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THE EPISTEMIC OBLIGATIONS OF THE IDEAL CITIZEN: A NEO-ARISTOTELIAN  
SOLUTION FOR TRUTH-DECAY IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy and Religion  
The University of Mississippi

by

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May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary democratic societies are currently encumbered by the problem of *truth-decay*. Truth-decay is defined as the following set of interrelated trends:

1. an increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data
2. a blurring of the line between opinion and fact
3. an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact
4. declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information<sup>1</sup>

The four core causes of truth-decay are, (1) cognitive bias, (2) changes in the information system (including the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle), (3) competing demands on the educational system that limit its ability to keep pace with changes in the information system, and (4) political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization.<sup>2</sup> This problem exposes the philosophical limits of the *classical liberal* framework, which serves as the philosophical foundation for contemporary democratic societies.

Under this framework, *freedom* is defined as, “...the citizens of a given democracy...wish to live as free [people], not as virtual slaves...unimpeded by domineering rulers,”<sup>3</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich. “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018). 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life”. xiii-xv.

<sup>3</sup> David Keyt, “Aristotelian Freedom,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom*, edited by David Schmidtz and Carmen Pavel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.160-175. 163.

*common good* is simply, “the collective protection of the individual right to property, broadly defined as life, liberty, and possessions.”<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that the classical liberal framework is philosophically inadequate for addressing truth-decay, and propose an alternative Neo-Aristotelian framework. First, I will briefly sketch the Lockean origins of the classical liberal framework, and demonstrate how the classical liberal view of freedom and the common good fails to sufficiently address the four core causes of truth-decay. Second, I will give an overview of the three *democratic civic virtues* of *hope*, *citizens’ political prudence*, and *senses of humor*, and propose that these virtues can be used as a metric to determine whether or not my proposed framework is democratic enough. Third, I will explain Aristotle’s view of freedom and the common good, and argue that a philosophical framework based on these principles can address the four core causes of truth-decay in a philosophically sufficient manner. Fourth, I will reply to the objection that my framework is not democratic enough by arguing that it is consistent with the three democratic civic virtues.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary M. Keys and Catherine Godfrey, “Common Good,” *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, 2010, pp.237-244. 242.

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democratic societies are currently encumbered by the problem of truth-decay. *Truth-decay* is defined as:

1. an increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data
2. a blurring of the line between opinion and fact
3. an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact
4. declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information<sup>5</sup>

A common intuition is that democratic institutions already have the necessary tools in place to address this problem. There is some truth to this intuition. Democratic advocates like John Locke,<sup>6</sup> and Thomas Jefferson,<sup>7</sup> believed that an educated citizenry was a vital necessity for the protection and preservation of democratic institutions. Various academic disciplines including Education,<sup>8</sup> History,<sup>9</sup> and Neuroscience,<sup>10</sup> are actively researching truth-decay and

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<sup>5</sup> Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich. "Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life," 3.

<sup>6</sup> John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," in *Education: Ends and Means*, edited by Julius A. Sigler (Lynchburg: University Press of America, 1997). 406-7.

<sup>7</sup> M. Andrew Holowchak, "A System of Education, Not Just a University: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy of Education," 498, *History of Education* 47, no. 4 (2018): pp. 488-503, 498.

<sup>8</sup> Stanford History Education Group. "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning Executive Summary." Stanford.edu. Stanford History Education Group, 2016. <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEG%20Evaluating%20Information%20Online.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin M Levin, "The Remedy for the Spread of Fake News? History Teachers," Smithsonianmag.com (Smithsonian Magazine, December 6, 2016), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remedy-spread-fake-news-history-teachers-180961310/>.

<sup>10</sup> Tali Sharot, "Why the Brain Is Resistant to Truth," Time.com (Time, September 19, 2017), <https://time.com/4946513/twitter-facts-fake-news-neuroscience/>.

developing creative solutions to the problem, particularly in the areas of digital literacy, historical literacy, and methods of checking cognitive bias. These are all good starting-points, but if we are really going to address the core causes of truth-decay, then we need to change the entire philosophical framework that contemporary democratic societies are based upon. Contemporary democratic societies are philosophically based on a *classical liberal* framework. Under this framework, freedom is defined as, “...the citizens of a given democracy...wish to live as free [people], not as virtual slaves...unimpeded by domineering rulers,”<sup>11</sup> and the common good is simply, “the collective protection of the individual right to property, broadly defined as life, liberty, and possessions.”<sup>12</sup>

In this essay, I will argue that the classical liberal framework is philosophically inadequate for addressing truth-decay, and propose an alternative Neo-Aristotelian framework. First, I will briefly sketch the Lockean origins of the classical liberal framework, and demonstrate how the classical liberal view of freedom and the common good fails to sufficiently address the four core causes of truth-decay. Second, I will give an overview of the three *democratic civic virtues of hope, citizens’ political prudence, and senses of humor*, and propose that these virtues can be used as a metric to determine whether or not my proposed framework is democratic enough. Third, I will explain Aristotle’s view of freedom and the common good, and argue that a framework based on these principles can address the four core causes of truth-decay in a philosophically sufficient manner. Fourth, I will reply to the objection that my framework is not democratic enough by arguing that it is consistent with the three democratic civic virtues.

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<sup>11</sup> Keyt, “Aristotelian Freedom,” 163.

