a personally made home dinner or the payment of taxes to a food stamps program.

On the other hand, there are folks who believe that the government and/or institutions are not responsible for providing people with basic needs, but they would assert the idea of “negative rights,” which are the rights to not be interfered with or be stifled from pursuing the things they need. In this view, one cannot prevent you from fulfilling basic needs, but they don’t have to help you either. Negative rights are those which prevent you from getting beat up on the side of the road or robbed in the middle of the night. These rights
prevent interference with your liberty. Now, the assertion of negative rights does not nullify the idea of positive rights or vice versa, but the two bodies of thought can exist independent from each other in a society. When considering a just society, both positive and negative rights are relevant.

Let’s circle back to the discussion of justice as a virtue. Imagine a society where no one felt the obligation to consider what others were due. Our justice systems would crumble. There would be no due process of law or giving of Miranda Rights upon your arrest. You could say goodbye to any sort of guaranteed fair trial. You would have no access to programs ensuring your family food to eat or basic healthcare. There would be no section of the Constitution asserting your freedom to speech, religion, assembly, press, or petition without interference. No efforts would be made to align with the “straight line” of natural order. As U.S. citizens, we may sometimes take these rights for granted. We live in a country that considered the idea of justice heavily during its creation. People living in other countries may not have such privileges. They may be subject to unfair treatment on a daily basis and have little to no means for putting up a fight. Consider Apartheid in South Africa. From 1948 to 1990, the South African government enforced an institutionalized racist system known as “Apartheid.” During this time, many racial groups were excluded from political dialogue, deprived of citizenship, segregated, and even forced to relocate. We would deem this today as an unjust treatment of South African citizens and some officials have even been retrospectively convicted of violating natural human rights.

Here, we are discussing justice as a virtue or a habit of one’s heart and mind. Justice is unique when compared to some of the virtues discussed later in the book because it does not fit into a neatly defined box. The expression of justice in one’s day to day life might not be so obvious given its varied applications. However, all these applications have one common core: that people are given their due. To be just as a habit is to have the disposition of seeing to it that people are given their due.

So, what does it mean to be just in a society? How can we as citi-
zens practice justice in our everyday lives? Well, let us consider that justice is the act of giving to others what they are due. This is fairness. This is leaving something alone that isn’t hurting you. This is sharing your lunch with a friend after they shared some with you. We all have this innate sense of fairness and there are many ways to act on it. We can practice fairness in our lives by repaying the good deeds done to us. A mother is fair when she disciplines her kids equally. She is also fair when she makes sure everyone gets enough to eat at the dinner table. A professor is fair when they grade assignments and papers with an objective eye. To be fair in our own lives, we can treat everyone with a baseline respect no matter their background, gender, race, or other identifiable factors. If you do not yet know the person, then you could choose to be fair and give them an equal shot to prove themselves. We may not be designing cities from scratch and considering fundamental principles of justice as Rawls or Aristotle did, but we can be just and fair in our own lives, and this is what we should strive to do.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


“[Real courage is] when you know you’re licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.”

—ATTICUS FINCH, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

At first glance, courage is a pretty intuitive virtue. There is no culture or society that does not value it at least to some degree, and most individuals value it as well. When we start to unpack it, however, there are some questions that come up. Can we have too much courage? Are there different kinds of courage? Is fear always necessary for courage? In other words, courage is intuitively obvious to most people, but we can disagree on the details.

These details can become especially important in the context of a democracy. Other, more practical questions come up. What might happen if a political leader lacks courage? What standard should we hold politicians to? Should we be strategic about our use of courage? What does courage look like for a citizen of a democracy, and how might one actually go about cultivating courage?
Through a series of examples, I’m going to attempt to provide some answers to these questions. However, in the spirit of public philosophy, feel free to disagree with me and think things through for yourself. As some of my examples will show, I think it takes a certain amount of courage to sit down and think through a topic instead of accepting a basic, more intuitive answer.

On Sunday November 21st at around 4:45 pm, Lewis Hamilton, the 7-time world champion Formula One driver, begins to put on his race suit. He is getting ready to hop into his Mercedes W12 racecar that will reach speeds upwards of 200 miles an hour during the race. There is no doubt that being a Formula One driver takes a certain kind of bravery. There is always the possibility of a serious crash and death. But the most remarkable part of Hamilton’s attire is not the fireproof material that his suit is made from or the biometric sensor in the glove that monitors his vitals during the race. It is the new helmet that he had designed specifically for this race in Qatar and the next race in Saudi Arabia.

When Hamilton sits in the car the bright rainbow helmet stands out from within the jet-black protective halo structure above his head. The back of the helmet features the Progress Pride flag with words written across it that declare “We Stand Together.”

For Hamilton, Formula One’s decision to race in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, countries where homosexuality is illegal, was troubling. In an interview with SkySports F1 he said, “I’ve been trying to think, ’what is it that I can do?’ I’m only one person.” Ultimately, he decided to wear a helmet to bring attention to the persecution that LGBTQ people face around the world. It was a small gesture, to be sure, but one that is all too rare in international sports.

Hamilton’s show of support in Qatar and Saudi Arabia already tells us a few things about courage. First, there is a distinction between physical courage and moral courage. There is no doubt that Hamilton has physical courage. No sane person can drive a car that quickly around a racetrack without feeling fear, and many people could not overcome that fear, even for the millions of dollars that Hamilton is paid every year. Yet, Hamilton and the other Formula
One drivers have raced that way for years. Every race, there is a chance that they won’t leave the car that night.

One might say, however, that the drivers are being reckless for no good reason. That, I think, might be a fair criticism except we should acknowledge that what these drivers do does bring value to their life and the lives of their fans. It might be natural to ask what the benefit is to driving a car very quickly around a track, but every one of these drivers and their fans would point out that they do it for a certain kind of love of the sport. It is also hard to deny that they are conquering their fear and putting themselves at risk physically. That is what physical courage is.

The difference between Hamilton conquering his fear of driving a car at very high speeds and his fear of repercussions for openly supporting the LGBTQ community in countries where they are heavily persecuted is the reason he overcomes those fears. For Hamilton, speaking out against injustice is something he sees as an obligation. As he describes it, “I do think as sports go to these places, they are duty bound to raise awareness for these issues.” Hamilton sees himself as a representative of the sport and therefore obligated to stand up for his values. These values are what make up the moral element of courage. As Rushworth Kidder puts it in his book Moral Courage, “Standing up for values is the defining feature of moral courage.” Hamilton does not stand up for his moral values when he drives around a corner mere inches from another car, but he does when he wears a helmet that brings attention to an injustice.

One possible objection to Hamilton’s courage in this example is that he really didn’t have that much to fear given his status as an international celebrity. Could the Qatar and Saudi Arabian governments really have done anything to harm Hamilton. First, I think we should acknowledge that there was at least some risk. It was only as recent as 2018 when the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was assassinated after writing critically of the Saudi Arabian government. And, even if there wasn’t much possibility of physical harm for Hamilton, we should remember other athletes like Colin Kaepernick who have
effectively been blacklisted from their sport for taking a stand against an injustice. Hamilton certainly took a risk by wearing that helmet.

Secondly, I’m hesitant to say that the fear that courage allows us to overcome needs to be real fear in the sense that there is actual danger. Many people have a fear of flying on airplanes, despite the overwhelming safety of air travel compared to other methods of travel. Often, our fears can be irrational, but we should still call it courage when we conquer irrational fears.

One last thing to note on this difference between physical and moral courage is that they can often be intertwined. Sometimes doing the right thing requires both physical and moral courage. Think here of soldiers fighting for some value like freedom. They are risking their lives in battle which certainly takes physical courage because there is physical risk, but it’s also courage for some value. So, I don’t mean to suggest that they are mutually exclusive, or that we should focus more on cultivating one over the other. Sometimes, a fear can ask of us both moral and physical courage, and we should be prepared for both.

Lewis Hamilton’s courage to push for legal and social change stands out because of his fame as an international sports star, but one might argue that politicians have more direct control over certain social and legal issues in a democracy. However, many citizens of democracies do not trust their elected officials to do what is right when doing what is right has the potential to harm the politician’s career or other interests. It might surprise many of us to learn, then, that in the United States there is an award that is given annually to elected officials that demonstrate courage. Named after his book first published in 1956, the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award has been given to elected officials at the highest level of government on both sides of the aisle since 1990. It’s perfectly natural, I think, to wonder if there are any politicians worthy of the award left, but as Caroline Kennedy argues, there are such politicians. She writes in the book Profiles in Courage for Our Time, a collection of essays covering recent recipients of the award, “When we created the award in 1990, some doubted we would be able to find politicians worthy of the
honor. They were wrong. This book tells the stories of men and women at all levels of government, in all parts of our country, across the political spectrum, who have all stood fast for the ideals of America.”

If the past few elections have taught us anything, then we should all read her words with a healthy degree of skepticism. Still, if Kennedy is correct in saying that courageous politicians still exist then perhaps we would have reason to be hopeful.

We’ll look more closely at what John F. Kennedy and Caroline Kennedy have to say about courage in politics later, but for now let’s focus on one of the eight politicians Kennedy chose to profile in his book Profiles in Courage – Sam Houston. Houston (1793 – 1863) had an incredibly successful career as a politician serving as the first and third president of the Republic of Texas, its first senator when the state was admitted to the union, and its governor. He was considered a war hero by many for leading the Texan Army during the decisive Battle of San Jacinto in the Texas Revolution. He was very popular among Texans, but Kennedy was interested not in Houston’s popularity and success but his unyielding commitment to his values.

In 1859, Houston was elected as governor of Texas and delivered his inaugural address directly to a crowd of people from the steps of the capitol instead of to a joint session of the legislature as was tradition. During this speech he affirmed his commitment to keeping Texas part of the United States and “that he was Governor of the people and not of any party”

Unfortunately for Sam Houston, the country was headed for a civil war, and Texas would be forced to pick a side.

Houston was a slaveholder and a Southerner, but he always maintained that Texas should remain a part of the Union. This contradiction might seem to us today as irreconcilable, but for Houston it was his line in the sand. As the southern mood headed towards secession, Houston faced calls for his assassination and accusations that he was a traitor. He responded with a plea that highlights how important the country was to him, “Let them suffer what I have for this Union, and they will feel it entwining so closely around their hearts that it will be like snapping the cords of life to give it up.” So, Houston’s position
was clear. The only question remaining was what he was willing to give up to maintain that position.

Faced with overwhelming political will to secede, Houston was forced to try everything to keep Texas in the Union, and in the end, he was forced to give up the career he had worked his life for. When the question of secession was put to a state referendum, Houston alone campaigned throughout the state. The almost 70-year-old governor faced hostile crowds around the state with nothing but a couple of pistols on his hip and an unyielding conviction that he was doing the right thing. Still, despite his efforts, on February 23rd, 1861 the special convention in Texas voted 109 to 2 to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy. The convention required all state officials to take a new oath to the confederacy to maintain their office. Naturally, Houston refused and peacefully attempted to exercise his remaining duties as Governor. In his last message as Governor he wrote, “I am... stricken down because I will not yield those principles which I have fought for... The severest pang is that the blow comes in the name of the state of Texas.”

Sam Houston provides a model for how courage can work at the highest political level. As John F. Kennedy rightfully points out, it is not always as simple as doing the right thing regardless of any outside pressure. Kennedy asks, “Are we rightfully entitled to ignore the demands of our constituents even if we are able and willing to do so?” There’s no doubt that it would have been much easier for Houston to go along with what his constituents wanted. They were overwhelmingly in favor of secession. So, why did he pick this issue to take a stand? It might be that Houston was nearing the end of his career anyway. It is true that he was getting old, and he only died a few years after Texas seceded. This may have made it easier for him to take this stand, but we would be mistaken if we assumed it was easy.

Imagine a scenario where a member of your family begins to believe in a conspiracy theory. You, your siblings, your cousins, and the rest of your extended family are sitting around the table at Thanksgiving dinner and your brother says, “I won’t get the vaccine because there is a microchip that tracks you in it.” You chuckle and...
tell him he’s acting crazy and try to move on, but when you take a bite of your potatoes you look up and see everyone at the table staring at you. Suddenly, your mom asks why you think he’s “acting crazy.” Your Uncle jumps in with, “You’d be crazy if you got the vaccine.” You realize that everyone at the table agrees with your brother. Do you swallow your food and let them know that you agree with them and were just making a joke? Or do you take your stand despite having no support from anyone at the table?

This is how Houston may have felt. It’s clear from his words that he loved Texas and felt a special obligation to his constituents. However, that obligation did not require him to blindly follow their will. In the same way you probably love your family and feel an obligation to them, but you probably don’t think that same obligation means that you have to agree with their ridiculous conspiracy theories. In fact, it might mean that you have an obligation to try to change their minds.

Attempting to change Texans’ (or your family’s) minds is a task that threatens one’s fundamental relationships because it has the potential to alienate one from those that they love. Indeed, Houston did suffer a kind of existential blow. We should take him seriously when he describes “snapping the cords of life.” By losing the support of the constituents that he cared for and the position he worked his life to serve in, his identity was threatened by way of losing the loving bond that he had with Texas. It would be like leaving that Thanksgiving dinner and never talking to your close family members again. To sever a relationship like that is surely a scary thing and requires immense courage.

