Deconstructing Dialectic & Rhetoric in American Political Debate:

How did American political debate devolve from a dialectical endeavor to a strictly rhetorical one?

by

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In our American liberal democracy, political progress happens when leaders effectively communicate ideas to the public. These ideas are often shared in debates. However, recent years have seen a devolution in the method by which political debates are conducted. In past years, these debates were dialectical—in other words, they sought to establish truth from two opposing viewpoints. In American politics, however, recent years have seen debates become forums for rhetoric—a style of communication that places emphasis on persuasion without consideration for the opposition. This was not always the case. Politicians used to employ dialectical debate methods, but over time, debate has shifted from a dialectical form to a rhetorical one. In this project, I seek to explore this devolution from dialectic to rhetoric in American political debate. Now more than ever, it is necessary to ask questions about the increasing presence of rhetoric and its wholesale replacement of dialectic. In the aftermath of President Trump's employment of divisive rhetoric without basis

in fact, the divisions in our country are deeper than ever. The opportunity for dialogue seems all but closed as the brute force of rhetoric encloses the electorate in distinct bubbles. So, I ask one framing question: **how did American political debate devolve from a dialectical endeavor to a strictly rhetorical one?**

To answer this question, I first spend time defining dialectic and rhetoric using ancient philosophical schools of thought. Proceeding from these definitions, I track the historical progression of political debate since the New Deal Era. I perform a philosophical analysis of the 1965 Baldwin-Buckley debate and the 2020 Biden-Trump one.

After analyzing these debates, I present the theory that this devolution into rhetoric in political debates is the result of shifting "winning" criteria delineated by advancements in communicative technology. Finally, I will chart a path forward endeavoring to restore dialogue: practicing controversy with civility.

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This thesis is the final product of not just two years of deeply intellectually engaging research, but four years of personal, professional, and intellectual development.

In the last two years alone, my research question has evolved considerably in response to the tumultuous tides of social, political, and economic life in the time of the pandemic and the end of the Trump administration.

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Introduction:

It is January 6th, 2021, and the U.S. Capitol has been breached. Not by progressive revolutionaries who have been oppressed by society's dominant socioeconomic and cultural forces, but by the very beneficiaries of the operation of these forces: relatively privileged white Republican voters.

This image is surely somewhat dystopian and even nonsensical, but it is not without explanation. The deadly Capitol riot was largely spawned by former President Trump himself, as it was his campaign to attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential Election and accompanying rally on January 6th that led so many of his supporters to turn to violence in their fealty to him.

Absent in this equation is an acknowledgement of—let alone respect for— the value of objective truth or logical coherence. The fact that Trump lost the 2020 election is of little importance to the Capitol rioters, as it is anathema to the Trump brand. Trump and everything and everyone he touches in the political sphere have become divorced from reality.

Fast forward to a point in time just a few months later, and the crazed rioters at the Capitol in January do not look so crazed anymore; rather, their views and actions represent the Republican party at large. Wyoming Congresswoman Liz Cheney's vote to impeach Trump in light of his incitement of the Capitol riot and her acknowledgement that Trump lost the 2020 election has been met with fierce opposition from a significant majority of the Republican party in both her own state and the U.S. House of Representatives. Her own state's Republican party has voted to censure her, and Republican Representatives are moving to oust her from her House leadership position

(Edmonson & Fandos). Cheney's acknowledgement of truth has placed her in the crosshairs of a rather ugly fight to determine the future of the party and American politics, and the winner of this fight—at least for now—seems clear. Truth does not fit into the modern Republican party's agenda.

The space in American political debate previously held by truth and the dialectical exchange of ideas that would emanate from agreement upon basic facts of reality has increasingly been occupied by rhetorical impulses that have brought us to this current state of affairs.