<sup>12</sup> Keys and Godfrey, “Common Good,” 242.

## I. Democratic Freedom, The Common Good, & Truth-Decay: Why We Need a New Philosophical Framework

The classical liberal view of freedom and the common good originates from John Locke's *social contract theory*. According to Locke, human beings are endowed by God with *natural rights* to life, liberty, health, and property. Before a formal government is established, Locke states that human beings live together in what is known as a *state of nature*. For a human being to live in a state of nature means that they live together with other human beings "according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them..."<sup>13</sup> For Locke, the principle of reason dictates that human beings must respect the natural rights of other human beings. However, from a practical perspective, living in a state of nature without the presence of a formal government poses a problem because it is impossible for the natural rights of all human beings to be protected and preserved without a formal government.

Due to this dilemma, Locke argues that human beings must enter into a *social contract* based upon mutual *consent* for the sake of creating a *commonwealth*. A social contract is an agreement in which "each person agrees to surrender some (or all) of his or her originally expansive rights and freedoms to a central authority on the condition that every other person does the same. In exchange, each person receives the benefits that supposedly only such a central authority can provide, notably including domestic peace."

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<sup>13</sup> Alex Tuckness, "Locke's Political Philosophy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Web accessed January 28, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/#StatNatu>.

A commonwealth, in Locke's view, is "not a democracy, or any form of government, but any independent community which the Latins signified by the word *civitas*, to which the word which best answers in our language is 'commonwealth,' and most properly expresses such a society of [people] which 'community' does not (for there may be subordinate communities in a government), and 'city' much less."<sup>14</sup> What this means is that Locke's social contract theory does not endorse a specific form of government. Rather, human beings have the opportunity to create a government of their choosing as long as it is based upon the principles of mutual consent and self-government.

Another name that we could use for Locke's commonwealth is a *state*. For Locke, it is the job of the *state* to "provide a secure framework for the life, property, and liberty of the people."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, that state "can and should be legally limited in its powers...its authority or legitimacy depends on its observing these limitations."<sup>16</sup> Thus, citizens living under a Lockean form of government have a constitutionally guaranteed form of freedom that both protects their natural rights and prevents them from being the victims of governmental abuses of power. Indeed, because a Lockean government offers such protections of freedoms and rights, Locke's approach is often taken to embody classical liberalism.

In his essay, "Aristotelian Freedom", David Keyt labels this constitutionally guaranteed form of freedom as *democratic freedom*. According to Keyt, to be democratically free means,

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<sup>14</sup> John Locke, "John Locke on Government Chapter 10. Of the Forms of a Commonwealth," accessed January 28, 2022, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1651-1700/john-locke-essay-on-government/chapter-10-of-the-forms-of-a-commonwealth.php>.

<sup>15</sup> Moseley, "John Locke: Political Philosophy," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Web accessed 21 Nov. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Wil Waluchow, "Constitutionalism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, December 20, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/constitutionalism/>. Web accessed 21 Nov. 2021.

“...the citizens of a given democracy...wish to live as free [people], not as virtual slaves...unimpeded by domineering rulers.”<sup>17</sup> This definition of democratic freedom embodies the spirit of Locke’s view in two ways. First, it requires that citizens be unimpeded by domineering rulers, meaning that the state must be limited in its powers. Second, it is not restricted to one specific form of government, and can therefore be the philosophical basis for multiple forms of government. However, the reader may ask, “This definition of freedom is no doubt influenced by classical liberalism, but in what sense is it democratic?” This objection points out a weakness in Keyt’s definition. While it is true that he explicitly states in the first part of his definition that citizens experiencing this type of freedom live in a democracy, this does not explain why the type of freedom they are experiencing is exclusively democratic.

In order to solve this dilemma, let’s break apart Keyt’s definition. First, we have citizens who wish to live as free people. To live as a free person, in this sense, is to enjoy one’s natural rights unimpeded by a domineering ruler (the second part of Keyt’s definition). The function of a ruler under a democratic form of government is to protect and preserve those natural rights. Furthermore, a democratic form of government derives its power to protect and preserve those natural rights from the consent of the governed.

Couldn’t a constitutional monarchy fulfill both of the conditions laid out by Keyt’s definition of democratic freedom? The answer is yes. According to Keyt’s definition of democratic freedom, a constitutional monarchy can be labeled as a democratic form of government even if it is not a direct democracy because the monarch derives its power from the consent of the governed as established in the constitution. Therefore, in this essay I will follow Keyt and refer to the classical liberal view of freedom as democratic freedom.

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<sup>17</sup> Keyt, “Aristotelian Freedom,” 163.

Just as the classical liberal view embodies a distinct type of democratic freedom, it also features a distinctive conception of the common good. The common good, in all of its various formulations, is the end or goal for which actions are taken (the establishment of a government, for example). For Locke, the natural rights of human beings are life, liberty, health, and property. A social contract and its respective form of government are established for the sake of protecting and preserving those natural rights. Therefore, the classical liberal view of the common good is simply, “the collective protection of the individual right to property, broadly defined as life, liberty, and possessions.”<sup>18</sup>

Having set out the classical liberal framework of democratic freedom and the common good, we can now turn to the question of how well it combats truth-decay. First, what do we mean by truth-decay?