So, maybe politicians back then actually cared enough about an issue to take a stand on it, but what about in today’s political climate? While I don’t mean to argue that all politicians care about doing what is right, I think there is hope that courage in politics still exists and that it can be further cultivated. Let’s take two recipients of the Profile in Courage award this year as examples.

Liz Cheney, a Republican Congresswoman from Wyoming, received the award for speaking out against members of her own
party who were spreading falsehoods about the 2020 election. She even voted to impeach President Trump after the January 6th insurrection. Her actions have already cost her the leadership position she held in the Republican party and it will likely lead to a significant setback in her political career.⁹

I like the Liz Cheney example here because I think we can often find it difficult to acknowledge courage from those we disagree with. Many on the left might ignore what Cheney did because of her political views, and many on the right will ignore it because it wasn’t in line with the rest of the Republican party. Still, for some reason, Cheney went against her party to do what she thought was right, and that is admirable in its own right.

Another recipient this year was Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for defending Ukraine against the unjust Russian invasion.¹⁰ I think his example is a less controversial kind of courage than Houston’s or Cheney’s, but courage nonetheless. Here, too, we see a blending of physical courage and moral courage where President Zelensky has faced assassination attempts and refused to leave cities that were actively under siege in order to lead his country and help secure democratic principles.

In the 1950’s, John F. Kennedy also lamented that the nation had forgotten about courage, but even he was hopeful that political courage was still possible in his time. He writes, “I am convinced that the complication of public business and the competition for the public’s attention have obscured innumerable acts of political courage – large and small – performed almost daily in the Senate Chamber.”¹¹ Perhaps this is true in our time as well.

For Kennedy, part of the issue was that the public had forgotten how to appreciate the pressures of politics. He argues that if we better understood these pressures then we “might be less critical of those who take the easier road – and more appreciative of those still able to follow the path of courage.”¹² Kennedy urges us to look beyond the easy answer to always do what is right regardless of its popularity because politicians do have a certain obligation to follow what is popular. That is why they are elected representatives – they represent
the public. So, there really is a meaningful conflict when a politician is forced to decide between what they think is right and what their constituents want. This is why I find the Sam Houston story to be so admirable. His courage, and the courage of other politicians like him, wasn’t just the courage to speak up, but it was the courage to stand alone while doing it and knowingly risk everything they had worked for.

We should take seriously Kennedy’s claim that the public needs to find its courage in order to recognize courage in politics. After all, it is easy enough for people like you and me to sit back and claim that our elected officials need to have more courage, but what about us? Does our courage matter for us? Does it matter for a democracy? And, if it does, then how do we go about cultivating it?

We don’t have to look far for examples of the courage of everyday people furthering democratic ideals. America was formed through a revolutionary war that was certainly terrifying for those brave enough to fight in it. Later, America took another step towards a further realization of democracy with the civil rights movement. Of course, both of these moments in history took courageous leaders, but they wouldn’t have amounted to anything without courageous people. Widespread courage is simply required to progress as a society because progress almost always comes with fear.

We can look to ancient Athens to get an idea of what courage might look like when it is conceived as an essential democratic virtue. As Ryan Balot argues in his book *Courage in the Democratic Polis*, “The Athenians recognized both the intrinsic goodness of courage, as a virtue, and the instrumental importance of courage as the ‘footstool of the virtues.’ Which made possible secure lives of freedom, equality, and solidarity within their democracy.”¹³ In other words, the Athenian conception of courage was inextricably linked to democracy. They had transformed it from simply a heroic virtue to one that was essential in securing democratic principles like liberty, equality, and rational deliberation.

What does Balot mean when he claims the Athenians saw courage as the “footstool of the virtues?” It might help to think just about
physical courage first. Take the example of Lewis Hamilton driving a race car around a track at 200 miles per hour again. In this case, Hamilton has the goal of setting a fast lap. Let’s assume he feels at least some fear that he might push the car too hard and crash. In order to achieve his end goal, he needs to face and overcome that fear. That isn’t to say he will be able to rid himself of that fear entirely, just that he needs to be at a point where the fear is not stopping him from achieving his goal. Courage is what gets him over that fear, and, in that way, courage plays an instrumental role. It allows him to achieve his goal.

Now think about the goals of a democracy. Democracies can differ, but any democracy should be striving for equality, freedom, and rational deliberation. None of these goals are without their fears. At the very least, the fight to achieve these ideals asks us to endure uncomfortable situations like a thanksgiving dinner with family members that disagree with us politically. At the most, as history shows us, these ideals can mean facing death. Courage, thus, enables progress towards these ideals by getting us over the thing that threatens to arrest all progress – fear.

So, even if courage matters in an instrumental way, whether it is to further democratic principles or our own goals, should we really care about courage for its own sake? The ancient Greeks (and many other philosophers) thought of courage as one of the four cardinal virtues along with justice, temperance, and wisdom. The word cardinal comes from the Latin word “cardo” that means “hinge.” They viewed these virtues as essential for the good life; life, quite literally, hinged on them. Here, courage again plays a kind of instrumental role but not in the same way as before. Earlier, courage worked to further one’s external goals – driving a car very quickly and furthering democratic principles. Here, however, courage works on a much more personal level. It is what enables a person to have an intrinsically good life. Aristotle (and plenty of other philosophers) make this argument much more thoroughly. I’ll leave this idea here as an opportunity to further think and learn about courage. Decide for yourself if courage matters for its own sake.
If courage is something we ought to cultivate, how do we actually go about doing that? If courage is a kind of habit, then to cultivate it we have to first practice it. In the same way we teach children that brushing one’s teeth twice a day gets easier with time, we should think the same about facing our fears. Eventually, we don’t have to tell ourselves to brush our teeth in the morning; we just do it. We should strive to get to a place where courage becomes almost automatic.

In 2018, I had just graduated from high school. To celebrate, a few friends and I went to a rope swing on a nearby island. To get to the rope, we first had to climb across barnacle covered rocks and up a sketchy ladder that wasn’t attached at the bottom. Then, we would climb up the side of a tree that had fallen over. It was low tide, so the platform and the rope were probably 30 feet above the water. I watched my friends climb up there and swing, but when I got up to the platform I was frozen with fear. I was up there for 5 minutes trying to summon some kind of courage to swing and jump into the water. I kept telling myself that it would be fun, but nothing really got rid of the fear that I had. Eventually, though, I just jumped. Of course, it was fun and I immediately went again. The second time I went I didn’t hesitate at all. The same thing that had terrified me two minutes ago now seemed easy.

That story is an example of physical courage and a relatively risk free action, but I think it demonstrates a few key points about the cultivation of courage. First, courage is not about having no fear. When I finally decided to jump, I still felt the fear in that moment. Courage is really about accepting and, in a way, embracing that fear. So, it isn’t a superpower that will allow us to do whatever we want with no fear. A courageous person will still feel the fear that a cowardly person would, only they will actually be able to overcome it.

Secondly, we can build up a kind of confidence that helps us do scary things. Think about your first time on a roller coaster. Was it scary? What about your second time? I’d guess that after the first, you realized that there really wasn’t much to fear. I think it’s fair to say that second time required less courage than the first because there was simply less fear, but it’s also true that courage is what got us to
that point. That isn’t to say that the end goal of courage is some fearless state. There will always be things that scare us. But, the more we do scary things, the more we realize that our fear is often misplaced and the more courageous we’ll become.

There is an interesting dilemma that comes up when we think about courage as a habit. That is, how can people seemingly summon an immense amount of courage to, for example, run into a burning building to save someone? Were these people writing down 5 fears they faced that day in their journal every night? Probably not, but we shouldn’t think that they were able to summon courage out of nowhere.

First, we should recognize that not just anyone will have the courage to run into a burning building to save someone. Many people would simply freeze or run away to save their own lives, and that might be the prudent thing to do. What separates the people who do run into the building from everyone else is that they have successfully cultivated courage as a habit. This is what I mean when I say that courage can become almost automatic. When successfully cultivated, it can be almost like a default state or an instinctual reaction to a scary situation.

Of course, these people might not think of themselves as courageous and might not have been actively cultivating courage. I think there are a couple of things going on here. First, one individual might be more inclined to courage for reasons beyond active cultivation. In other words, they might simply start from a different baseline level of courage maybe because of the way they were raised, but it could be any number of factors.

Second, some things scare some people less. I, for instance, am terrified of spiders. When they scuttle across a wall, I will often freeze and back away as far as I can. Other people keep spiders as pets. Is it fair to say that those people, if they’ve never experienced any fear in the presence of spiders, have more courage than me? It seems to me that some people might just be less afraid to run into a burning building, and, therefore, require less courage than someone who was absolutely terrified of fire.
The final thing to note, and I think this is the most important because we have the most control over this one, is that the successful cultivation of other virtues will serve to enhance one’s courage. For instance, someone who is a just person will already be inclined towards doing the just thing in any situation. If doing that just thing requires courage, then there will be a certain moral momentum pulling them towards the just action. They will still need courage to do it, but they are much more likely to be successfully overcome a fear that an unjust person or a person who has not successfully cultivated a degree of justice.

In the example of a person running into a burning building, the person is probably helped by a strong inclination to save someone. If there was no one in the building to save, it would be hard to imagine anyone running into it. In fact, we’d likely call them reckless. But, because there is a person to save, there is a reason to be courageous. It’s much easier to be courageous for the right reason and it’s much easier to follow that right reason if we’re already inclined towards it by cultivating other virtues.

One more thing to note here is that the very same thing that made it so difficult for Sam Houston to be courageous can actually make it easier to be courageous. For him, the loss of a loving relationship probably created a lot of fear that he had to overcome. But, imagine the person running into the burning building is actually saving their own child. It’s likely then that fear for their own safety doesn’t even enter their minds. The more pressing issue would be fear for their child’s safety. Houston certainly feared for the safety of Texas and Texans. He was well aware that secession would lead to war and suffering. In his case, his loving relationship was both a motivating factor and a barrier he had to overcome. Either way, these loving relationships show up often in stories of courage.

As a practical step towards cultivating courage, we can look to others as examples. Courageous people, or at the very least acts of courage, are all around us if we look. Whether it is an athlete, a celebrity, a social activist, or an historical figure, these examples can be useful as a way figure out what we should aspire too.
I think to properly utilize these examples, we should place ourselves into the shoes of the courageous person. Similar to how basketball players will visualize their shot before making it, we should visualize ourselves in situations that call for courage. Then, we can ask ourselves what we might do in that scenario. In many cases, the scenario might be too far-fetched to really know what we might do, but the exercise is still useful because it can change our perspective. Remember, courage is really a kind of mindset and habit. If we’re able to put ourselves in a courageous state of mind, even if only hypothetically, then we’re still actually working on cultivating courage.

I want to end with another story of Lewis Hamilton, the Formula One driver, that I think serves as an example of cultivating courage. When Hamilton was a kid, he was bullied and beaten at school by other kids who were bigger than him. His father set up a boxing match between Hamilton and his bully. In the first round Hamilton got beat up, but his father made him get back in the ring for the second round and told him to not give up. Hamilton went back into the ring and this time he beat up the bully. The bully didn’t mess with Hamilton after that.

Of course, I’m not condoning this style of parenting or dealing with bullies. What’s interesting is that Hamilton told this story in 2016 when he was in the middle of tight championship battle. He clearly considers this story a source of strength and a lesson to himself that he should never give up. I think that strength is part of what allows him to openly criticize the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia even if it’s scary. His previous success with courage allows him to be courageous now. In other words, he’s built up this habit. That, I think, should be our goal – to cultivate courage so that we simply get better and more comfortable at overcoming fear to achieve our worthwhile ends.

Max Varela
May, 2022
Notes


6. Kennedy, John, 134

7. Kennedy, John, 138

8. Kennedy, John, 32


10. Defending Democracy

11. Kennedy, John, 23

12. Kennedy, John, 24


Why is it that from a young age so much time is spent trying to ingrain in us the habit of saying “magic words” like “please” and “thank you” when asking for things? At breakfast, asking “Will you pass the syrup?” conveys the same essen-

United States Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsberg's long friendship despite their differing judicial beliefs epitomize the virtue of civility

CIVILITY
tial information as “Will you please pass the syrup?” Yet, most people prefer the latter. Why is that? What makes these “magic” words so magical?

When people first think about politeness, many associate it with the dictates of politeness, a long list of rules of etiquette that must be memorized and executed. This conception of politeness may evoke something like the formal interactions in a Jane Austen novel. Some of the rules may seem archaic and pointless, which is what I thought when my parents told me “No putting your elbows on the table during a meal.” I never understood how the placement of my elbows would make any difference for anyone else. However, I would be cautious about defining politeness as just following a set of rules. This leads to a shallow understanding of politeness, without getting at the heart of why it is really important.