So, we must ask the basic question: how did we get here? **How did American political debate devolve from a dialectical endeavor rooted in truth to a strictly rhetorical one devoid of it?**

To answer this question, I first spend Section 1 defining dialectic and rhetoric using ancient philosophical schools of thought. Proceeding from these definitions, I detail what rhetoric looks like in practice and what makes it dangerous at a public scale in Section 2. Then, I track the historical progression of political debate since the New Deal Era in Sections 3, 4, and 5. In the process of tracking this progression, I will first provide an overview of how rhetoric has replaced dialectic over time in the United States' domestic communicative landscape in Section 3. After this, I will apply the principles of my work in Sections 1, 2, and 3 to two case studies to demonstrate how rhetoric has replaced dialectic in practical terms. In Section 4, I perform a philosophical analysis of the 1965 Baldwin-Buckley debate using the aforementioned principles to provide an example of functioning dialogue. In Section 5, I apply

the same principles to a debate held almost 60 years later: the first 2020 Biden-Trump Presidential Debate.

After analyzing these debates, I present in Section 6 the theory that this devolution into rhetoric in political debates is the result of shifting "winning" criteria delineated by advancements in communicative technology. In this same section, I will chart a path forward endeavoring to restore dialogue: practicing controversy with civility. To chart this path forward, I will adopt a communicative device that lies at the heart of this paper—I will engage in a dialogue with a fictional "other" in an attempt to demonstrate the logical salience of a potential path by offering a perspective that challenges the dominant view offered in the paper.

Purpose of Study

My main goal in this study is to identify and articulate if, how and why rhetoric has increasingly replaced dialectic in presidential political debate. The "why" portion of my inquiry will make up a large portion of my thesis. I will focus on understanding why dialectic declined and why rhetoric ascended in the American national political arena. Spending time on this story of dialectic's decline and rhetoric's ascendance helps to understand how American political debate arrived at its present form.

My inquiry spans a 60-year period. I have chosen this seemingly arbitrary time period, because it lets me track an American political history that proceeds from an era of abundant bipartisanship to one of unrest in the Watergate era to almost nonexistent bipartisanship in the recent years following the rise of the Tea Party Movement. It is my contention that this falling bipartisanship is partly a result of the decreased presence of dialectical engagement and increased presence of rhetorical communication. The shifting role of the media in the production of the discourse of debate has much to do with the increased use of rhetoric in presidential political debate. I seek to offer and articulate this explanatory framework to answer my primary goal.

Literature Review & Background

My interdisciplinary project here is situated within a broader history of work that explores political and philosophical elements of debate. From ancient meditations on debate such as Plato's *Phaedrus* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to more modern understandings in 21st-century works such as Ziblatt and Levitsky's *How Democracies Die*, political philosophy and science are well-acquainted with debate. The ancient works in this field illustrate what dialectic and rhetoric look like, and newer sources take a look at how political theory can be used to explain and influence the progress of our American liberal democracy. Though expansive, these areas of study have very little overlap. There is a gap in the field's applied understanding of debate's forms. This is where my research comes into play. I wish to deconstruct the devolution from dialectic to rhetoric in American political debate. My study is distinct from existing literature in this direct application of theoretical debate form to tangible political debates.

To better understand how exactly my study is distinct, I find it pertinent to take a look at existing literature in political philosophy concerning debate that I draw from and situate my study amongst. While I categorize my project as

belonging to political philosophy, it incorporates three primary branches of study that are quite distinct in their subject matter. These branches are the philosophy of debate, political theory, and communicative theory.

The philosophy of debate's body of literature begins with two ancient works: *Phaedrus* and *Rhetoric*. Written by Plato and Aristotle, who are arguably the most influential thinkers in the Western canon of knowledge, these works lay out the groundwork for a formal understanding of debate. In *Phaedrus*, Plato laid out the terminology of dialectic and rhetoric and effectively structured debate forms for millenia. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle contextualized rhetoric within the nascent Western philosophical canon and informed rhetorical argument from that point onward. Though not dispositive, these sources carry great weight in establishing the philosophy of debate.

Modern political theory, science, and history also play a large role in my work here. Among the works most relevant to my analysis are contributions from political theorists such as Michael Sandel, political scientists like Daneil Ziblatt and Steven Levinsky, and historians like Timothy Snyder. These thinkers apply historically significant political theory to modern problems in an effort to guide political action. They are more concerned with historical analysis and policy than they are with systems of communication (i.e. the deployment of dialectical and rhetorical forms of communication).