In their report, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts in American Public Life*, Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich define truth decay as:

1. an increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data
2. a blurring of the line between opinion and fact
3. an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact
4. declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information<sup>19</sup>

The four core causes of truth decay are, (1) cognitive bias, (2) changes in the information system (including the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle), (3) competing demands on the

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<sup>18</sup> Mary M. Keys and Catherine Godfrey, “Common Good,” *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, 2010, pp.237-234. 242.

<sup>19</sup> Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich. “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” 3.

educational system that limit its ability to keep pace with changes in the information system, and (4) political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization.<sup>20</sup>

Can the classical liberal framework offset these causes? Let's examine each in turn.

*Cognitive bias* is, “a strong, preconceived notion of someone or something, based on information we have, perceive to have, or lack.”<sup>21</sup> These preconceived notions are, “mental shortcuts the human brain produces to expedite information processing—to quickly help it make sense of what it is seeing.”<sup>22</sup> According to Tali Sharot, an Associate Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London, “in order to assess data and decide what is true the brain relies heavily on its emotional system...it is important to be acutely aware that it is people's feelings, hopes and fears that play a central role in whether a piece of evidence will influence their beliefs.”<sup>23</sup> If our brains rely heavily on their emotional systems when assessing data and deciding what is true, then it must also be true that we cannot avoid a certain level of cognitive bias.

The classical liberal framework cannot address cognitive bias. First, a person can fall victim to any level of cognitive bias and still be democratically free because cognitive bias does not carry the *coercive* force of a domineering ruler. Moreover, a person can fall victim to cognitive bias and still be loyal to the common good, defined as the collective protection of the individual right to property, so long as they understand what property is theirs and what property

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> MasterClass Staff, “How to Identify Cognitive Bias: 12 Examples of Cognitive Bias - 2021,” MasterClass (MasterClass, November 8, 2020), <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-identify-cognitive-bias#12-examples-of-cognitive-bias>. Web accessed 21 Nov. 2021.

<sup>22</sup> MasterClass Staff, “How to Identify Cognitive Bias,”.

<sup>23</sup> Tali Sharot, “Why the Brain Is Resistant to Truth,”.

is not theirs *under the law*. Therefore, we need a new philosophical framework that can address cognitive bias.

Kavanagh and Rich identify two *changes in the information system* that contribute to truth decay: the rise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. According to a Pew Research survey, “About two-thirds of U.S. adults say they get news at least sometimes from news websites or apps (68%) or search engines, like Google (65%). About half (53%) say they get news from social media, and a much smaller portion say they get news at least sometimes from podcasts (22%).”<sup>24</sup> The two data points from this survey that are relevant to truth decay are: (1) Almost two-thirds of American adults get their news at least sometimes from news websites, news apps, or search engines like Google; and (2) 53% say they get their news from social media.

On the first point, Kavanagh and Rich draw attention to the fact that, “As the 24-hour news cycle forces media organizations to fill more time with content, they are forced to shift away from reporting strictly the facts (of which there are only so many) to providing commentary, increasing the volume of opinion over that of fact and blurring the distinction between the two.”<sup>25</sup> On the second point, we must note that false information spreads faster than true information on social media platforms,<sup>26</sup> and because social media algorithms are based on user engagement, the information presented to users on those platforms is more likely to

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<sup>24</sup> Elisa Shearer, “More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>. Web accessed 22 Nov. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Kavanagh and Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” 97.

<sup>26</sup> Sara Brown, “MIT Sloan Research about Social Media, Misinformation, and Elections,” MIT Sloan, October 5, 2020, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/mit-sloan-research-about-social-media-misinformation-and-elections>.

reinforce their current political opinions and cause intense emotional reactions of happiness, sadness, or anger instead of presenting them with a full and complete picture of reality.<sup>27</sup>

The classical liberal framework cannot address these changes in the information system. If being democratically free means being unimpeded by a domineering ruler, and being loyal to the common good means recognizing the collective protection of the individual right to property, then citizens can form false beliefs on the basis of the misinformation brought about by these changes in the information system, and still be democratically free and loyal to the common good. These changes in the information system do not have the coercive force of a domineering ruler, and do not impede the recognition of the collective protection of the individual right to property. Therefore, we need a new philosophical framework that can address these changes in the information system.

Kavanagh and Rich summarize the *competing demands on the education system* as such:

The fiscal constraints and demands placed on the educational system and the resulting gap between the rapidly evolving challenges of the new information system and the curricula offered to students in most public schools constitute the third key driver of Truth Decay...without the training that they need to carefully evaluate sources, to identify and check their own biases, and to separate opinion and fact, students matriculating out of schools that teach kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12)...or universities may be highly vulnerable to false and misleading information and easy targets for intentional disinformation campaigns and propaganda. Furthermore, once consuming this information themselves, these users are more likely to pass the information along to others, perpetuating the challenges that Truth Decay poses and contributing to a context in which Truth Decay flourishes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Greene, Conner, “Effects of news media bias and social media algorithms on political polarization.” Iowa State University, 2019, <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8694&context=etd>. Web accessed 1 Nov. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Kavanagh and Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” 157.

Out of all four of the core causes of truth-decay, the classical liberal framework seems the most equipped to handle these competing demands on the education system. In his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke tells us that the purpose of education should be, “to set the mind right, that on all occasions it may be disposed to consent to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Thomas Jefferson believed that an educated citizenry was so vital to the stability of a democratic form of government that he concluded, “Failure to educate at the highest or lowest level meant death to the republic...”<sup>30</sup> Without an excellent education system, citizens will be unequipped with the proper critical thinking skills that will enable them to recognize the collective protection of the individual right to property.