On the receiving end of questions like “Will you pass the syrup,” I have always found that the more the person emphasizes how unbothered they would be if I do not fulfill the request, the more likely I am to want to accommodate them. And, on the other hand, when someone asks me a favor that feels more like a demand, something they fully expect me to do, I feel the urge to deny them the favor. Adding these “magic words” subtly makes the petition more attractive to the person you are asking. I take this to mean that we are geared to be protective of our autonomy; when our ability to make choices feels threatened by someone making a demand of us, we instinctively try to assert it by showing them that we can choose whatever we want. However, when we feel that we are in a safe decision-making environment, one in which there is little external pressure to choose one way or the other, we are not only more likely to be more open and accommodating to others, but we are more willing to comply. So these words really are magical in that they can change someone’s will since they can be the crucial difference between someone being unwilling or willing to do something for you. However, the words are hollow in themselves; they do not actually cast a spell of persuasion, but they essentially communicate a respect for autonomy which greases the wheels for getting what you want. It should not be
surprising how these have rules have been passed down for so long in civil society. After all, it is easier to remember a list of rules than a complex theory on human nature.

Each rule of politeness serves as a specific pinpoint that, when considered altogether, forms a rough picture of how we should act toward our neighbor. Autonomy is the underlying motivation for saying “please” and “thank you,” but each rule contributes its own background to the picture.

The goal of this chapter is to develop a good understanding of what the virtue of civility is and how it can be valuable for a democratic society. Throughout this chapter, I will be presenting “working definitions” for the virtue of civility and revising them as I go along. The framework of virtue that I will be assuming for this chapter is virtue as a “habit of heart and mind.”

**Assumed definition of virtue: a habit of heart and mind that makes us a better human being**

So far we have considered the nature of politeness, but let us now turn our sights to civility and try to flesh out what exactly it is. As with politeness, I think the common understanding of civility is something along the lines of merely the following of a list of societal rules of civility. I call this the **rule definition of civility**.

**Rule definition of civility: following a set of rules of interpersonal interaction set by society**

This is a good starting point, but there seems to be some problems we need to address with the definition. First, with politeness, we realized that the rules only exist as particular examples of a more important, but shrouded attitude one should have towards one’s neighbor, and I argue the same can be said for civility, an idea which is not expressed in the rule definition of civility. The rules of civility should lead us to civility itself, so our final definition should skip to that and cut out the middleman, so to speak. Second, the rule definition of
civility does not fulfill our assumed definition of virtue, since obedience to a set of rules without having the intention of civility in our heart is not the virtue of civility, but rather the virtue of obedience. For civility to be a virtue, it needs to penetrate beyond one’s external actions and inform our inner attitudes towards others.

We have come to the important point that civility needs to be more than just a matter of following a loose list of rules, but this still leaves us with the bigger question of precisely what is civility and what is its purpose. Let us first talk about why we need civility and when it arises.

I’m sure that we have all had the experience of having to work on a group project with someone who thinks very differently from us. Perhaps they are practical and you are more artistic, or perhaps it is as simple a difference as them preferring red and you preferring blue. If you were working on this project alone, and you were the final decision-maker, there would be no problem at all in making your project as artistic or blue as you wanted. However, in a group project this is not the case; each of you has equal say in how this project turns out and you need to work through your differences to make one cohesive product. I find it difficult, probably due to my pride, to concede my vision even on something as trivial as color, but I still find this concession easier than to concede my overall artistic perspective to my partner’s practical perspective. Part of the reason it is easier is because of the way that we categorize the two differences.

Preferences in color boil down purely to a matter of taste, rather than some matter of genuine choice. You certainly would not say that someone is wrong for saying orange is their favorite color, even if your favorite color should be purple. Because we consider color to be a matter of personal taste, we are glad to concede any difference in opinion without doubt or blame. However, we are much less likely to accept plurality, the many-ness, of people’s opinions when it comes to things that we consider to be a genuine matter of choice. Part of the social problem of outrage is that we tend to be too rigid with our distinctions of matter of truths and matters of taste.

Exactly where do our beliefs come from? Let me ask you to engage
in a little thought experiment. Please try to remember the last time you were outside on a clear and sunny summer day. When you look up, what color is the sky? Blue, obviously. Well, I happen to be a chemistry major, and I’m going to tell you why the sky is actually blue. The sky is blue because oxygen atoms are blue, and it is the oxygen atoms of \( \text{O}_2 \) in the air that make it look blue. That’s also why the ocean is blue because the oxygen atoms in \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \). Now consider:

Do you believe this explanation? There is no need to consider my credibility – that is beside the point for this thought experiment, so simply consider the empirical facts alone. Are the facts as I state them plausible and convincing? Give it a few minutes, until you come to your conclusion, your conviction about whether my claim is true or not, and then, when you are ready, turn to the next page.
Fortunately, for the sake of our sense of sight, this “fact” is not why the sky is blue. The real reason, if you are curious, is because there are molecules in the atmosphere that scatter blue light the most. If this experiment worked the way I expected it to work, then you will have become convinced that it is not true. Maybe you thought that if we can see oxygen atoms as blue, then we must see all other atoms’ colors as well, which would not explain how air, which is only ~20% O₂, would show up as blue. Or maybe you thought that on a cloudy day, the sky looks colorless even though there should be the same amount of oxygen atoms in the sky and in the water in clouds, and therefore it must have more to do with the sun. And maybe you did not come up with a way to disprove it, and that is fine as well. Overall, I mean to show that if you think about a certain problem long enough, assuming you have enough information, you will eventually come to a conclusion, and that conclusion is not a decision but rather a sort of calculation by your mind.

A helpful image for elucidating this point is to imagine your consciousness as a train; let us call it your “Train of Thought.” You may think that you are in control, driving the train and steering it to its destination. But, in reality, that is not our experience of consciousness. Ideas pop into our head seemingly at random. We cannot decide what pops into our head, but we can decide if we want to give attention to that idea or ignore it. We are more like a passenger waiting at a train station. You can choose what train you get on, but you do not know where it will end up. In my thought experiment, assuming you don’t initially know why the sky is blue, you are probably unsure if what I say is true or not. If you choose not to think about it more, you do not get on the train and you stay at the station. You can still say that you believe it or not believe it, just by picking randomly, but you do not believe that choice in any meaningful way. But if you take the other approach and choose to think about the problem, you may have come to a conviction that it was true or false, though then again, maybe not. Perhaps you didn’t have enough time, and you were still unsure. I suspect that if you thought about the question long enough you — say you took a month-long silent retreat focused solely on
figuring out this problem — you would surely come to the conviction that it is false.

Since we cannot straightforwardly choose what we believe, it only makes sense to accept others’ thought-out beliefs in the same way as we accept ours, or in the way that we accept others’ skin color, tastes, and disparate elements of the self that are outside of their control. We may not agree with their conclusions, but who is to say if they have not reached it through a thorough thought process? All this is to say that we can too quickly assign things that are matters of taste to be matters of choice.

The fact that we can consider others’ beliefs as a matter of taste is important because it allows for a greater respect for others. Without respect, we are promoting the opposite of civility, outrage. Let’s consider outrage in a scene that is likely all too familiar to us. You are sitting at dinner with extended family, and someone brings up something tangentially related to politics, say the prices of gas, paper towels, or college tuition. Take your pick. Your uncle takes this opportunity to express his views about just why exactly it is so exorbitantly expensive. Across the table, your aunt fires back, hurling insults at him and anyone or anything he brought up in his point. From here, many things can happen. He could respond aggressively, or he could respond sheepishly, but rarely does it end with your aunt and uncle leaving the table having come to an amicable agreement or shared new understanding.

If we react with outrage to someone’s beliefs, we are communicating to them that we do not respect them and what they have to say. Therefore, they are unlikely to respond with calm collectedness. In this sense, outrage evokes outrage from the other. By remaining civil when someone disagrees with you, you are more likely to elicit an honest response. Conceivably, they may try to explain why they believe what they do, leading to a deeper understanding of their argument.

Civility is important in political discourse because without it, outrage plays into confirmation bias, further dividing political tribes. The problem is that our own outrage often appears to ourselves as
righteous, rational thinking. When I respond with outrage to someone’s opinion, I may view my response as a “clever point,” rather than communicating that I do not respect what they have to say. Consequently, when they justifiably respond defensively or offensively, it is easy to chalk this up to people being irrational and emotional in their thought processes. In fact, this is a common understanding of contemporary political discourse, with videos with titles such as “Ben Shapiro DESTROYS Megan Rapino and the gender pay gap” racking up millions of views on YouTube.

Even someone who has very carefully considered their belief on a controversial topic can be made to look foolish by a question positioned in a tricky way. A good example of this is the question posed to Michael Dukakis’ during the 1988 presidential debate. Dukakis was opposed to the death penalty, and during the televised debate the moderator asked Dukakis if he would support the death penalty if his wife was raped and murdered, to which he replied “No,” consistent with his stated position.

The question is uncivil because it was not asked with the goal of understanding his belief, but rather, to force the question about policy into an emotional light, where Dukakis will have nothing to add. Since his policy position is based on statistics that show the death penalty does not work as a deterrent, Dukakis’ reply is entirely rational. However, the question inevitably paints him in an uncharitable emotional light. Either he says yes and contradicts his own stated policy position, or he says no and comes off as a cold and uncaring husband, someone who can react to his wife’s violation with complete equanimity. This sort of “gotcha question” is how some people want political discourse to go, with their side decimating every opportunity of conversation. This mentality is dangerous because it slyly replaces understanding as the goal, and by doing so, furthers confirmation bias.

With a newfound appreciation for other’s opinions and with an understanding of why respecting others is important, let us revise our definition of civility to include these elements.
The internal definition of civility works well for situations when someone is interacting with people they know and care about. If you have a good relationship with someone, you are interested by them, and thus, you would be interested to hear about their beliefs. Your genuine care for the person holding the belief should adequately motivate you to hear them out if they say something you disagree with. This is a sort of natural civility. Although it is natural, that is not to say that it is necessarily easy. In these situations, we must still remind ourselves of the reasons we care for the person to overcome any temptation of outrage.

A potential objection to this definition involves the aspect that having respect is necessary for showing civility, and therefore, if we do not respect somebody, we do not need to be civil to them. Although we showed that we should not blame people for their beliefs because believing something does not mean that someone deliberately chose to believe it, this does not explain what general attitude we should have if they act with outrage toward you. We showed that a lack of respect would subsequently make it harder to respect someone in return. Ideally, people we respect and the respect we demonstrate in practice will always coincide, but what if they do not. Which one should concede?

When it comes to situations where we do not already care for the person who treats us uncivilly, such as a stranger on the street, it is difficult to imagine our care for that person will extend far enough to be able to fuel the natural civility required from our deeper relationships to overcome the disrespect. We need to remember that everyone's mind is a little different. Therefore, we should engage our curiosity with respect to how other people construct their beliefs. If you have no relationship with the person, such as your Uber driver, it is unlikely that you will glean anything meaningful about the person's life or thoughts, though this result is far from impossible. I've had a number of memorable and meaningful experiences in such transient
encounters. Civility in these cases is a practical virtue that functions much like politeness so far as being effective at getting you what you want. Insofar as there is something that you can gain from demonstrating respect, then it is important to keep it. This gives us the cooperative definition of civility.

**Cooperative Definition of Civility:** Demonstrating respect for people you disagree with for some cooperative end

This qualifier at the end of the definition, “for some cooperative end,” provides the boundary limitations for civility. Going back to the question of what if someone is uncivil to you, is there a condition in which we are justified to act uncivilly in return? There certainly are times that no one would blame me for a lack of politeness. Take for example a case where you are the owner of a small convenience store, and you find out your employee has been stealing from the company for years by not reporting cash sales and directly pocketing the money instead from those transactions. In this scenario, no one would expect you to politely ask the employee to leave and calmly say they are fired. Because of the lack of respect shown to you by your employee, the respect shown in return through politeness is not necessary.

Even though civility may not be necessary, one could make the argument that it is the preferable outcome. For example, on the school yard, if a kindergarten classmate hits my son, I would not blame my son for hitting the bully back, but I would praise my son if they took the high road and did not retaliate with violence. Civility may be like this in the sense that when we are shown incivility, the most laudable course of action would be to respond civilly to that person, even though it may not be blameworthy to be rude.

Throughout this essay, I have presented the purpose of civility for pursuing collaborative ends in everyday life. In this sense, even if you fundamentally disagree with your partner on a class project, it would serve you best to show civility to your partner until you are done with the project. However, when there are no collaborative ends that can
be achieved between the parties, then civility may not be necessary, but I believe it may still be commendable.

JOHN CERRITELLI
MAY, 2022

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After she leaves, Stud opened the Sex Competition and typed Her Name / Her Rating/10. He texted his roommate and checked Snapchat. Babe, a woman he has been snapping for a month, messaged him back. Above in his identical concrete dorm cell, Stud’s rival opened the Sex Competition too. His roommate texted back: the first floor was still losing. Stud wasn’t upset or anything because it
wasn’t deep like that, but now he felt a certain type of way. He would carry for the team because he knew he could. Just facts. He knew in a supernatural type of way tonight that he would say all the right things... except it was his roommate’s turn to have the room, which blows.