The last body of literature that I draw from belongs to communicative theory. This theory was born out of the basic idea of communicative action developed by Jurgen Habermas in his 1981 work *Theory of Communicative Action*. This idea of communicative action refers to the system in "which actors

coordinate their behaviors on the basis of 'consensual norms'" (Habermas 91–92).

I see a need to link philosophy of debate, political theory, and communicative theory in conducting my analysis, as no work presently does this. In existing literature, this application of theoretical concepts to pure public ideological interactions is missing. Though Habermas gets close to tackling a project similar to mine, he is more focused on presenting a socio political history than he is on understanding debates. By looking at debates, I can focus on specific case studies to see how theoretical concepts are at play in our purest public ideological interactions.

Materials and Methods

General Approach:

Given that I am writing what is effectively a work of political philosophy, much of my methodology is confined to the qualitative realm. In this qualitative capacity, I will be using two ancient philosophical texts, *Phaedrus* and *Rhetoric*, to establish working criteria that I will use to relate and analyze selected case studies of dialectical and rhetorical speech.

Research:

I am not so much concerned with obtaining a treasure trove of data as I am with identifying a few case studies that I can use as canvases to conduct my philosophical analysis. These case studies are political debates. I chose two debates for my analysis: a 1965 debate at Cambridge between James Baldwin

and William F. Buckley and the first 2020 American Presidential Debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. I chose these particular debates for their form, content, and their cultural and political temporal significance.

By form, I mean the locus of enunciation of the speakers involved in the debate. This is conditioned by the debates' format—their general structure. Both debates involve two primary speakers who offer opposing viewpoints on a given topic or set of topics. In other words, these debates allow for conversation between two parties. Such conversation provides me with an ideal backdrop against which I can deconstruct the presence of dialectical and rhetorical communication.

When I say that I chose debates on the basis of their content, I mean that I chose them based on their subject matter and the strength of the presence of dialectic, rhetoric, or both forms of communication in them. The speakers in the 1965 Baldwin-Buckley debate do an excellent job of providing me with a model example of strong dialectical exchange. They engage with one another as equals, agree to the basic parameters of their debate, and address each others' points with information rooted in fact. Meanwhile, the speakers in the 2020 Biden-Trump debate do an exceptionally poor job of engaging in dialectical exchange. They fail to agree to the terms of their debate and at multiple points use information that has no basis in fact. I chose this debate as a model example for the increased presence of rhetoric in modern debates.

The debates' cultural significance also factored into my selection of them. The Baldwin-Buckley debate involved two deeply culturally significant intellectuals: James Baldwin, a famous Black gay author who was integral to the

literature of the Civil Rights Era, and William F. Buckley, the founder of the conservative *National Review* publication. Both parties contributed to the intellectual discourse that was occurring inside of political circles at the time. They were effectively structuring the political worldviews of their massive readerships. As such, this debate between them was a cultural clash of intellectual titans. The Biden-Trump debate was perhaps even more culturally significant given its time, as it involved then-President Trump and former Vice President and future President Joe Biden. The speakers were both running for the highest office in the land, and the debate's viewers would express their response to the debate at the ballot box.

The debates' positions in time are also of significance in my choice of them. The Baldwin-Buckley debate occurred in 1965 during the height of the Civil Rights era before the advent of the Internet and social media. The Biden-Trump debate occurred in Fall 2020 in the leadup to the 2020 Presidential Election amid racial unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. It was one of the final legs of a Presidential campaign season fundamentally structured by the presence of the Internet and social media.

Analysis:

I will analyze debates on the basis of two primary ancient philosophical texts that I mention in the subsection titled *General Approach*. Proceeding from this, I will conduct my own philosophical analysis and bolster it with a variety of 19th and 20th century works of political science and theory. These works

contain a number of theories that I will reference and explicate when necessary in building my own theoretical framework.