The lack of an excellent education system clearly infringes on the common good in that it interferes with the ability of citizens to recognize which property is theirs and which property is not theirs. However, it does not carry the coercive force of a domineering ruler. Therefore, we may say that the classical liberal framework addresses half of this cause, but does not address all of it. Therefore, we need a new philosophical framework that can address these competing demands on the education system.

The last core cause of truth-decay that Kavanagh and Rich identifies is *political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization*: “Polarization drives increasing disagreement about facts and interpretations of those facts and the blurring of the line between opinion and facts by creating two or more opposing sides, each with its own perspectives and beliefs.”<sup>31</sup>

These three types of polarization can lead to “political inaction and dysfunction at all levels of

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<sup>29</sup> John Locke, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” 406-7.

<sup>30</sup> Holowchak, “A System of Education, Not Just a University: Thomas Jefferson’s Philosophy of Education,” 498.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

government,” an “erosion of civil discourse,” “uncertainty about the meaning and likely enforcement of government policies,” as well as the undermining of “both trust in government and the efficacy of checks and balances.”<sup>32</sup>

Polarization is clearly a problem for the overall health of a democracy. The epistemic uncertainty on the part of citizens about the enforcement of government policy caused by these three types of polarization infringes on their ability to recognize which property is theirs and which property is not theirs. Therefore, political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization infringe on the common good under the classical liberal framework. Physically speaking, they do not carry the coercive force of a domineering ruler. However, recent political events like the insurrection that took place in Washington D.C. on 01/06/2021 suggest that the epistemic effects of polarization can influence events of physical violence that impede the democratic freedom of other citizens. Therefore, polarization also infringes on democratic freedom. However, the classical liberal framework is ill-equipped to address these three types of polarization because it prides itself on upholding the Millian principle of allowing everyone to pursue their own good in their own way as long as they do not harm others. This principle alone sews the seeds for these three types of polarization. Therefore, we need a new philosophical framework that can address political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization.

In summary, the classical liberal view of democratic freedom and the common good cannot adequately address the problem of truth-decay and its four core causes. My conclusion is not that any particular policy is needed: any given specific policy would have to be judged by its costs and benefits, and combatting truth-decay without causing many other problems would be challenging. What I have tried to show is that the classical liberal framework of rights and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

democratic freedom does not possess the necessary concepts that can register the problem of truth-decay as a real problem.

## II. Democratic Requirements for Our New Framework

In light of the inadequacy of the classical liberal framework, we need a new philosophical framework based on a view of freedom and the common good that addresses the four core causes of truth-decay. One way of doing this, perhaps, would be to argue for the sort of arrangement Plato promotes in the *Republic*: absolute rule by a small group of philosopher kings who are perfect exemplars of epistemic success. But that sort of proposal isn't realistic, nor is it ethically palatable. In our effort to combat truth-decay, we should try to find a framework that combats truth-decay, but that is also consistent with contemporary democratic values.

What would it mean for a framework to be consistent with contemporary democratic values? I believe that the *democratic civic virtues* can provide guidance. Democratic civic virtues are virtues that are “motivated solely by the desire to promote or attain the legitimate ends of democracy,” and involve “a commitment to democracy and democratic processes.”<sup>33</sup> It is important that democratic civic virtues are included in this philosophical framework so that the framework may both aid in the promotion or attainment of the legitimate ends of democracy and stay committed to democracy and democratic processes. This ensures that the framework stays consistent with contemporary democratic values.

Contemporary democratic theorists have written about a variety of democratic civic virtues. Three of those virtues that I wish to focus on are *hope*, *citizens' political prudence*, and *senses of humor*.

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<sup>33</sup> Nancy E. Snow, “Hope as a Democratic Civic Virtue,” *Metaphilosophy* Vol. 49, No. 3 (2018): pp. 407-427. 419.

According to Snow, hope is a “belief-desire complex,”<sup>34</sup> that must be fortified with “empirical research that highlights roles for knowledge, strategy, and planning in efforts to achieve the goals we set for ourselves through civic imagination.”<sup>35</sup> It is “the entrenched disposition of openness to the political possibilities a democratic government can provide.”<sup>36</sup> Hope is a specifically democratic virtue in two ways. First, by requiring that citizens be open to the political possibilities that a democratic government can provide, hope instills in them a sense of perseverance in times of crisis and motivates them to pursue solutions when problems arise rather than falling into pessimistic despair. Second, it requires that citizens take an active role in their government so that they may achieve the goals they set through civic imagination.

According to Ottonelli, citizen’s political prudence “does not substitute for the speculative use of reason in theorizing about justice and the common good...but constitutes instead its pragmatic counterpart.”<sup>37</sup> It is a form of practical wisdom whose fundamental requirement and function “consists in taking into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of millions of other people.”<sup>38</sup> Let us recall that democratic forms of government are based on the idea of self-governance. Citizen’s political prudence is a specifically democratic virtue in that it requires the agent to take into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of a diverse group of people when performing actions. This virtue is especially useful for those in positions of political power.