Looking back, Babe realized that she was misinterpreting him most of the time. What had he meant by “movie night”? She had spent the night with a male student platonically before — after a night of drinking, with a group of friends and studying abroad. She didn’t know Stud only asks people like Babe over to have sexual relations. Stud’s friends, heteronormative dudes, also only ask girls to spend the
night with sexual implications. In fact, they kind of all agree hanging out alone and watching a movie, inevitably leads to kissing and then stuff. They think other people, who are chill, get that. Babe didn’t know they thought that was chill.

“Looking back I should have realized she had bad social skills. Last night was so awkward I think she’s probably a virgin or really religious,” says Stud. Stud’s roommate shrugs, “Did you see they rated Taylor B. a 10?” “And now none of her friends are going to mess with me either and I’m pretty sure she knows Cindy,” Stud replies. “Yeah that sucks dude but at least you guys kissed. Respect,” says Stud’s roommate.

Nothing about respecting someone with “game,” being respectful at dinner or showing respect to your elders belongs when regarding Stud and Babe. It’s easy to talk about people like Stud with the familiar words “dick” or “predatory,” but judging that he is a negative person and assigning the label doesn’t explore why he is wrong. Pointing out that it’s 2022 and we, as a society, know he should act differently is also not deep enough. Cultural values and interpretations of how people act change across time and culture. What if there’s a way to talk about Stud’s behavior that proves he is fundamentally wrong?

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas worked on this question and famously insisted that ethics is fundamental to human existence. Controversially he derived a reason we “should” act from the way things “are.” I won’t use his work to prove Stud is wrong. Instead, I choose to ground my writing in Levinas because his thoughts on the Other illuminates how to practice respect, and because he prompts reflection on a key aspect of philosophy: why it’s worthwhile to think about something without a for-sure answer. Inspired by his writings on Otherness and ethics, I will talk about respect on a different level. A philosophical conversation about “respect” is an opportunity to explore the boundaries of what it describes and how it relates to us. This enriches our ability to navigate any type of relationship with more control.

I define respect as:
1. The disposition towards another person that recognizes and protects their dignity/autonomy while regarding them.
2. The habit and intentionality of acknowledging another person's autonomy and dignity through communication and action.

It’s important to be on the same page about what autonomy means. Autonomy is the ability to control your own life. Consider the difference between a remote-control robot and a robot with artificial intelligence, or the difference between living under your parent’s rules and living on your own. When you trespass another person’s autonomy, you are restricting their freedom to live as they wish. This sounds similar to personal liberty, a concept in political science, but we are not talking about civil rights. We establish those in government and society—social constructions. Social constructions are not fundamental, and to get an idea of what Levinas tries to do, let’s break the idea of autonomy down ontologically. This means that we will try to establish the fundamental state of how things are in our perception of them. Each ontological proposition aims to give a description that is undeniable, like a fact.

When we look at any two people, we realize each person is fundamentally separated from everyone else. To all of us, everything else in the world is something besides us: everything but us. Next, we declare that no other thing or person can understand what goes on inside our heads. This is called the Problem of the Other Minds in philosophy. There is no development in neuroscience, psychology, or psychoanalysis that gives us the ability to look at someone and know what they are thinking. Next, we can establish that we influence our behavior and navigate the world with those lonely mental processes. Everyone is exercising this control on their own, so everyone has their own autonomy. In other words, autonomy is not a word representing a socially constructed right; it is a description of how everyone is.

Everyone’s perspective or world view is different because we are all developing minds that are isolated and unique. We reach the same
conclusion as neuroscience and psychology, that every mind and brain in unique, when we follow our proposition — everyone is apart from ourselves — with the argument that if everyone is different from everyone else then everyone is unique. Each person who will ever live is unique and they can have different understandings of the world. These separate understandings make communicating very complicated. Stud was assuming that Babe knew what he meant when he asked her to watch a movie. But there is no universal knowledge about what “movie night” means to people or what “movie night” means in Stud’s text. To Stud and his friends, the two words have a relative meaning inside their group. Stud was oblivious to the fact that Babe was not seeing the world through the toxic masculine culture he embodied. He was not respecting Babe as her own, unique person.

Practicing respect involves acknowledging someone’s uniqueness and recognizing their autonomy. This begins with a mental disposition, but translates into actions that do not trespass another person’s autonomy. Respect must be practiced. Stud is not a fundamentally disrespectful person: He can recognize his own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others. Some people have personalities and characters that make them more caring and likely to respect others. Those we call “good people” can give the impression that there are some innate or emotional qualities that allow them to be better to others. Respect — something we can practice and foster as a habit — is a virtue. Virtues are not descriptions of personality attributes, and by practicing and nurturing virtues we can develop lasting changes to how we behave and think.

Practicing respect through intentional recognition of autonomy involves noticing when the other person does not have a chance to share their opinion about what you are doing. This is obvious in the case of someone “making a move” on another person. When someone “makes a move” they force the other party to experience the physical action or conversation without earning consent. They rely on social cues (often a misinterpretation or disregard of social cues) and not explicit consent. Here’s another example: if a woman is at Stud’s
house, and he ruins their ability to get home safely, Stud is restricting their autonomy to spend the night in their own bed. Cisgendered males will likely engage in these risks more often because within masculine culture, there are traditions of initiating relationships. But people belonging to all gender and sexuality groups transgress through language, which can be much less obvious.

Practicing respect in communication involves treating the contributions of the other as valid expressions of their subjective experience. Think of a crayon box: Kids only pick from the colors available and they imagine their picture in the colors they think they can use. As soon as the kid sees a new color in the box, their idea of the picture changes. Someone’s autonomy is their ability to choose what life
they will live, and this is affected by what life they think they *should* live and what life they *can* live.[12] Expressing opinions through judgment and challenging what other’s share from their thoughts pressures them to accept a certain array of colors. Even in instances where there is enough contextual information to establish a “way things are,” it is essential to acknowledge that what may seem wrong is a valid expression from their perspective.

No one has the information necessary to fact-check an extension of a perspective. We do not know what they actually think and invalidating what they share pretends that we do.[13] There’s a distinction between personal validation, the kind of validation we are talking about with respect, and correspondent validation, the kind of validation that requires a correlation (correspondence) with observable fact. In a scenario where the correspondent truth (or the truth based on observable facts) is necessary, like in court, then the expression of someone’s opinion may be irrelevant to the proceedings. But even if the opinion is irrelevant to the court, it isn’t meaningless to the individual. Stud is invalidating Babe’s experience in the texts and in doing so, Stud restricts how Babe thinks it is okay to live. This is an invasion of Babe’s autonomy.

He does so by assuming he knows what Babe means and that Babe’s thoughts belong in his value system. He is assimilating Babe into his subjective experience of the world and all his biases alter how Babe seems.[14] This appears impossible to avoid all the time because we are trapped in our existence. No one always catches themselves invalidating someone else or acting without permission. That is why practicing respect requires a shift in disposition. Shifting our disposition fosters a healthier habit of interpreting other people. Stud feels like he can get what he wants from women. In each interaction, he approaches them from a disposition of contest and achievement. Even if most of time Babe *seemed* comfortable — when Stud brushed off how she didn’t touch his hand when he put it on her leg — he assimilated Babe’s reaction into something that jived with what he wanted. Stud assumes he understands Babe, which creates convenient explanations that reaffirm his belief that everything along the way of
getting what he wants is okay. If it becomes obvious that Babe does not think the same way as Stud, then suddenly Babe is at risk of becoming something alien and unrelatable. Once again, with disrespect, Babe’s autonomy is compromised, and she is shoved into a framework of “cringy feminist-virgin/ super religious noob.” At this point nothing Babe does is given the respect of an individual; she is only a stereotype.

When a difference is consciously realized, someone who is practicing respect should approach the other person from a place that tries to reach a consensual understanding, or else an acknowledgement of valid differences. Consensual understandings cannot fully rely on the abstract information two people share through the similar ways they participate in life. For example, even though two people share much of the same understanding about what goes into cooking, there can be divergences about what the experience of cooking means; a cis-gendered woman could have a negative association with cooking food from our history of gender roles.

The acknowledgment of valid difference, what Levinas would call “alterity,” involves openness and self-control. You have to approach the other person with a mission to listen and be comfortable with their difference. This is hard to do when it seems that the other person’s point of view is objectively wrong or aligned with something negative. But meeting someone within your differences is one of the most precious opportunities people have. No one has the same experiences and body as any other person, so nobody can relate entirely to another person. We are alone in a way we can never fix or get around for all our lives. Because we cannot fully understand anyone else, we cannot fully understand ourselves either. Without being intentional with regard to acknowledging difference, everything that is shared will be misinterpreted on both sides. Only by not assuming we can understand what each other means can we connect how we feel and think without assimilating everything said into our own terms.

Approaching conversations while being mindful of alterity is also a tool for building a more robust worldview. For someone who values having an empirically accurate point of view, interactions can
be like peer reviews on their point of view. This happens a lot without us noticing. Think about when someone pointed out you were pronouncing a musician’s name wrong. We can initiate this process by asking questions, trying to reach common definitions, exploring each other’s influences, and sharing art. The more diverse and far-reaching our perspective is, the more robust and reliable it is.

Our self-interest ultimately has a huge role in the ethical conclusions of this conversation on respect. When we realize that each person is unique and has autonomy, we are faced with the problem that there is no fundamental reason each person should act a certain way, even if that way is how we think makes people good. How can I tell Stud he is wrong for transgressing Babe when I am at the same time disrespecting his autonomy to do what he wants? Stud must decide himself to practice respect: He must think critically and philosophically about what his choices mean.

Levinas insists that we have a constant ethical demand to others. He believes the lonely urge to find meaning in life is an always present urge to justify living with others. This is a very involved and abstract idea. Why does a description of autonomy mean that Stud should have practiced respect? If we can’t find a clear answer, what’s the point of all this? Many philosophical writings deal with questions that cannot be given a definite answer. The point is that thinking carefully about difficult things benefits how we deal with them. Thinking about our relationship to others is what reveals ethical conclusions.

There are two parts of this: what we think is best, and what we want. Considering that we now know everyone is autonomous, do we think practicing respect is best and do we think practicing respect is something we want? The first question concerns governing a society and the big theories in ethics. How should most people act, and how should they decide how to act, to have the best society? In a democracy specifically, where the voice of people is represented in government policies, practicing respect allows the beliefs of all groups to be represented. If their autonomy was not recognized, they would be assimilated into the beliefs of the majority and their needs would
not be accommodated. Does this necessitate a libertarian government? That depends on what you think about how we decide to act. Should everyone, even the government, absolutely practice respect to the best of their abilities, or should there be a compromise for a greater good that may acknowledge the needs of more people in the long run?[24]

Next, we consider what we personally want. Do we want others to respect us? If we are not considered with respect, then we are at risk of being invalidated, discredited for the other person’s point of view, and begin transgressed. A transgression can be verbal or physical and, in both cases, we are at risk of being hurt. Think about if there is a lower or higher risk of experiencing pain when you are unable to give feedback on the experience. If your feedback matters, and you could prevent yourself from experiencing pain, would you want the other party to listen to your feedback? Do you want to have dignity?

A person’s dignity is their worth that earns respect. A respectful disposition assumes everyone possesses dignity; it is the demand that Levinas strove to make fundamental.[25] If we want to be dignified, but do not want to honor the dignity of others, we are concluding that everyone does not deserve to be treated the way we ourselves want to be treated.[26] Of course, this embodies the Golden Rule. Levinas takes it a step further and believes others are worth more dignity than we are ourselves, and that we have an asymmetrical responsibility to everyone else.[27] Whether we believe in the Golden Rule or Levinas’ idea, we are deciding that life as a narcissist is not the best option. Practicing respect is a declaration that we want to be someone who is healthy and positive to others. It is a personal activism that proclaims and demands dignity of everyone.

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1.-Speaking in those terms is a discussion of performances that does not take advantage of what the concept of respect can illuminate about our relationships. Courtesy, admiration, or etiquette only explain a notion of what is appropriate and desirable; practicing good manners doesn’t prepare us to be fundamentally better neighbors. When you are told to respect an elder, “respect” is referring to a performance to either communicate an authentic sentiment or an understanding of how people organize themselves. This sentiment could be something like admiration, a desire to please, or a sense of inferiority but is unavoidably communicated by acting what we learned to be “respectful.” If we look at someone’s behavior, without knowing if they have that sort of sentiment, and determining whether it is respectful, our criteria for saying it is, still comes from representation of other “respect” performances.

[2] When I was reading Lévinas, I was frustrated that he wouldn’t just get to the point and prove that ethics is ontological. His arguments are long and involved, and unsuited for this paper. A key part of philosophy is engaging with work like Lévinas’ work, even though it seems they are trying to answer something unanswerable. Thinking through the work and Lévinas’ many-faceted explanation of why ethics is fundamental is worthwhile and meaningful.

[3] I hope to demonstrate a point about all philosophy: Philosophy is not meaningless when it doesn’t provide facts. This essay is not meaningless because it doesn’t prove why Stud is wrong.

[4] Why do we need new terms to talk about the same thing? No word is a perfect synonym and taking advantage of the rich lexicon that philosophical terms provide equips us to talk more comprehensively and critically about a subject.