Section 1: Dialectic & Rhetoric

To articulate how rhetoric has increasingly replaced dialectic in American political debate, I must first break down what debate, dialectic, and rhetoric *are*. These extended definitions are the project of this paper's first section. To define each of these terms, I will first be relying on their most ancient definitions in Plato's *Phaedrus* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* for the purposes of understanding their historical common conceptions.

As I consider "debate" in this paper, I take the term to represent a process of investigatory thinking between two or more parties directed upon a concept or thing—in other words, deliberation. Successful deliberation requires

a starting point. For ancient philosophers like Plato, this point is one of agreement upon basic definitions that guide an investigation. These agreed-upon definitions are to be used as points of reference throughout deliberation (Plato, 237d). They are necessary preconditions for successful deliberation because they ensure that the involved parties are speaking the same language premised on common terms. This understanding of definition as starting point continues to inform inquiry and deliberation today, and as a standard component of modern philosophical writing, its presence is felt in this very paper in the existence of this definitional section.

The directed thinking that characterizes deliberation should proceed between parties in a "dialectical" manner—that is, through dialogue that seeks to reveal truth. In the ancient canon, dialectical engagement requires that the involved parties agree upon an understanding of the form and dimensionality of a subject. This capacity is prism-like in grasping a subject at hand. It simultaneously involves bringing "into a single form things which have previously been scattered in all directions" and seeing "into a single thing and to see the natural outgrowth from a single thing toward many things" (Plato, 265d-266a). The singularity of form is an important characteristic element of dialectical engagement, as it imbues discussion with a set subject that involved parties can focus on while attempting to seek further truth. Though this set subject that constitutes the singular form may touch many subsidiary subjects, focus on the set subject behooves truth-seeking for the same reason that agreement upon basic definitions does: it provides a centralizing point of reference that streamlines discussion. In this centrality, the singular set subject

frames discussion as an endeavor removed from oneself, as the set subject is something to be held independently of one's biases and instead to be shared by each of the involved parties in discussion. This removal makes the resulting dialectical engagement that occurs start from a necessarily neutral point.

While dialectic develops from an ideally neutral point shared by each involved party for the sake of seeking further truth, rhetoric proceeds with the intention of persuading; seeking truth is much less of a concern for rhetoric. The art of rhetoric in the ancient canon is the "guiding of souls through words" (Plato, 261b). It is a style of engagement that places authority and control in the voice of the orator and places little agency upon the listener, displacing thereby the concern for truth, both in terms of the audience and the speakers. It is worth mentioning here that for Plato, "guiding of souls" possessed a negative connotation, as it was seen to bear relation to treacherous enchantment (Scully, Footnote 106). With the increased value of persuasion, decreased value of truth, and the orator's power over the listener as its basic elements, rhetoric is premised on the endeavor of seeking what *seems* to be true rather than that which is indeed true.

It is on the point of treachery, however, that there exists some level of disagreement in the ancient philosophical canon. Plato differed from his peer, Aristotle, in understanding the form and necessity of rhetoric. While Plato viewed rhetoric in a negative light, Aristotle understood rhetoric as value-neutral (Rapp 4.2). In Aristotle's view, rhetoric is not something inherently laden with a negative value, but rather a mere passive tool that can be used in

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service of both positive and negative ends—the user and the ends are determinative of rhetoric's value.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle also explains the necessity of rhetoric and its relationship to dialectic. Rhetoric is necessary when speaking to a public comprised of ordinary people, as the disparity in power that it creates between the uninterrupted orator and the listener imbues the orator with added authority (Rapp 3). When the orator speaks uninterrupted, the orator's speech is left unchallenged—there is no opposition to poke holes in the speech's content. With unchallenged authority, the orator becomes more appealing to listen to, and with this added appeal, it becomes easier for the orator to communicate with an audience that has only limited intellectual concern. As such, rhetoric is useful in communication with the public.

At this point, we have understood the differences of dialectic and rhetoric, but understanding the relationship *between* dialectic and rhetoric is also of great importance at the outset of my work in this paper. Insofar as it is an element of debate, rhetoric is very much a counterpart to dialectic. Both share commonalities in that they can be used by both sides of an argumentative opposition, but they differ in method. While dialectical engagement attacks or maintains an argument in a directed private or academic context, rhetorical engagement is the mounting of public defense or accusation against an opponent (Rapp 3). This public dimension of rhetoric is not centralized in truth or academia, but in persuasion. With a rudimentary understanding of ancient definitions of debate, dialectic, and rhetoric, we can move on to this paper's next section to engage in a discussion of what rhetoric looks like in practice.