According to Deen, “a sense of humor is a secondary virtue conducive to the cardinal political virtues of sociability, prudence, and justice...prudence and sociability are served by

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<sup>34</sup> Snow, “Hope as a Democratic Civic Virtue,” 411.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>37</sup> Valeria Ottonelli, “Citizens’ Political Prudence as a Democratic Virtue,” in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2018), pp. 388-406. 390.

<sup>38</sup> Ottonelli, “Citizens’ Political Prudence as a Democratic Virtue,” 389.

benevolent humor that (a) cultivates an awareness of the limits of politics and of the need to overcome our self-serious attempt to bend reality to our ideology and (b) promotes connections and sympathy between citizens.”<sup>39</sup> In order for democracies to function effectively, citizens must understand that a democratic government depends on a robust public debate between different ideas. A sense of humor can aid this debate by allowing citizens to take a step back and mitigate any potential anger towards those who disagree with them. By engaging in humor, citizens of different political persuasions can also form connections and sympathy for each other, thus making it more likely that a democracy will remain stable and flourish.

These are not the only three democratic civic virtues, nor are they hierarchically superior to the other democratic civic virtues in any way. A full analysis of the democratic civic virtues would include other virtues such as efficacy and trust.<sup>40</sup> However, for the sake of my project of addressing the problem of truth-decay, I believe that these three virtues must be included because they play a particularly important role in addressing the four core causes of truth-decay.

First, if the problem of truth-decay is to be solved at all, hope as a belief-desire complex must be embodied among the citizenry. This is important for two reasons. First, it will instill within citizens an optimistic morale that will incentivize them to take action. Second, if citizens use civic imagination to formulate the goal of solving the problem of truth-decay, then they will have to create roles for knowledge, strategy, and planning. Any substantive solution to the problem of truth-decay must involve knowledge, strategy and planning.

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<sup>39</sup> Phillip Deen, “Senses of Humor as Political Virtues,” in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2018), pp. 371-387. 372.

<sup>40</sup> Kimmo Gronlund, Maija Setälä, and Kaisa Herne, “Deliberation and civic virtue: lessons from a citizen deliberation experiment,” *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, (March 2010): 95-117.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1755773909990245>.

Second, by taking into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of millions of other people, citizen's political prudence can be useful in addressing all four of the core causes of truth-decay. First, by being inculcated in citizens, this virtue can address cognitive bias by placing an epistemic check on the cognitive biases of citizens. Second, by being a form of practical wisdom, citizen's political prudence can address the changes in the information system by equipping citizens with the necessary critical thinking tools and strategies to navigate the vast network of content presented by social media and the 24-hour news cycle, and discern truth from falsehood. Third, citizen's political prudence is a useful tool for public servants to employ in their endeavor to create solutions to address the competing demands on the education system. Fourth, citizen's political prudence can contribute to the decrease of political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization by providing citizens with the epistemic tools to put themselves in the shoes of other people, thus cultivating a respect for other people's viewpoints and providing a possible foundation for the building of bridges rather than polarizing division.

Third, by cultivating an awareness of the limits of politics and of the need to overcome our self-serious attempt to bend reality to our ideology, and by promoting connections and sympathy between citizens, senses of humor can help address both cognitive bias and political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization. Our cognitive biases incentivize us to bend reality to our ideology, but by cultivating in us a need to overcome that desire, senses of humor can help address those cognitive biases. Political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization causes divisions among citizens who, though they may share different political views, also share many other things in common. By promoting connections and sympathy between these citizens, senses of humor can help them see each other as human beings that are not completely defined by their political views alone, thus creating the potential for decreasing polarization.

In Chapter I, I argued that a classical liberal framework is philosophically inadequate for addressing the problem of truth-decay, and that we have good reason to search for a new philosophical framework. If that new framework is to be relevant, it needs to be democratic and in this Chapter I have argued that there are three democratic civic virtues that are particularly well-suited for this new framework. But these new virtues, by themselves, do not constitute a new framework: they only provide some conditions that a new framework must include.

Where shall we turn for a new framework that avoids the pitfalls of the classical liberal framework and is consistent with democratic values? I believe we should turn to Aristotle as a guide in developing a new framework, for his political thought provides a view of freedom and the common good that is well-suited for addressing truth-decay.

### III. Aristocratic Freedom and the Common Good: The New Framework

Aristotle's view of freedom is rooted in his thoughts about the good life. He argues that the best life a person can live is a life of excellent rational activity, or *virtue*. Virtues are, "a disposition in relation to the affections...and [Aristotle] says that we acquire virtue by habituation [*ethismos*]." <sup>41</sup> This latter part is significant because it is only through habituation of virtue that our responses to natural pleasures and pains can change. These responses must change because "we have to develop our abilities to enjoy," <sup>42</sup> the pleasures of the intrinsic value of virtuous actions. The virtuous life is "specifically the life of politics and philosophy," <sup>43</sup> and the life of politics and philosophy is "the life of [the] free [person]." <sup>44</sup> The conception of freedom that Aristotle characterizes as being exhibited by the life of politics and philosophy is known as *aristocratic freedom*: "The agents of aristocratic personal freedom...are free by nature; their goal is a life of politics and philosophy..." <sup>45</sup> I will later demonstrate how Aristotle's view of freedom is one that does not classify citizens who fall victim to any of the four core causes of truth-decay as free.