[5] Lévinas’ way of creating an ontology is influenced by the Phenomenologists. Phenomenology explores the patterns and structure within our experience of the world.

[6] I use the word “influence” because professionals argue over how much control we have over our behavior. Google the Sam Harris-
Daniel Dennett squabble, for an example. There are radical consequences to assuming we have no control, so for the purposes of this essay, we will assume we have at least some control.

[7] Check out these essays: (Valizadeh and Liem,. Et All, 2018), (Rees, 2011).

[8] I read Wittgenstein and Austin to prepare for this essay. Learning about how they treat language helped me pull together my thoughts on communicating with the Other.

[9] This is not to say their interpretations of words are entirely dissonant. Words have contextual connotations in material things they represent and their role in grammar.

[10] Consider the tradition of men asking women on dates, proposing etc., and the outdated perspective that masculinity is active while femininity is passive.

[11] This pulls from the existentialists. Culture impacts the freedom to keep autonomy by invalidating their existence and provoking psychological discomfort. The process of people deciding what is the acceptable and preferable way to live has a large effect on the experience of existing.

[12] As citizens, people are constantly compromising their autonomy for the moral and legal beliefs of the governed society.

[13] Watch the movie Primal Fear to see a really interesting consequence of this.

[14] This paragraph approaches the Other from a point of view deeply influenced by Lévinas. Where traditionally the Other in philosophy as either seemed as relatable or a stranger, Lévinas believed “The Other lies absolutely beyond my comprehension and should be preserved in all its irreducible strangeness,” (Davis, 1996).

[15] This is referred to as “Othering” by Orientalism thinkers and literary theorists

[16] By abstract information, I mean information that has a strong enough relationship to a context that through its correspondence it can be understood with minimal personal bias.

[17] Women and feminine-identifying people have been unfairly designated to do domestic work (cleaning, cooking, laundry) by
culture. There is a lot of literature about this, so just Google it or use any Gender Studies cross-reference in an academic database.

[18] See (Perpich, 2008) and (Critchley and Bernasconi, 2002)

[19] This is an Existentialist idea.

[20] See (Lévinas, 1969). I do not replicate his argument, but I draw from one of the first premises: that we build our ontologies from the Other.

[21] See the section “Ethics and Face.” In the relationship we share to the face is a very interesting and enriching thing to think and read about.

[22] See the excerpt from “existence to ethics” in (Lévinas and Hand, 1989).

[23] Utilitarianism, Deontology, Virtue Ethics. A quick search in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy website will give you a basic idea of all three.

[24] Technicalities of how governments work affect our options.

[25] This is a big oversimplification. Lévinas’ conception of “demand” relied on his thoughts about face, which is too involved to explain in this piece of Public Philosophy. See pages 78-123 in (Perpich, 2008). In his ontology, we gain subjectivity through the relationship to the Other, or other people. So the demand to be ethical is necessary to our existence because it creates the way we are, in the world (Critchley and Bernasconi, 2002).

[26] Our society treats criminals and enemies of the state as if they do not deserve dignity.

[27] This is because the relationship is fundamentally asymmetrical to begin with. He treats the Other as an infinite subject apart from ourselves (Perpich, 2008).

Bibliography


Trust is a civic virtue that seems full of mystery. Understanding trust more thoroughly can help us develop more trusting relationships with others. These relationships can help us build a habit of trust, which is important to living a good life. But what exactly does trust entail? What makes us trust in anything or anyone at all? Why should we trust? We need to find viable answers to these questions and other ones to cultivate trust and promote cooperation in society.

We can naturally come to trust things based on our everyday experiences and reasoning. For instance, we know that a bowling ball will fall to the ground when dropped. Our knowledge of this law of nature stems from our past experiences and reasoning to understand that an expected result will happen no matter what. Trust is the reason we maintain this expectation. Trust involves having a belief that some-
thing will succeed in its purpose. You may be wondering how a bowling ball can have success, or even have purpose at all. In this context, purpose is the way that the natural world is ordered and how the things in them are oriented towards finding that order and balance. In this case, a ball suspended in air on earth would not be consistent with the natural order of our world. One of the purposes for the bowling ball would be to obey the law of gravity since that is the natural order of things. To have success, the ball must follow the natural rule of gravity and fall to the ground. Trusting in such natural laws is necessary to even have a basic understanding of the world around us. We hold a great amount of trust in our own experiences and our knowledge of these facts of life, leaving little room for doubt.

There are so many other everyday things that we trust to happen. We have good reason to believe that our electricity will work on a good weather day, our cars will work as we expect them to when we start them, and so many other things that are part of our daily operations that we barely think about them. We don’t trust these as much as we trust that the sun will rise or that gravity will cause a ball to drop because we are less certain in our belief that the electricity or our cars will succeed than we are of the sun or gravity. The level of trust that we allow for seems to be dependent on our certainty of the outcome. It is our trust in all these things that allows us to go through our days without constantly worrying about everything that could go wrong. If we couldn’t have confidence that the basic daily tools that we use or that the laws of nature will operate as they should, we would all be terribly anxious and have miserable attitudes towards our daily lives.

Trusting in things is what keeps us sane and allows for a balance between optimism and pessimism. Even the most pessimistic people have enough trust in things to function at a basic level. If we had so much certainty in something that is unreasonable, we would lose touch with reality and be overly optimistic all the time. If I expected my car to magically start every morning even if it hasn’t worked in months, I would have a belief that the car would achieve its proper function and purpose, but that would be a misguided belief and would not actually be trust, but rather, something like ignorance or blind
trust. On the flip side, if we had inadequate certainty in something that is reasonable, we would be overly pessimistic. In this case I might expect my car to break down even though it is in great condition. I would be constantly fearful that something would go wrong because of my distrust of my car. Having proper reasoning is helpful to determine how much we should trust something. If we have good reasoning and a balance between blind trust and distrustfulness, we will be able to develop a healthy amount of trust in something.

Trust is not limited to trusting things to happen. Trusting others is the heart of the virtue of trust. As humans, we strive for close relationships and meaningful interactions, and one piece necessary to form these close relationships is trust. Our closest relationships are the ones where we are trusted by the other and trust in them in turn. To have relational trust is to not only have a belief that someone (rather than the general trust in something) intends to succeed in their purpose, but also, to rely on someone. Trust has a strong influence on the way people make decisions and trust is often something that is not even realized by the individuals engaged with it. So, would everything that I expect a person to do be what I trust them to do? If my brother always lifts weights in the morning and I have a belief that he will continue to do this, would I be trusting that he will lift tomorrow morning? Perhaps I trust that he will perform the action, but it wouldn’t be the same as if I told him a secret and trusted him to keep it secret. I don’t rely on him to lift every day. If he decides to take a day off from lifting, or physically can’t do so for some reason, his actions will not agree with my belief or expectation that he would lift, but the purpose part of relational trust seems to be the determining factor here. It is a reasonable belief that he will lift each morning because of the frequency, but with respect to our relationship, it is unimportant whether he lifts or not. Whereas something like revealing a secret of mine would betray my trust because it would be interfering with part of the purpose in our relationship, which is to be loyal to one another. Relationships depend on whether trust is broken. The more we rely on something to go a certain way, the more we will need to trust that it will succeed. If I have a life-threatening accident, I will rely on
someone much more than if I need to be picked to go to a regular checkup with a doctor. In this case, the reliance on someone is the difference between the level of trust needed. Trusting someone to pick me up for a checkup is not as important since the consequences of missing it aren’t as bad. Of course, trust would falter a bit if I had a friend who said he would, but he never showed. However, I would lose trust more in someone who was able to take me to a hospital, but passed on the chance. The person who didn’t take me wasn’t reliable at all because if I didn’t get to the hospital, the consequences would be dire and yet they still chose not to take me.

When trust is broken, it can be very damaging to a relationship. There are always more ways to break someone’s trust than there are to remain true to them. Some people will distrust at the blink of an eye, while others will continue to trust for an extremely long time, even if both situations have similar circumstances. We are all inclined to trust differently depending on our past experiences and personality traits. Do we have any control on how much we trust someone? At first glance, it may seem like we can choose to trust others at any given moment. However, trust is something that we need to develop over time and can’t just flip a trust switch on or off. If my brother goes behind my back and breaks my trust, I could be hung up on the issue no matter how much I want to let him off the hook. As my brother, part of his purpose is to be trustworthy, and if he breaks my trust, I may not be able to truly trust him. There is no telling exactly how long it might take to regain the trust that was lost. It seems like it is generally related to how much they can act in a trustworthy way over a certain amount of time. However, the number of trustworthy acts and length of time necessary could be different for each individual relationship. If I thoroughly believe that it was a mistake and won’t happen again, I will have to trust him whether I want to or not, since my belief in his intentions and a reasonable probability that he will follow through successfully on his intentions determines my trust for him. Close connections to one another also seem to be a factor in how likely it is that the intentions are good and having people around with good intentions creates a more trusting environment.
Some of our most important relationships are rooted in love. Close familial and spousal relationships are founded on love, and this develops a mutual trust between people over time. Assuming that parents provide proper care for a child, a young child necessarily trusts their parents because of their dependence on them for survival. In the child’s experience, however far they have made it through life can be credited to the parents. I think children often attribute their survival to the success of their parents without even realizing it, and this is the first step to developing a close relationship based in trust. Psychologists have recognized trust issues as a problem and they have developed theoretical frameworks to understand how different parenting styles can affect the future relationships of their children. Research on attachment theories has shown that an individual’s attachment anxiety developed in early childhood relationships make children more prone to distrust a significant other later in life. This explains how there can be a ripple effect of distrust in all areas of someone’s life. It shows a commonality with the example of optimism and pessimism. Some people are much more likely to be closer to the blind trust side of the spectrum of trust and others are more prone to be distrustful of others.

Trust is something that can be gained and lost since the belief in others is not necessarily stable. As time goes on, we don’t see people the same way and various events could shift the attitudes that we have about others or that others have about us. However, in our close relationships, we have a strong desire to maintain mutual trust. These relationships are the foundations of living as social beings. The close relationships we have are what give us confidence in our actions and confidence to trust others beyond the ones we love. We trust people close to us to never have bad intentions for us, and we trust that they reciprocate that trust towards us. We strive to be at the point where our trust in close relationships will be almost as certain as the laws of gravity acting on a bowling ball. In many ways, our relationships define who we are and if we lose trust in our loved ones or they lose trust in us, it can feel like we aren’t even the same person that we used to be. We need to maintain close relationships so
that we stay true to who we are and are able to form connections with everyone.

In our society, cooperation is one of the central foundations to the prosperity of all people. Trust is one of the main components required to achieve cooperation. In cooperative settings, trust can be unidirectional, and other times it is multidirectional. When working with others, there must be faith that others will do what needs to be done and that trust should be mutual across the board. Cooperation requires a common goal and trust that each person will do their part to reach this goal as much as they can. In the context of cooperation, trust is multidirectional. Everyone involved in cooperation must have at least a basic level of trust and good intentions towards every other part of the group to be successful. However, trust could appear as only unidirectional if I were to trust a stranger walking by while they don’t trust me back. If I trust them not to hurt me, but they think I would hurt them for some reason, they would be extra cautious around me, and the trust would only go one way. Think about how much you trust someone walking down the street. Most people seem to have a general sense of trust that others will not do them any harm because they have good intentions. Our personal experiences are what shape our expectations of others. Since we are rarely in danger from others in public, we tend to assume that we are safe and trust that we will not be harmed by them. This can be a problem if there are people who do not have good intentions and may cause harm to others. It is a safe bet that there will be at least some people out there who do not have good intentions. So, it seems that there must be a limitation on trust with the general public. However, if there is too little trust in each other, we fall short of a truly prosperous society because any sort of cooperation would not be true cooperation if everyone is always watching their own back and uncertain about the intentions of others. A healthy level of distrust is important so that we are not careless and blindly trust people who are not worthy of such trust. There are different degrees of trust and sometimes there can be too much or too little. Finding the balance for people we don’t know will include more distrust than the ideal balance for close relationships. The sweet spot
of trust is at a different place on the spectrum of trust for varying levels of relationships. The closer you are with someone, the closer you will be to the blind trust end of the spectrum, and the less you know about someone, the closer you will be to complete distrust of that person. Every single rank of relation to you lines up somewhere in between these two ends.