Section 2: What Does Rhetoric Look Like in Practice? Why is it Dangerous?

Rhetoric's more nefarious tendencies noted in Section 1 are not isolated to the theoretical realm. They have pierced practical political affairs for millenia, and in the last century, they have become especially powerful forces in the construction of authoritarian messaging. We may recall that rhetoric proceeds by positing a relationship between orator and listener in which the orator holds power over the listener, and by placing increased value on persuasion at the expense of truth value. Each of these elements are at play in rhetoric's usage for authoritarian ends. To be clear, this is an arena formally distinct from debate, but understanding rhetoric's usage in an authoritarian context helps elucidate its practical use as an exploitative device devoid of truth. In this Section, I will detail the shape of rhetoric in political life by discussing the nature of the relationship between orator and listener, this relationship's construction of truth, and historical examples of this relationship bearing out in practice.

The power disparity between orator and listener that is essential to the procession of authoritarian rhetoric has been present in authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian regimes from Stalin's Soviet Union to Hitler's Germany to Trump's America. In order to function such that it is maintained over time, this disparity requires the active participation of both the orator and the listener. The orator in an authoritarian setting gives orders. The listener, having listened to these orders, can choose either to abide by them or to reject them. For authoritarian rhetoric to take hold of a polity, a critical mass of listeners must *choose* to abide by these orders. This element of choice, however, is one that often falls away and fails to be perceived by listeners in social settings or

altogether must be ignored out of an impetus for survival. It is helpful here to draw from historian Timothy Snyder's work in *On Tyranny* with reference to psychologist Stanley Milgram's 1961 shock experiment at Yale University. In the experiment, Milgram ordered subjects to apply what they thought were fatal electrical shocks to other subjects who had no relation to the shock applicants. The "shocked" subjects, though merely acting and not actually having shocks applied, displayed visible pain in response to the shock applicants' shocks. Even so, many shock applicants continued to follow Milgram's orders with seemingly little regard for the shocked party's pain (Snyder 17). The key decision-making force at play in this interaction between Milgram as order giver and the listener as the shock applicant was what historian Timothy Snyder has termed "anticipatory obedience" (17). This term refers to one's instinctive unreflective adaptation to a new situation. The instinct held by people in unfamiliar settings that Snyder and Milgram get at is to understand authority as a north star that is to be followed without question when making decisions. Milgram's experiment revealed that people are "remarkably receptive to new rules in a new setting. They are surprisingly willing to harm and kill others in the service of some new purpose if they are so instructed by a new authority" (17). This experiment, while imperfect, indicates that anticipatory obedience is the lifeblood of the power disparity between orator and listener in an authoritarian setting. One's propensity to follow orders without reflection mediates the choice of the listener to either abide by the orator's rules or to reject them. With this powerful mediating force that takes the authority of the orator as a given, the perception of choice falls away and gives precedence to obedience.

Anticipatory obedience serves to legitimize the authority of the orator. Once the orator in an authoritarian setting has such legitimized unquestionable power, the orator has the ability to author the listener's conception of truth. The rhetorical orator is no longer bound within the confines of objective truth, as the orator's authority-laden word is the listener's guiding light—more so than even truth itself. The orator's authority is supreme to truth. So, the orator, now afforded the necessary conditions to construct the listener's truth, can author a version of the truth that renders the orator immune from criticism. This construction of selective truth is what we commonly understand as "propaganda". By feeding a charitable version of the truth—falsehood, even— into the public consciousness, the authoritarian orator delegitimizes objective truth, as the orator's word is more powerful than the objective information that opposes the orator. This act of delegitimizing truth ultimately serves the interest of the orator in power, because if "nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so" (Snyder 57). With truth itself in question, the authoritarian orator renders truth as something that is no longer neutral and independent, but as something that corresponds to the orator's word. The orator thus centralizes themself in the listener's conception of truth.