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<sup>41</sup> Rachana Kamtekar, "The Relationship between Aristotle's Ethical and Political Discourses (NE x 9)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Ronald Polansky, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 370-382. 375-6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>43</sup> Keyt, "Aristotelian Freedom," 167.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Aristotle's view of the common good builds on his account of happiness. For Aristotle, the happiness of an individual human being necessarily includes the happiness of other human beings because humans are by nature *political animals*: "Thus that [a human being] is a political animal means that individual human beings' capacities for life are essentially incomplete... To be a human being is thus to be the sort of creature who by nature lives interdependently with other members of the species."<sup>46</sup> Political animals unite together to form *communities* for the sake of the common good, defined as, "the happiness of all citizens."<sup>47</sup>

Even though human beings are political animals, however, that doesn't mean that *every* aspect of a human being is interpersonal. The happiness of all citizens includes certain *sub-goods* that are *interrelated and shared*, and other sub-goods that are not interrelated and shared.

Aristotle identifies *justice* and *friendship* as two sub-goods that are common to all communities: "It does seem... that friendship and justice are concerned with the same things and [25] involve the same people. For in every community there seems to be some sort of justice and some sort of friendship as well" (*NE* VIII.9, 1160a24-26). Aristotle argues that justice is the most excellent of the virtues because it is practiced by one human being in relation to another human being.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, he defines friendship as "reciprocated goodwill."<sup>49</sup> Justice and friendship are thus interrelated and shared goods. But not all goods are like this: Aristotle identifies one sub-good that is not interrelated and shared, and that is the individual act of theoretical contemplation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jean Roberts, "Political Animals in the Nicomachean Ethics," *Phronesis* 34, no. 2 (1989): pp. 185-204, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852889x00125>. 198.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Morrison, "The common good," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, edited by Marguerite Deslauriers, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 176-198. 182.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014). 79.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Justice,<sup>51</sup> friendship,<sup>52</sup> and theoretical contemplation,<sup>53</sup> are goods that require citizens to deploy *epistemic faculties*. In Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between four types of justice: *justice as the lawful*, *justice as equality*, *political justice*, and *justice by nature*.<sup>54</sup> One contemporary virtue epistemologist, Miranda Fricker, argues that there is also an epistemic type of justice known as *testimonial justice*:

The virtue of testimonial justice is a critical awareness of, and entrenched disposition to correct, one's prejudicial perception of speakers. This virtue requires the motivation to make unprejudiced judgements, and reliable success in neutralizing prejudiced judgments.<sup>55</sup>

Fricker's notion of testimonial justice is compatible with Aristotle's view of justice because those who are responsible for the distribution of justice must be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment. The art of deliberation and judgment requires the deployment of epistemic faculties, which aid these persons in making unprejudiced judgements and neutralizing prejudiced judgments.

According to Anne Baril, each person who is engaged in a deep, rich friendship with another person finds themselves "both in the position of needing someone to talk through... issues, and in the position of being a friend to someone who needs someone to talk through these issues with. In such situations, being a good friend calls for epistemic virtue."<sup>56</sup> Aristotle's definition of friendship as "reciprocated goodwill" is consistent with the idea that

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<sup>51</sup> Heather Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology," in *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2008), pp. 639-663, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00146.x>. 659.

<sup>52</sup> Anne Baril, "The Role of Epistemic Virtue in the Realization of Basic Goods," *Episteme*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2016), pp. 379-395, 389.

<sup>53</sup> Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology," 652.

<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 77-89.

<sup>55</sup> Heather Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology," 659.

<sup>56</sup> Baril, "The Role of Epistemic Virtue in the Realization of Basic Goods," 389.

goodwill can be reciprocated epistemically between friends through the exercise of epistemic virtue.

For Aristotle, theoretical contemplation is the activity that “seems by nature to rule, lead, and understand what is noble and divine...”<sup>57</sup> The knowledge that theoretical contemplation brings to us is similar to Heather Battaly’s idea of *high-grade knowledge*, as opposed to *low-grade knowledge*. Battaly defines low-grade knowledge as, “perceptual knowledge,” and high-grade knowledge as knowledge that “requires active inquiry on the part of the agent, and arguably includes scientific and moral knowledge.”<sup>58</sup> Since high-grade knowledge requires active inquiry on the part of the agent, and active inquiry requires the deployment of epistemic faculties, I infer that Aristotle’s activity of theoretical contemplation also requires the deployment of epistemic faculties.

If citizens do not deploy their epistemic faculties to the necessary degree required by these sub-goods, then the common good will fail to come to fruition. Therefore, Aristotle’s view of the common good is one that confers *epistemic obligations* onto citizens.

Aristotle’s view of freedom is directly connected to these epistemic obligations conferred onto citizens by this commitment to the common good. Aristotle organizes the citizens of his ideal *polis* into three categories based on the respective degrees of aristocratic freedom that they possess. The citizens who possess the smallest degree of aristocratic freedom are *immature citizens*, whose special function is, “to enforce obedience within the city walls and to defend against aggressors beyond the walls...”<sup>59</sup> The citizens who possess a higher degree of aristocratic

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<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Battaly, “Virtue Epistemology,” 641.