In the fable of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” there was a boy who constantly lied about the danger of a wolf attacking, just to gain attention, but when he was actually in trouble, nobody trusted him because of their past experiences with him. The lesson behind the fable is that you should not lie because you will end up losing people’s trust. Also, the story does well in displaying how and why people form trusting relationships. People decide who they should trust based on their past experiences. If someone has a track record of following through on their word or displaying trustworthy characteristics, they will be trusted more than someone who has not done this. Deciding who to trust and how much trust is deserved depends on that person’s habits. The habits that people display are what can raise or lower their social capital. Social capital is a concept associated with forms of trust that set up a powerful framework for society. The main idea behind social capital is basically that each person has a certain value of how much they deserve to be trusted. For example, the boy who cried wolf had enough social capital to get the people to attend to him when he initially cried, but as the lies piled up, he lost social capital. Eventually the entire town did not respond because of how the boy’s social capital had withered. Social capital depends on who trusts and determines the capital in question. Each individual places different levels of capital on people depending on the relationship and experience that they have with someone. The boy’s mother would probably still trust him more than others based on the closeness of their relationship. Or if the boy had a friend who still trusts him because the boy had proven himself many more times than not to the friend, his experience overall might still allow for a greater social capital than what would be credited to the boy by the rest of the town, whose only experiences with him have been when he lies to them.
Social capital is a very subjective measure, one that varies for everyone depending on who is evaluating it. However, if many people develop generalized attitudes towards specific groups, it can lead to an overall attitude by a significant portion of the population. Think about the shared attitudes that people hold about specific actions. If someone is a thief who has been caught many times stealing from others, most people will not trust them. However, if someone is a good EMT, they are generally trusted by others to perform their duties and care for the people in danger. The thief is someone with low social capital and the EMT would have high social capital. But we can't assume that all EMTs are trustworthy and that all thieves are not. The general idea of thieves in situations where they could steal would be to distrust. And to some extent, this is a healthy distrust if they have not proven themselves worthy of trust again. It takes time and reconciliation to earn back trust. Publicly, the thief is just a thief, but they are someone who always follows through in their close relationships, someone who always intends to accomplish whatever is necessary for others in their life. The EMT might be completely unreliable in their personal life and never follow through on anything. Who is more trustworthy, the thief or the EMT? Trust is situational in this way and there is no objective way to determine who is more trustworthy. This example really shows the complexity of character and trustworthiness.

The social capital can be different in the public perception of someone compared to a private perception. In this case, public perception of the EMT is better than the thief. But within their relationships, the private perception from people close to them, the thief would be perceived as more trustworthy. I think most people would point to close relationships and value the trust within those than the public trust as more important, but both have a unique value. The societal implications of public trust shouldn't be overlooked. How well people interact with others in public is part of a virtuous life, especially thinking about democratic virtues. In a democratic society, the perception and trust of others needs to exist at a certain level to trust the system as a whole. It is not practically advantageous to
anyone who trusts known thieves to watch their bag while they go to the bathroom. Based on our knowledge of thieves, we would expect a habitual thief to steal the bag. This is not to say that someone who has stolen before doesn’t deserve any trust, but you should be wary of the possibility that they might steal again, since the best predictor for future behavior is past behavior. Everyone deserves chances for redemption, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be cautious with a previous offender who hasn’t redeemed themselves yet.

In our society, one of our most important virtues is trust. Without a healthy amount of trust, there would be little to no cooperation because there would be so much betrayal of trust. Cooperation is a crucial part of a successful society, and it requires people to have the same intentions towards a common goal. The last decade in American society, people have been increasingly moving towards opposite sides of the political spectrum. This has caused civil unrest and so much uncertainty about who to trust. It has gone so far to the point where it is not only political differences, but this lack of trust has led people to see others as their enemies. Many people no longer see people with different opinions as just their political opposition. They see them as bad people who have bad intentions for the world. Looking at social media, it is not hard to find cases where people completely ostracize others due to differences of opinion.

It is hard to know who to believe with the state of the current social and political climate. Since it is hard to find the truth and there is so much skepticism around, people are beginning to trend towards being generally distrustful. When people get too close to that end of the spectrum of trust, they start to develop a perceived hostility from the world around them. When people view their external situation as hostile, they tend to project their own hostility outwards, and at a certain point, they will cut themselves out of cooperative avenues in society because of this negative perception of the world. Without a healthy amount of trust, it will be difficult for a society to truly flourish.

So how do we go about reversing this process of growing hostility and distrust? I don’t think there is a clear answer, but it
must be possible to restore trust in some fashion across our society. I think deep down, everyone has a genuine desire to trust. Part of the problem is that people hide this desire behind defense mechanisms so that they are not able to be taken advantage of. This is an adaptive behavior that can be beneficial in many cases. However, if we are to build trust, we need to improve other civic virtues first. Respect is the main one that comes to mind. If respect flourishes, there should be little reason to distrust other people due to their political beliefs. Now, this is not to say that if you respect someone else that you should necessarily trust them, since if they don’t have a mutual respect, or if they lack respect towards others, they could still take advantage and it would cause even more trust issues. However, if everyone could establish an acceptable amount of respect, we would be able to have a confident belief in their intentions and rely on them to promote a good society. If we can develop a healthy trust of ourselves and others at an individual level and come together as a society to foster trusting relationships, we will be able to overcome many of the social issues that we are currently facing.

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The ability to become part of something greater than ourselves and that serves more than just ourselves is one of the shimmering abilities that we possess as humans. We are inclined to intertwine our fates with each other in what we may call a civic society. Civic society is composed of individuals who have amalgamated their lives with the faith that so doing is the better way to live, despite their individual nature being changed in the process. Individuals are now found among the context of other individuals. Along with the ability to consider the differences in which individuals view fate, the key to a well-ordered and equitable civic society lies in the interactions and coexistence of an individual amongst individuals. These interactions are informed by various habits of heart and mind. These habits of heart and mind are best described as virtues.

Among these virtues are habits that underpin civic society and serve to demonstrate the impact that virtue has on civic society; those virtues are foundational for the existence and functionality of a civic society. One of these key virtues is *confidence*. To identify why confidence is a foundational virtue, we must turn our attention to how this habit affects the individual, then how confidence can manifest in uncertainty beyond oneself. From this point, we can then understand
peer-confidence and see how it is vital to an equitable civil society. Viewing institutions as the apparatus responsible for enabling and creating peer-confidence allows us to see how the malformation of a civic society indicates the lack of confidence as a virtue. The identification of this malformation ultimately enables the individual to call on fellow citizens, as great leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. did, to create a civic society where all individuals can live a good and meaningful life. By fighting inequity in institutions, King Jr. was expressing the virtue of peer-confidence in the sense of the innate desire to be a good citizen because being a good citizen is truly in every individual’s best interest.

To approach confidence as a virtue, we might first turn our attention to self-confidence. Self-confidence is the belief in one’s own capabilities and abilities. When we refer to an individual’s abilities, we mean skills that have been realized to an extent determined by how much they have been acted upon. A capability is an unrealized skill, a potential that would require acting upon to then become an ability. Take glass blowing as an example of a capability. It is presumably a skill that an individual can learn, if given the chance and assuming a willingness to act upon. When we view glassblowing as a capability, we accept that one can learn to blow glass with no prior experience. Of course, an individual might expect to be a very poor glass blower when beginning, but if they are self-confident in their ability to undergo the process of developing a capability, they can eventually realize their abilities that they can possess through action.

An individual displays the habit of self-confidence when they act upon their capabilities. By attempting to learn, an individual is expressing self-confidence as a habit that indicates they are willing to start where their current abilities end and subsequent capabilities begin. If an individual toils away for hours on end in front of a hot furnace, seeking to realize their abilities, one will be a better glassblower at the conclusion of that process than they were prior. Without the belief in one’s capabilities, an individual would not attempt to learn to glass blow, nor attempt to change their nature at all because it would not be possible. This means self-confidence as a
habit is necessary for an individual to learn a new skill because without it, there would be no inclination to seek out new skills. The metamorphosis from capability to ability is only possible when a capability is acted upon, changing the nature of that individual and the composition of their abilities. This can only be achieved with self-confidence in the heart of the individual, as it requires a belief in something not yet manifested in concrete ways. This suspension of belief in an individual’s appraisal of their current state is what is supported by self-confidence when practiced as a virtue. Self-confidence is not rooted in the extent to which a capability is realized, but predicated on the potential for realization and the willingness to act upon that. Even if an individual cannot blow glass at a given moment, if they choose to learn, they are displaying self-confidence in their ability to change their state through action. As an individual changes their state, their self-confidence begins to be supported by the tangible evidence of the results of that process. Thus, an individual who has been practicing glassblowing might eventually be able to produce an ornament, a physical object that affirms the self-confidence that the individual had in their capabilities. The ornament would also represent a shift in skill from capability to ability. Note that this shift simply must occur for a capability to begin to become an ability and the size of the shift is less important.

Conversely, if an individual seeks to affirm an ability, and the tangible result of realizing this ability is a failure, a properly self-confident individual does not deceive oneself by overstating the extent of realization. Failure serves to inform the individual, who possesses the habit of self-confidence in their capabilities and abilities, just as the affirmation of success does. Failure, when it comes to the realization of an ability, allows us to temper self-confidence so it does not stray into self-deception. This is to say that if an individual continually attempts to blow glass and cannot, the individual ought to accept the limits of one’s abilities. If self-deception becomes a habit of the heart and mind, this indicates that the individual does not possess the virtue of self-confidence because they are unable to identify the limit of their capabilities. This is ultimately damaging to the indi-
individual and their civic society because it ignores what reality is telling an individual in relation to their self-confidence. Suspension of belief in one's current state must be marked by a grounding in tangible reality, not simply possibility. It is the balancing of these factors that characterize self-confidence as a virtue. While individuals must avoid arrogance, an individual needs to practice self-confidence: For an individual to lead a meaningful life, they must believe they can live well and be good, while also understanding they are capable of leading a meaningless life. Part of this fulfillment requires self-development, which is composed of realizing one's abilities as well as acknowledging what abilities they lack. Without this belief, life would be undermined. It would appear a futile endeavor for an individual to live well if they were intrinsically incapable of doing so, and if we were not predisposed to do so. It would be equally as damaging if individuals were to strip themselves of a tether to reality that failure can provide. Self-confidence requires the affirmation that an individual can live a meaningful life. Through this acceptance of an individual's capability to live well, an individual may change their state to more fully realize a meaningful life when they find themselves faced with failure or success.

An individual, having recognized the potential to undergo this process of realization internally and to appreciate how it must be tempered by failure, may then turn to their fellow individuals in civic society. While the individual can, through introspection, make definitive statements about their self-confidence, the individual cannot say the same about their confidence in their peers. Confidence in an individual's peers' (fellow individuals within a civic society) ability and capability need not be equitable so far as believing everyone can be good at something; capability and ability differ among individuals, meaning some will be great at something, while others will simply be terrible, despite their earnest efforts. An individual does not need to have confidence in his neighbor's ability to blow glass, but must have some confidence in their neighbor's ability to be a great peer in civic society because it is in their best interest.

This is where the virtue of peer-confidence is foundational to a
The individual who practices the habit of peer-confidence is expressing a belief in a shared commitment to the civic society that embodies their shared life. The belief is a degree of confidence in one’s peers’ ability to follow the guidelines through which a civic society governs itself in tandem with the desire to follow them because it leads to a better and meaningful life. This desire stems from the idea that the civic society in question provides more meaning and space for the good life than outside it. This revisits the concept of becoming part of something greater than an individual. The civic society is built upon the confidence in one’s peers to not only follow the rules, but embody the rules as a way of meaningful living. It is in the individual’s best interest to follow the rules in an equitable civic society. The individual lives a better life when their fate is shared with their peers within the rules. Peer-confidence focuses not on the individual’s abilities and capabilities when it comes to specific skills such as glass blowing or mathematics, because these skills are not innate, but focuses instead on the innate faith in our peers to be good citizens. Our peers’ desire to be equitable citizens stems from so doing being in their best interest. An individual can see if their interests are being served, so far as the ability to have a good and meaningful life is concerned, by turning to institutions that set out the rules within a society.

One common institution of a civic society is a judicial system. In addition to being one of the ways in which a civic society articulates its rules, a judicial system serves to illustrate how peer-confidence is a cornerstone of civic society when it comes to qualities of equitable institutions. A judicial system is a collection of individuals who interpret, enforce, and change the rules of a civic society. These rules are partially how a civic society expresses the intertwining of fates when it deals with individual straying from societal ideals. Judicial systems are responsible for prescribing corrective action in response to an individual violating the rules. If the judicial system is equitable, it will seek to provide both adequate punishments to satisfy those who were violated and also seek to bring those responsible back within the rules. In some cases, a judicial system seeks justice for a violation of
rules that protect all individuals. An example of these rules are traffic laws. The victim in this transgression is the potential safety of the public. For a justice system to fulfill this task, peer-confidence must be practiced twofold: the first is the peer-confidence expressed by the victims. The victims are confident that they are protected under the rules, and it is in their best interest to allow the institution to dole out corrective justice rather than take it into their own hands. The second form of peer-confidence necessary to the judicial system is the peer-confidence that is extended by the judicial system to those accused of violating the rules. Civic society affirms the capability of those who momentarily find themselves outside of the rules to abide by the rules after the transgression. There must be faith in the ability of the institution tasked with producing justice without alienating those who transgress or excluding them from civic society all together. Civic society ought to focus on ultimately assimilating an individual within society rather than seek to exile those who find it not in their best interest to abide by the rules. A civic society that seeks to exile citizens would not be practicing the virtue of peer-confidence, as this would suggest that an individual is incapable of being a good citizen. For all individuals in a civic society to be considered a good citizen, the characteristics of a good citizen cannot be informed by institutions that are inequitable.