Rhetoric's conferring of absolute truth-making power upon the orator over the listener has tangible power. This power has borne out throughout history in the information propagated by authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian leaders. Much like in the Milgram experiment, such leaders have used their authority to direct listeners to commit existential atrocities. In Stalin's Soviet

Union, Stalin's collectivization efforts relied in part on the effectiveness of propaganda. With government posters that depicted prosperous farmers as pigs, Stalin's regime dehumanized farmers and legitimized the violent taking of their land. As Timothy Snyder remarks in *On Tyranny*, "A neighbor portrayed as a pig is someone whose land you can take" (Snyder 28). In this case, propaganda directed the attention of the listeners—citizens of the Soviet Union—to follow the Communist Party's orders without thinking of the humanity of these orders.

In Hitler's Germany, the state's propaganda arm encouraged both the active and passive participation of Germans in the genocide of Jewish people. Just as Stalin's propaganda in the Soviet Union became a part of the country's physical landscape on posters, the Nazi party's propaganda became a part of Germany's urban landscape. Now, I do not wish to create false equivalencies between the oppression enacted and experienced in both regimes, as there is clearly much to be said about their differences. At some level, it is also worth recognizing my limitations as an undergraduate student in this analysis, as much of my knowledge of the two regimes is geopolitically biased. Most of the material I have encountered regarding the oppressive use of physical landscapes in both regimes has been recorded and written by Western authors. With that said, I find this information derived from these sources valuable in understanding landscape as a rhetorical device. In the Soviet Union, the landscape was created through government action. In Germany, this landscape was created in part by Hitler and Goebbels, but it was largely constructed and maintained through the active participation of German citizens who marked

shops as "Jewish"—the citizens were actively executing a necessary step in the genocide that the Jewish people were to face (Snyder 28).

In both of these instances, the authoritarian orators constructed versions of the truth that depended upon the participation of the listeners that comprised their states. This participation was found readily, as the authoritarian orators capitalized on the public's anticipatory obedience in their rhetorical appeals.

Section 3: How Has Rhetoric Replaced Dialectic Over Time?

While I draw from ancient definitions of dialectic and rhetoric, much of my study in this paper is concerned with the development—or, more aptly, the devolution—of American political debate during the last 60 years between 1960 and 2020. In Sections 4 and 5, I provide analyses of debates from 1965 and 2020 in this endeavor. The 1965 debate that I centralize in my analysis in Section 4 offers me a chance to discuss what a model debate as dialectical endeavor looks like. Meanwhile, the 2020 debate centralized in Section 5 if offered for the purpose of understanding the complete breakdown of dialectical debate—this breakdown has given way to a communicative atmosphere in which rhetoric is supreme to dialectic.

In this section, I am concerned with articulating the key factors at play in the creation of this breakdown of dialectical engagement and emergence of rhetorical speech as the dominant form of communication over time.

The development of communicative technology over the last 60 years presents us with an atmosphere in which the incentives for dialectical engagement have precipitously decreased while those for rhetorical engagement have proportionately increased. The basis for these shifts in incentives lies in the marked increase in access to information made available by such communicative technology to the electorate. Between 1969 and today, humanity has seen the development of the Arpanet, the U.S. government-controlled ancestor of the Internet, and the Internet itself. Since 1996, the number of Internet users globally has exploded from 40 million users to 4.66 billion users as of January 2021 (Castells) (Johnson). The Internet has made access to information easier and faster, and as a result, the flow of information that humanity is exposed to has substantially increased in intensity. If one is to evaluate the practical effect of this increased information upon communicative incentive structures, one must understand how increased information impacts the population being communicated to in political debate: the electorate. Here, Herbert A. Simon's famous assertion is of great value: "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Simon). With increased access to information, the electorate is bombarded with more content that consumes its attention than ever before. Between 1980 and 2008, the amount of information that Americans consumed on a daily basis increased fivefold, and as of 2008, Americans consumed the equivalent of 34 GB of information a day (Bohn 996). Today, that number is likely even higher given further advances in technology presented by smartphones and social media. Given the increased amount of information that the electorate has to process, political communication has

evolved to command our attention within our information-rich world. In this environment, attention is increasingly difficult to command. So, political communication is increasingly bombastic and sensationalized to generate engagement in the digital age.