<sup>59</sup> David Keyt, “The Good Man and the Upright Citizen in Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2007), pp. 220-240. 223.

freedom are *superannuated citizens*, whose special function is to act as priests and “honor the gods by serving them...”<sup>60</sup> The citizens who possess the highest degree of aristocratic freedom are *full citizens*, whose special function is to “to deliberate and adjudicate.”<sup>61</sup>

In order for citizens to increase their degree of aristocratic freedom and strengthen their epistemic faculties to the degree demanded by the common good, they must be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment (*Politics* III.11, 1281b30-40). This education must also include the study of *legislative science*.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, a philosophical framework based on Aristotle’s view of freedom and the common good would require that citizens be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment, as well as legislative science for the purpose of deploying their epistemic faculties to the necessary degrees required by the sub-goods included in the common good.

In contrast to the classical liberal framework, under this Neo-Aristotelian framework, citizens who fall victim to any of the four core causes of truth-decay would not be classified as free. As we can see, this framework, in many ways, promotes resources for actively combatting truth-decay. First, the framework addresses cognitive bias by requiring that citizens be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment. By being educated in the art of deliberation and judgment, citizens will be equipped with the necessary epistemic tools to check their own biases: “For when [the multitude] all come together their perception is adequate, and, when mixed with their betters, they benefit their states... Taken individually, however, each of them is an imperfect judge” (*Politics* III.11, 1281b34-40). By requiring citizens to be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment, and by framing the search for truth as a *collaborative* effort rather

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Kamtekar, “The Relationship between Aristotle’s Ethical and Political Discourses (NE x 9),” 381.

than a *solo* effort, this framework also addresses the changes in the information system because it equips citizens with the necessary epistemic tools to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information.

Moreover, in contrast to the classical liberal framework, the Neo-Aristotelian framework addresses the competing demands on the education system in two respects. First, the classical liberal view of freedom does not require that citizens be educated. By contrast, in order to be aristocratically free, one must be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment. Second, the classical liberal view of the common good does not confer any epistemic obligations onto citizens beyond requiring them to know what property belongs to them and what property does not under the law. Aristotle's view of the common good, as we've seen, confers epistemic obligations onto citizens because it is composed of sub-goods like justice, friendship, and theoretical contemplation which require citizens to deploy epistemic faculties.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the Neo-Aristotelian philosophical framework addresses political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization in three respects. First, by requiring citizens to be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment for the goal of combating cognitive bias, the Aristotelian framework encourages citizens not to silo themselves in information that reinforces their own partisan beliefs. Second, Aristotle's view of freedom and the common good encourages aristocratically free persons to avoid extremely partisan stances on any issue. Third, by framing the search for truth as a collaborative effort rather than a solo effort, citizens under this framework are encouraged to have discussions with other citizens who hold different views.

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<sup>63</sup> Any discussion of a policy-based solution to the competing demands on the education system based on an Aristotelian philosophical framework is outside of the scope of this essay.

#### **IV. Is the Neo-Aristotelian Framework Democratic Enough?**

Earlier, in Chapter II, I argued that if a political framework is to be relevant for our contemporary situation, it would need to be fundamentally democratic. At that point I also suggested that a good way of assessing whether a framework is democratic is to assess whether it embodies the three democratic civic virtues of hope, citizens' political prudence, and senses of humor. How does the Neo-Aristotelian framework that I described in the previous section fare? Is such a framework consistent with democratic values? It would be reasonable to have doubts. Someone might dismiss the Neo-Aristotelian framework as being hopelessly anti-democratic because Aristotle subscribes to a view of the good life as one that is full of virtuous activity, and the goal/end of a political state based on this view is to help citizens become as virtuous as possible. A democratic state subscribes to no specific view of the good life. Instead, it allows citizens to pursue their own good as they see it, and if it were to subscribe to a specific view of the good life, it would descend into a totalitarian regime.

Nonetheless, however reasonable such worries might be, I believe that the framework I have introduced is sufficiently democratic. Let's begin with hope. The Neo-Aristotelian framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of hope in two respects. First, in order for citizens to practice the democratic civic virtue of hope, they must have the entrenched disposition of openness to the political possibilities that a democratic government can provide.

What this means is that citizens must realize the *potential* that a democratic government can reach, and this should motivate them to put in the work necessary to fix the problems with that government.

For Aristotle, hope “underlies deliberation, which is needed for any exercise of a virtuous disposition,” and “hopefulness is also presented as valuable in its connection with youth and the virtue of *megalopsychia* (high-mindedness): hopefulness spurs us to the pursuit of the noble.”<sup>64</sup> What Aristotle means here is that hope is a necessary prerequisite for deliberation, and thus it is also necessary for the exercise of virtuous activity. Without hope, we will not be motivated to pursue noble goals, and thus we will not be able to engage in virtuous activity. We must be hopeful and have faith in the idea that the status-quo can improve. Otherwise, problems will not be addressed, and nothing will fundamentally change.

Second, the democratic civic virtue of hope requires us to use knowledge, strategy, and planning in efforts to achieve the goals we set for ourselves through civic imagination. By requiring that citizens be educated in the art of deliberation and judgment (*Politics* III.11, 1281b30-40), Aristotle requires citizens to be hopeful because hope is a prerequisite for engaging in deliberation. The art of deliberation and judgment is the necessary skill set that will enable citizens to use knowledge, strategy, and planning in efforts to achieve the goals they set for themselves through civic imagination. Therefore, the Neo-Aristotelian framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of hope.