For an individual to have faith in an institution within a civic society, they must have confidence that the rules they have set forth are equitable. This is to say that an individual must have confidence that living a good and meaningful life is possible within the rules. This must hold true for that individual as well as fellow citizens. If a civic society is structured in such a way that confidence cannot occur, then peer-confidence becomes impossible. An example of an institution failing to give peer-confidence within a judicial system can be found in the United States. There is a lack of confidence stemming from civic society not expressing confidence in groups of individuals based on unfair criteria, in this case race, and this completely inhibits equity in a judicial system. The US judicial system has historically incarcerated black individuals for longer and for less than white individuals.
A civic society, such as the US, is incapable of receiving confidence from a group of individuals because the rules they have set forth in their judicial system are impossible to abide by if one wishes to participate fully in civic society. Civic societies require equitable institutions that generate equitable rules. Once that result has been achieved, then it is reasonable to ascribe peer-confidence to all in a civic society because it would in fact be in their best interest to abide by the rules. Without the individuals within a civic society having confidence in the institutions that compose it, there can remain no confident civic society at all. If the rules that are set forth are inequitable, it becomes unlikely that intertwining one's fate with others whose interests are represented over one's own can be beneficial. While peer-confidence as a habit requires an enduring belief in an individual's inclination to participate in a civic society, the ability to do so is rooted in the peer-confidence that is only possible when the construction of a society allows for it. If peer-confidence is not incorporated into the construction of a civic society, its institutions will not be equitable. This makes individuals hard pressed to practice peer-confidence because the rules may inhibit rather than promote a good and meaningful life.

The ability of the individual to identify this inequity is evidence that even when a civic society is malformed, confidence can be restored. This further suggests how foundational confidence is as a virtue in civic society. This is predicated on the confidence of one's peers' desire to live a meaningful life in society (only one that is equitable) and how being a good citizen is in their best interest. So, while the idea that self-confidence and peer confidence can exist within an inequitable civic society is incompatible when classed as a virtue, this habit of heart and mind suggests a shared desire for equity in civic society at the root of peer-confidence. Acting on this desire is done through the confidence of one's peers possessing the same desire. The practice of peer-confidence so far as recognizing one's own desire to be a good citizen allows for the removal of inequity from institutions in civic society that deny this affirmation. The practice of peer-confidence leads to a healthier civic society as a whole. If a civic society
seeks to restore the habit of peer-confidence, then it must become comfortable with the existence of inequity within its civic societies and institutions. The only way to then reestablish equitable institutions is through the collective practice of confidence amongst each other and to then rebuild institutions that recognize every individual’s intrinsic desire to live well within a fair civic society. To live well, an individual must account for the inevitability of being wrong. An individual will certainly fail at some point; self-confidence allows for the individual to persevere when warranted and to change course when needed. Civic society and the peer confidence that bolsters it are ultimately composed of these individuals. This means that there are times where civic society fails in what it sets out to do. Civic society must also be willing to face their state of being with confidence as to leave room for progress when it comes to civic society’s failures. Confidence as a virtue propagates the willingness to admit inequity in civic society because it first affirms the capability of the discernment of equity as well as demonstrates a willingness to change course.

Confidence as a virtue is beneficial to civic society because it affirms the transitive state individuals occupy as citizens in civic society. This nurtures mutual respect for fellow individuals within a civic society. This respect, cultivated by confidence, leads to a cohesion for individuals of a civic society in a willingness to accept individuals’ ability to change. This can only happen when the individual is confident in joining fates. This is something made easier by the recognition of those who fall short as a peer because one is certain of their capability to become a great citizen, if not a great poet. Confidence lubricates the gears that serve to propel civic society forward because it both promotes the creation of common rules and encourages an endless process of removing inequity from those rules.

This habit of heart and mind is a catalyst for civic society and its progress, so let us focus on an individual who both practiced peer-confidence and was bolstered in this regard by his self-confidence. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated in 1968, was described in the *New York Times* as “the leader of millions in nonviolent drive for social justice” (Jahanbegloo 112). First, let us examine Dr. King’s habit
of self-confidence. Dr. King realized his aptitude in being a leader and realized this capability by becoming a great one. Not only did Dr. King have the ability to identify inequity, but Dr. King also believed that he could change the order of things within a civic society to help eliminate that inequity; his lasting fingerprint on the civil rights movement is tangible evidence that he possessed this ability. For Dr. King to possess this confidence, in the face of repeated failure, he had peer-confidence in the civic society to become good citizens, even if they were not good citizens at that time. Dr. King was appealing to the desire of the individuals within a malformed civic society to be good citizens. This shows how Dr. King’s view of civic society is peer-confident, rooted in the essential belief that individuals within a civic society can and want to become a good citizen. Dr. King, through his own self-confidence in his ability to bring about change non-violently, became the catalyst for the restoration of peer-confidence by addressing inequitable institutions in his civic society. The non-violence that Dr. King chose to employ could only have succeeded if he possessed the virtue of peer-confidence for individuals amongst the same civic society so far as it was beneficial to both the individual and society as whole to foster it. Dr. King highlighted how the treatment of black individuals within a civic society excluded people by definition. The habit of peer-confidence not being practiced by an institution led to an inequitable civic society because the rules were formed in such a way that prevented black individuals from living a good life. Dr. King recognized that within a peer-confident society, blacks wished to be good citizens and to live a meaningful life because it was in their best interest as well as other individuals’ best interests. Those citizens who were preventing this could become peer-confident in black individuals because it is ultimately in their best interest to do so. Civic society functions the best when all the fates contained within it are equitably represented. Civic society could be addressed and reformed because Dr. King believed in its desire to be equitable because equity is in all individuals’ best interest.

The fates of many individuals are bound together within a civic society. This collective fate, and more importantly the journey
towards that fate, will appear differently to individuals. Accounting for this, the habit of confidence allows a civic society to embody these differences in a cohesive form where dimensions include as much as possible without a reduction to another side of the civic society. When the best interests of society as a whole are represented through the rules set forth by institutions, the way in which society progresses includes the recognition that there must be adjustments made to this course along the way. Although the details of an individual's view on the shared fate in a civic society will differ, a confident society will chart a course using a bearing deduced through equitably balancing these differences as best they can. This balancing ought to be constantly revised and purged of inequity so that all individuals may live a good and meaningful life within a civic society. When a civic society displays inequity, it means that confidence as virtue is not being practiced because the individual who suffers at the hand of inequity is presumed to be the transgressor, while society may be transgressing upon them. This can serve to deny the ability of the individual to be included in the practice of peer-confidence. This in turn throws off the course of a civic society because it is unable to practice the habit of peer-confidence when it is simply impossible for some individuals to abide by the rules and live a good meaningful life. The blame for this miscalculation lies in the institutions themselves rather than the alienated individual.

Humanity's ability to become a civic society defines us when it comes to how an individual relates to other individuals. The willingness to join the fates of individuals together into a whole is evidence that we progress more together than we do apart. A good and meaningful life is found amongst one's fellow citizens; society functions best on this assumption and for this to hold true, a civic society must practice confidence as virtue when it comes to self and the peer. Without the self-confidence that an individual can live a good and meaningful life, life itself would lose much of its meaning. Individuals are dynamic in so far as one can act upon capabilities to change their state of being. The shifting of a capability to an ability will sometimes involve failure. A self-confident individual will recognize when a
failure is a steppingstone or a sign to change course. This requires a suspension of doubt in the case of some failures, which leads to further realization of an ability, while a failure that requires a reassessment of to what extent an ability can be realized ultimately requires a tempering of said doubt. When a civic society practices the virtue of peer-confidence, the society itself must be equitable. This is because peer-confidence consists of both a willingness and a desire to abide by the rules set forth. For this to be the case, the civic society must be composed of equitable institutions that create and enforce the rules. Being a citizen of a civic society must be seen as the catalyst for living a good and meaningful life, making it in the best interest for individuals to amalgamate with other individuals. If the virtue of peer-confidence is not practiced in a civic society, it must be propagated by removing the inequity that blights it. Retooling the institutions that exclude by definition allows for peer-confidence to be restored, as those individuals who were excluded can become a good citizen because it is no longer impossible.

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Justice, respect, trust, confidence, civility, and courage are virtues needed for a well-functioning democracy. They guide us in how to live our lives, acting as moral divining rods aiming our pursuits in the “proper” direction. What happens when these virtues conflict? What if in the pursuit of justice, it becomes necessary for me to act uncivilly towards someone enacting injustice. How do we decide which virtue to act on in each circumstance?

I believe we should turn to discernment as a much-needed habit of heart and mind. The habit of discernment requires us to utilize practical wisdom in our lives. Practical wisdom is the central idea of Aristotle’s virtue ethics. For Aristotle, practical wisdom is how we live in accordance with the “good life.” According to Aristotle, being practically wise is necessary to cultivate a good character. Practical wisdom and the habit of discernment it fosters are deeply connected with the other virtues described in this volume.

Discernment is not something we often consciously practice outside of specific, weighty decisions. However, not many of us will be faced with a literal trolley problem in our lives, suddenly thrown into a life and death scenario, but we will need to decide how we act
in our everyday lives. The kind of practical wisdom fostered through discernment helps us know what it means to act with justice, respect, trust, confidence, and courage.

Courage and discernment have a unique relationship with each other. Whereas discernment serves mostly as a guide needed to effectively use other virtues, a sort of moral level that helps us see things in a clear manor, courage influences discernment as much as discernment influences courage. We need to discern when what it means to be courageous in a particular moment, but we also need courage to see things in an objective light and to admit that our point of view may not always be the most applicable one. To discern properly we need the courage to admit that we may be wrong.

But if the type of discernment created by way of practical wisdom is not something particular, how do we utilize it in our lives? How do we define something that has such general application? I believe we can try to understand discernment through an examination of two fictitious characters, one who acts with discernment fostered through the use of practical wisdom, and one who acts without a sense of discernment or practical wisdom.

THE BANKER

The banker woke up with a smile, as he looked out from his balcony and felt the sun warm his face, he heard the familiar knock on his door. “Enter,” he said, eyes still gazing at his peaceful garden. The door creaked open as the voice of his butler joined the clatter of the coffee tray, “My misses says there’ll be rain this afternoon sir, best dress accordingly.” “Nonsense,” the banker replied, “my knee always tells me when the weather’s about to change and I feel rather spry today.” The banker had always been served well by what others in town, rather snidely, called his “whims and fancies.” If not for these whims, he would never have invested his inheritance in a bank prior to the retirement of its longtime manager (which came to the surprise of many with its sudden announcement). His position as manager of the bank, and the small taste of the lavish life it provided him, came
from trusting intuition. This belief in intuition was often relayed to employees at the bank who were advised to “Keep your nose clean, stay optimistic, stick to your job, and life’ll happen.”

Having finished his coffee and dressed, rather lightly, for the day, the banker met his driver and headed toward the bank, a journey that now happened without a thought, like a chef who dices vegetables without conscious effort. He conducted much of his work with the bank in a similar manner. “It was successful before him and would surely be successful long after he was gone,” the banker thought. As he entered the bank, he paid no attention to the grand promenade that led to the entrance, nor to the columns stretching from base to roof, nor to the stone lions whose elegance used to fill him with pride in the establishment. He simply entered, asked the head banker for “any pressing updates,” and walked to his office. This had become his routine through years of running the bank.

This day seemed like any other, and the banker treated it as such; he met with the important account holders, said a passing hello to the employees, and got the daily after-lunch briefing from the head banker. However, he noticed a change in his ever dutiful second today, during their meeting; she was angry and short tempered throughout. When the last bullet point had been discussed, the banker could no longer hold in his curiosity, “You seem angry with me today Catherine, where is this sudden change coming from?” “Sudden,” she replied, “have you not heard my warnings of our declining capital in the past months, have you not seen the numbers slowly dwindling in our lobby, have you not heard the confused murmurs of your competitors who have warned about the declining economy and shared their insights for staying afloat during the storm?” “This is preposterous, this bank has thrived for generations, it was here long before you and I and will be here long after us, regardless of what I or anyone else does,” said the banker. “No, it will die after just three years after contracting the disease of your management”. She sighed because she knew her words fell on deaf ears, as they so often had. She asked, “How can you be so blind? Do you read the briefing I give you each day?” “Always,” he replied. “Then what part of our situation
came as a surprise to you? You have given loans to doomed fine tailors and jewelers even after I had turned them down. And why? Because you believed they were gentlemen of long-standing repute who would surely repay the loan,” said Catherine. “I did what I believed best,” responded the banker. “You governed this bank with faith not with reason, and my friend, banks are built on reason. They thrive on calculation, not belief,” said Catherine, offering the last word.

The banker left that day without a sense of where he was going, the rhythm of his life was shaken, and he walked. He walked out of the bank, past his driver and the outstretched umbrella, past the bakery he often stopped at on his way home, out of the town and out of the life he had loved. He walked until he could walk no longer. The rain did not bother him, though the constant downfall saturated every layer of his clothing. His feet eventually gave out as he fell to his knees. He stayed there, transfixed as though locked in amber, and he cared not to move for he had nowhere to move towards.

OUR DEPICTION of the banker serves as one side of the coin of discernment, (though perhaps discernment relates more closely to a twenty-sided die than a coin), and I now offer another perspective on the habit of discernment.