In many arenas, this phenomenon of sensationalization is known as "clickbait" (Frampton). It is the latest evolution of headline writing, and in the digital age, its effect is to reduce information to just a few words or a soundbite that is a few seconds long. This reduction offers simplicity, and this simplicity can be marshalled to suppress reasoning capacities and to exploit confusion (Allen). The increased value of short and easily digestible information in our information-rich environment has profound impacts on the incentive structures present for dialectical and rhetorical communication. The increased flow of information in the present communicative environment is more conducive to rhetoric than it is to dialectic. Dialectical engagement is primarily concerned with elucidating truth through conversation—key here is the notion that truth is the end goal. Rhetorical engagement, meanwhile, is less concerned with truth and more concerned with the persuasiveness of the orator. In an information-rich environment, the average listener in the electorate simply does not have enough attention to verify the truth or truth value of each piece of information that they come into contact with. Without incentive to verify information's truth value, a listener is more amenable to simplistic and easily digestible information as opposed to information that, while possibly true, is nuanced. The electorate thus has a preference driven by increased access to information to rhetoric over dialectic. As political communication must respond to the communicative

preferences of the electorate, political actors participate in what Jurgen Habermas calls "communicative action": they "coordinate their behaviors on the basis of 'consensual norms'" (Habermas 91–92). The consensual norms at play in political actors' communicative action are born of an environment in which listener attention is limited in light of increased access to information. In such an environment, simple and clear rhetoric is taken as norm in modern political communication to command listeners' already limited attention.

In this informational landscape in which incentive structures for dialectical and rhetorical communication have shifted, the shape of political communication has changed. With the advent first of television in the 1960s and then that of the internet in the 1990s and social media in the 2010s, there have been distinct evolutionary periods in the development of communicative modes. These changes in modes of political communication have contributed to the rise of increasingly rhetorical communication over time.

In the 1960s, television fundamentally changed how politicians communicated with American citizens. Nowhere was this change more glaring than in the first televised American presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Television viewers could see Nixon sweating and exhibiting visual ticks that made them feel as though Nixon was nervous while Kennedy was calm (Robb). Style became supreme to substance. Suddenly, television opened up a new communicative realm: that of the visual. With the visual realm opened up, there was a new space in which politicians had to exhibit not just dialectical argumentative prowess, but increased stylistic rhetorical understanding. Politicians had to learn how to communicate

stylistically in a visual space. Television thus ushered in an era in which communicating with viewers required increased rhetorical attention.

Over time, this attention manifested in the development of the "logic of spectacle" (Snyder 63). As politicians learned how to communicate in a visual space in an increasingly information-rich environment, politicians, political organizations, and entities that derived profit from covering political affairs began to make use of the sort of sensationalization rooted in the same phenomenon of clickbait that I described earlier in this section. Commanding viewers' attention became an exercise in sensationalization, and this sensationalization did not require basis in truth. With media organizations like Fox News circulating bombastic conspiracy theories divorced from reality with emotive anchors delivering the theories and flashy headlines occupying the bottom third of the screen, political communication became a project of spectacle. Moreover, the circulation of conspiracy theories did not occur in isolation in small information networks; rather, such theories breached broader society and prompted mass media entities to respond to them to denounce their truth value. However, this denouncement largely served to provide these theories with greater air time, as even denouncement required the repetition of these theories. As this cycle of creation, circulation, and endless repetition of conspiracy theories proceeds, the electorate internalizes the core aspects of these theories without a broader framework or context (Snyder 55).

Perhaps the most fascinating development in the advancement of communicative technology in the last 50 years has been the fact that each advancement has been created by the needs of a reality conditioned by the prior

advancements in technology. Television ushered in the logic of spectacle, and this logic became central to political communication. Within a landscape in which this logic was normalized, the future advancement of technology would effectively be born from within this logic. It is no surprise, then, that the advent of social media would ratchet up the intensity of this logic to deepen its central presence in society.