The Neo-Aristotelian framework is also consistent with the democratic civic virtue of citizens’ political prudence. Recall that citizens’ political prudence is a form of practical wisdom

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<sup>64</sup> Claudia Bloeser and Titus Stahl, “Hope,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, March 8, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hope/#AnciAccoHope>. Web accessed 22 Nov. 2021.

whose fundamental requirement and function consists in taking into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of millions of other people. By being educated in the art of deliberation and judgment, as Aristotle requires, citizens are being educated to take into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of a variety of people:

For the many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively...For being many, each of them can have some part of virtue and practical wisdom, and when they come together, the multitude is just like a single human being, with many feet, hands, and senses, and so too for their character traits and wisdom. That is why the many are better judges of works of music and of the poets. For one of them judges one part, another another, and all of them the whole thing. (*Politics* III.11, 1281a41-42, 1281b1-9).

In this quotation, we can see how the Neo-Aristotelian philosophical framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of citizens' political prudence in two respects. First, notice here that Aristotle says as mere individuals, human beings are not excellent men. One reason, in addition to his belief that human beings are political animals, why Aristotle may have thought this is because all human beings fall victim to some form of cognitive bias when forming their beliefs and acting upon them. Second, notice how Aristotle says that when human beings come together collectively, they act in a way analogous to a single human body. Without the hands, feet, and senses, a body ceases to be a fully functioning body. In the same way, human beings deliberating together in a collective way, rather than an individual way, combine character traits and wisdom in such a way that serves as a check on their own individual cognitive biases. This collective act of deliberation and judgment requires each individual human being to take into account the thoughts, actions, and feelings of the other human beings they are deliberating and judging with when making decisions. Thus, they are collectively exercising citizens' political prudence and this means that the Neo-Aristotelian framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of citizens' political prudence.

Finally, the Neo-Aristotelian framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of senses of humor in two respects. First, Aristotle recognizes wit as a moral virtue.<sup>65</sup> A virtuous sense of humor is a part of the good life, which means that it will be a part of a person's aristocratic freedom. Second, and more germane to democratic assessment, Aristotle would agree with Deen that a virtuous sense of humor is one that cultivates an awareness of the limits of politics, combats our self-serious attempt and of the need to overcome our self-serious attempt to bend reality to our ideology, and promotes connections and sympathy between citizens:

People who go to excess in trying to cause laughter seem to be buffoons and vulgar, doing anything to cause a laugh | 5 | and aiming at producing laughter rather than at saying things that are gracious and do not cause pain to the butt of their jibing. But those who never say anything to cause laughter themselves and are repelled by those who do, seem boorish and stiff. People who are amusing in a gracious way, on the other hand, are called "witty" [*eutrapeloi*], as they are quick on the return [*eutrapoi*]. | 10 | For things of this sort seem to be movements of people's characters, and just as their bodies are discerned from their movements, so are their characters. Since occasions for causing laughter are prevalent, however, and most people enjoy amusement and jibing more than they should, buffoons are also called "witty" because they are thought sophisticated. But that there is a difference here, | 15 | and no small one, is clear from what we have said. (*NE* IV.8, 1128a1-15).

Notice here that Aristotle distinguishes between two polar opposite ideas of humor as well as their mean. First, there is buffoonery in which its practitioner will do anything to get a laugh even if it is vulgar and not in good taste. Second, there is stiff boorishness in which its practitioner says nothing whatsoever to cause laughter, and it is possible that this person may not even possess a sense of humor at all. The mean between these two extremes is wit, or a virtuous sense of humor. The exercise of a virtuous sense of humor cultivates an awareness of the limits of politics because it enables human beings to laugh with each other and see past the artificial barriers constructed by their political views. A virtuous sense of humor also helps us overcome

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<sup>65</sup> John Lippitt, "Is a Sense of Humor a Virtue?", *The Monist*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (2005), pp. 72-92. 73.

the need to bend reality to our ideology by allowing us to laugh at the potential hypocrisy of that ideology. Lastly, a virtuous sense of humor promotes connections and sympathy between citizens by enabling them to notice a commonality between them: namely, that they all share a sense of humor and they can form a bond over this. Therefore, the Neo-Aristotelian framework is consistent with the democratic civic virtue of senses of humor.

In this Chapter, I systematically demonstrated how this Neo-Aristotelian philosophical framework is consistent with the three democratic civic virtues of hope, citizen's political prudence, and senses of humor. While it is reasonable to fear that an Aristotelian approach might incorporate archaic values, such worries can be met. For, rather than simply adopt all of Aristotle's views as a dogma, I am arguing for a specifically *Neo-Aristotelian* framework – a framework that I have shown accords with three important democratic values.

## **V. Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued that the classical liberal framework is philosophically inadequate for addressing the problem of truth-decay. I proposed that we replace this framework with a Neo-Aristotelian framework because this framework is better suited for dealing with the four core causes of truth-decay and remains consistent with democratic values. In Chapter I, I sketched the Lockean origins of the classical liberal framework, and demonstrated how the classical liberal view of freedom and the common good fails to sufficiently address the four core causes of truth-decay. In Chapter II, I set out the democratic requirements that any alternative philosophical framework would need to meet: the three democratic civic virtues of hope, citizens' political prudence, and senses of humor. In Chapter III, I outlined the contours of my proposed Neo-Aristotelian framework, showing how it mitigates the four core causes of the problem of truth-decay. Lastly, in Chapter IV, I defended this framework against an objection that it was not democratic enough by arguing that it is consistent with the three democratic civic virtues.

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