THE FARMER

The farmer woke with a smile, and he was greeted, as he always was, by the sound of sheep and the wagging tale of a four-legged friend. Though still young and impulsive, having just recently taken over for his much older brother as the head sheepdog, Vita Brevis, the bearded collie, was a hardworking and loyal companion. The similar looks and nature of Vita and his brother serve as a painful memory of how quickly his old friend got sick, a sickness which may have spread to the flock, and now they serve as a reminder to take joy in life, for life is short. The farmer sipped his coffee and started the day’s work, feeding Vita, collecting eggs, and setting the sheep to graze. Having checked the health of every sheep as it went out to pasture, the farmer let them graze a little longer than usual today. The weather was kind
in the morning, but his neighbor had warned of approaching rain and the sheep might not be out again come afternoon (the farmer had lost few sheep in his career but the occasional theft by wolf or coyote often came under heavy cloud cover, a trend his competitor once noted after a few rounds at the pub). The farmer and his neighbor had often disagreed about the details around their shared property line. The culmination of such disagreements would often be an afternoon spent debating who would pay for repairs on a shared fence only for the farmer to eventually offer to cover over half, if just to resolve the matter.

His was not a large farm, but the farmer took pride in it. He had started with a flock of just a dozen, and he had grown it to over 50 in just one season, and had over time, through a few successful pairings and many more unsuccessful ones, made himself one of the largest shepherds in the area. His fellow farmers were astounded by this growth and often urged him to branch out. “I know sheep, I’ll stick to sheep,” the farmer always replied. As he listened to the rain outside and cleaned away the remnants of his midday meal, the farmer let his mind wander, as he always did this time of day.

“The sheep are getting long; they’ll need to be sheared soon. Should wait to bring in the wool until Friday though, they always pay more on Friday, though I might have to make space for the wool until then,” he thought. The farmer went about his afternoon taking careful stock of what fences needed to be mended, what weeds needed to be rooted out, and when these tasks could be accomplished. When he finished his work for the day, the farmer made dinner, fed Vita, had his meal, and cleaned up. As he washed his dishes, he slipped into thinking about the tasks of the day and of days to come. His mind wandered, as it was known to do while dishwashing.

Vita’s barking stirred him from his thoughts, and the farmer went outside to aid his friend in whatever he had gotten into (Vita seemed to share a propensity for harmless trouble with his late brother). Donning his boots and jacket, he walked towards his friend. He found Vita and was led to a peculiar sight, a man in a suit, of decent make, kneeling in the mud of his freshly plowed field.
“Are you praying, friend?” the farmer asked. “Not sure even that is much use to me now,” the man replied, “I’ve lost everything, they’ll take the bank and everything in the house except the walls.”

“Well, I don’t know how much use walls’ll be against this rain,” chuckled the farmer, “but my roof should help keep us dry, so come on in.” Letting out an involuntary chuckle, which was his first sign of life since he had given himself to the rain, the banker followed and was led into a sincere home and given a warm meal.

After the farmer had fed the banker and given him a dry set of clothes, he handed him a cup of freshly brewed tea and asked, “Well friend, what’s next?” “Nothing, nothing is next,” the banker replied, “Soon I’ll have nothing left and nowhere to go.” “Short of after death, nothing is never next, something is always coming, life’ll happen, it is your job to figure out what it holds,” replied the farmer.

I OFFER these stories not as a real experience in anyone’s life, nor as a historical narrative, but rather, as a fictional thought experiment. The banker and the farmer offer two perspectives on how practical wisdom can be present or missing in our lives. The glimpse into the farmer and banker’s fictional lives portrays them at a high and low respectively. A high point in our life gives a perspective from which we can see the fruits of our labor; a low points, a perspective from which we can reflect on what to change. These stories highlight the type of thinking that got them to their position.

The banker shows the ways we can prevent ourselves from fostering the habit of discernment. The day in his life illustrates the pitfalls of living a life without practical wisdom. One of the primary faults of the banker is his propensity toward confirmation bias. We see this both in how the banker attributes his rise to power within the bank to following his intuition and how he trusts his knee to tell him when the weather is going to change along with his often-repeated motto that “life’ll happen.” Confirmation bias can often blind us to the reality of our situation and prevent us from seeing what can sometimes be a scary truth. Our world is not a world of only pleasant truths; our world is much darker than we like to admit to ourselves. It is only through accepting this stark reality that we can move through
it and progress in the face of adversity. Avoiding confirmation bias can be exceptionally difficult when we have associations ingrained in us for our entire lives. Association is not always harmful, and it can even make our lives better; when we associate the rattle of a snake with danger, it keeps us from coming too close to it on a hike, we use association for our safety. When we associate a smell with a pleasant memory or person, it can help us build relationships. However, we are not perfect creatures, and we often associate things inaccurately, as the farmer did with his lack of knee pain when it came to clear weather or a gentleman’s perceived financial standing with their ability to repay a loan. Associations make it easier for us to fall prey to confirmation bias, and can thereby keep us from thinking rationally. An overabundance of a virtue such as confidence can lead us to be more likely to accept confirmation biases and to make assumptions on limited information.

Negative assumptions are especially easy to make if we have an aversion to the person or idea about which we are making assumptions. This becomes particularly dangerous in a democratic system with political parties. As political ideology becomes more ingrained into the perceived character of individuals, we become more likely to make assumptions about individuals based on limited information, such as their political party. This dismissal of ideas leads to a lack of civility and is harmful to a democratic society. Assumptions about individuals can lead us to representing their ideas as weaker than they truly are. This practice, colloquially referred to as “creating a straw person,” induces us to believe we are practicing discernment when we have not truly engaged with an idea adequately enough to do so. By making a counterargument seem weaker than it really is, we can mislead ourselves into believing we have compared two ideas reasonably, utilizing the kind of practical wisdom Aristotle calls for, without ever accurately representing the counterargument. Negative assumptions and misrepresenting ideas, both spring from an overabundance of confidence in our own ability to reason. Discernment’s role is to help us see when confidence has strayed too far from usefulness and may blind us to reality.
Discernment can also be undermined by our ability to create false dilemmas. We often conceive solutions as a matter of either A or B, and only A or B. False dichotomies can prevent us from seeing the problem and possible solutions in their true light. Often, when we create false dilemmas, we are doing so by mistaking potentiality for actuality. We see what is possible and substitute the possible for the actual. Just because it is possible for something to take place does not mean it must take place. This misconnect between potentiality and actuality comes from mistaking correlation for causation. If we practice the habit of discernment and consider problems with practical wisdom, we can avoid associating events inappropriately. Seeing the disconnect between correlation and causation becomes exceptionally difficult when our reasoning is guided unduly by emotion. The banker was blind to the connections between a degrading economy and the eventual fall of his bank because he was focused on the personal connection with his bank. His refusal to see the reality of the situation and to predict a probable chain of events was born from a refusal to admit that the lifestyle granted by his position might not last forever.

Where the banker thought with emotion and kept his eyes fixed fondly on the past, the farmer fostered the habit of discernment and utilized practical wisdom. The farmer, in his comparatively simple life, represents a desire to track the truth, not to prove himself right. The farmer values careful and persistent observation of objective truths. For the farmer, this meant tracking markets to maximize the value of his wool and making deliberative choices about which sheep to breed to best grow his flock. The farmer was not afraid to advocate against his initial stance, as is seen in his internal dialogue about when to shear the sheep and when to bring the wool to market. Of course, we cannot second-guess our conclusions forever. If we do, practical wisdom is no longer practical. We do not have unlimited time to debate issues, so we must eventually make a decision. Good decisions come down to a matter of trusting in our ability to reason effectively.

When we find ourselves spending too much time deliberating, Ockham’s Razor is a useful tool. The theory behind this states that, all
else being equal, the simpler solution that accounts for the facts is preferable. It is our responsibility, through practical reason, to determine whether or not “all else” is truly equal, in order to utilize Ockham’s Razor effectively. However, trust in our ability to reason cannot be blind trust. We must also have the courage to admit when we are wrong; we are imperfect beings and our ability to discern with reason is imperfect. Sometimes we get things wrong even when we try our best to act with practical wisdom, so it is our responsibility to look not only at the causes of our decisions with a discerning eye, but to look at the possible effects of our decisions in a similar way, as the farmer did when he, regardless of his trepidations, gave up his loving pet. However, it is not enough to utilize practical wisdom only before we make decisions. We must also use it when examining our decisions after they are made to determine if it was truly the right thing to do. We are going to make mistakes; it is our responsibility to learn from those mistakes and utilize the knowledge gained in future discernments.

To learn from our mistakes, it is useful to turn toward others who have been successful at similar endeavors. However, this often means turning to our competitors. When we have negative emotions about someone, we are less likely to see their input as valuable. It is the responsibility of a discerning mind to take all perspectives into account, not just those we favor. If the farmer had refused to accept the wisdom of his troublesome neighbor, he might have continued to lose his sheep. Letting our emotions about individuals cloud our judgement of their ideas can often blind us to the knowledge that we may gain from their insights. While we do not have to get along with everyone, an ultimately fruitless endeavor since we are tribal creatures, discerning individuals must utilize practical wisdom when examining all aspects of their life, including unpleasant relationships. Effective long-term change is not made quickly; it requires a long-term commitment toward bettering ourselves and our community, whether that be running a private farm, managing a bank, or voting in an election whose results effect not only members of our own nation but also the billions of people around the globe.
As a habit of heart and mind, discernment is particularly vital to a democratic society. Citizens must be rational. This need for practical wisdom was voiced by George Washington in his *Farewell Address to the Citizens of the United States*. This speech was not written as instruction for governing the nation without him, but rather a message to the public. Washington spoke to the American people, not the government, calling them to fulfill their duty as citizens in a democracy. He knew his decision to step down from the presidency would draw criticism, but he knew it was the right next step for the nation. He wrote these words to the people.

I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interest; no deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness; but am supported by a full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

Discernment guided Washington earlier in his presidential career as well. When he was considering stepping down after one term, Washington took an honest look at the country and saw that, although it was not his desire to run for a second term, it was the best next step for the country.

The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last Election, had even led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed & critical posture of our Affairs with foreign Nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea.

Later in his address, Washington warns against political factions and how they prevent productive civic discourse. These warnings against political faction show how dangerous governing our actions by emotion can be. We leave ourselves open to influence by those with malicious intent who would use our emotion to blind us and take us down a path decided *for us* rather than *by us*. As we are guided by emotion, we believe we are making our own decisions, and we believe our decisions are informed and calculated, but it is not until
we reach the end of the path, when we see what the chaos of our emotions has wrought, that we realize the folly of our actions. This lack of respect for the autonomy of the individual degrades the basic foundations of a democracy.

To avoid the malicious influence of others and utilize practical wisdom, it becomes exceptionally important, especially in regard to our responsibilities as democratic citizens, to have the courage to resist conformity. We are often presented ideas as the norm and taught to accept them without question. However, if we have the courage to resist conformity, we can act with discernment and make decisions based on our own reasoning, not just on what we have been told by others. Notice that the relationship between courage and discernment is different than the relationship between discernment and other habits of heart and mind. The interplay between the habit of courage and the habit of discernment is not a one-way street. Each needs the other to be utilized effectively. It is not enough that we discern when courage is needed; we must also have the courage to discern for ourselves and to resist the temptation to accept that others have already utilized practical wisdom in the formation of an idea. Discernment and the practical wisdom it requires is, at the end of the day, an independent virtue in the sense that we bear the ultimate responsibility to foster it.

Human life is, for lack of a better word, *messy*. Our subjective experiences are different in more ways than we can hope to understand while, at the same time, the grey matter that makes us who we are is so similar that we build in-groups and out-groups based on trivial differences and we attach extreme emotional importance to them. The disdain felt between a Yankees fan and a Red Sox fan seems so inconsequential when we view the world with a wider lens. Nonetheless, we attach such emotional significance to these divisions that we act irrationally toward members of other groups. Through fostering the habit of discernment, we can see through the emotional roadblocks and reason as objectively as we can hope to manage. When we take a more objective look at life, we can discern when to act on a specific virtue and when not to act on it. The shared etymological
root between “practical” and “practiced” is key for understanding how we build the habit of discernment. The habit takes practice to cultivate. We are deeply emotional creatures, and our emotional connections with others allowed our species to thrive. However, emotion can also keep us from seeing reality. We must practice discernment in our everyday lives, even in the details that seem unimportant, so we can use it when the stakes are higher. If we are not able to utilize practical wisdom when our emotions are only slightly invested, how will we be able to act with discernment when our lives are weighty and hectic?

I do not advocate for a complete detachment from emotion in our decision making. After all, indulging in such detachment would run counter to our nature. Instead, we must acknowledge that emotions influence all our decisions, and we must use reason to see when and in what ways our emotions might skew our interpretations. While our potential to reason may be innate, this does not mean it comes easily or automatically. We often are influenced in ways we don’t realize. When we build up the habit of discernment by practicing practical wisdom, we can better guide our decisions and act in accordance with the virtues we have built up in our lives.

Carter Howell
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