With over 2 billion users worldwide and 190 million users domestically, Facebook is a household name for many (Tankovska). It is the world's most dominant social media presence. Started in 2004, the company makes money largely through advertising revenue and its commodification and monetization of user data. Both of these streams of revenue are aided by increased user engagement. As such, Facebook has done what it can since its inception to increase all three of these aforementioned aspects of its platform: advertising, data sharing, and engagement. One aspect missing from this equation is objective truth. Between 2014 and 2016, Facebook did little, if anything, to regulate political content or screen content creators, and as a result, massive amounts of information were shared without basis in truth. During the nascent stages of the Black Lives Matter movement and in the leadup to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Facebook served as a platform for the amplification of divisive misinformation through advertising and user interaction. All of this fit within Facebook's business model and contributed to its financial success, as the spread of misinformation served to increase engagement massively (Buchanan). As the electorate was exposed to divisive and untrue claims, sects within the electorate became increasingly divided. This division further

influenced Facebook's curation of individual users' Facebook feeds, as maintaining increased user engagement meant exposing users to information that they liked looking at and agreed with and protecting them from information that they disagreed with (Buchanan). Timothy Snyder offers insights that are quite valuable to understanding the impact of this dynamic:

> People going door-to-door to canvass encountered the surprised blinking of American citizens who realized that they would have to talk about politics with a flesh-and-blood human being rather than having their views affirmed by their Facebook feeds. Within the two-dimensional internet world, new collectivities have arisen, invisible by the light of day—tribes with distinct worldviews, beholden to manipulations. (62)

Not only did the development of social media ratchet up the intensity of the logic of spectacle by increasing incentives for the sharing of bombastic rhetorical information without basis in truth, but it began to actively *inhibit* dialectical communication by shielding users from disagreement.

Today, public awareness around the agency of technological development in the construction of modern rhetorical landscape is increasing, and it is clear that the freefall of the value of truth in our society emanating from this construction is unsustainable. In Section 7, I will offer a path forward to help stop this freefall and restore the value of truth and dialectical communication.

Now having understood the communicative trajectory brought upon American society by the advancement of technology, I will discuss the debate that I posit in this thesis as the model for effective dialectical communication. Having occurred in 1965, it is absent of cultural communicative changes brought upon by the Internet and social media.

Section 4: The Baldwin-Buckley Debate

In this section of my thesis, I will perform a philosophical analysis of the

1965 debate at Cambridge University in England between James Baldwin, a

famous Black American author, and William F. Buckley, the founder of the conservative publication *The National Review*. In my analysis, I will be tracking the dialectical and rhetorical elements of the debate, and I will be positing this debate as a shining example of effective dialectical engagement. To posit as such, I will first be explicating both positions of the debate—that is, I will be summarizing and clarifying the points made by the involved parties in the debate. After explicating the debate, I will analyze the debate in accordance with the speakers' adherence to or deviation from dialectical and rhetorical techniques and tendencies discussed in Section 1 of this paper.

This debate provides me with rich and timely source material to analyze; it was conducted amid the Civil Rights Movement on the notion that "the American Dream exists at the expense of the American Negro" (NET).[1] Today, as we see Black Lives Matter protests take hold of the nation's consciousness, this debate on race and the United States' relationship to it from nearly 60 years ago is instructive in conceiving of a modern approach to political debate.[2] In the debate, James Baldwin is arguing in favor of the notion that the American Dream exists at the expense of Black people in the United States. Meanwhile, William F. Buckley is arguing in opposition to this same notion, instead arguing that the American Dream exists *in spite of* the plight of Black people. The key differences between both positions are that Baldwin sees the promise of the

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[1] The legacy of the term "Negro" is deeply problematic, and while offensive and potentially triggering, I have transcribed the word directly from the debate to preserve the academic and philosophical integrity of the debate's topic. In future references to the debate's topic in which I do not directly quote from source material, I will be using the term "Black" to refer to those referenced by this initial offensive term.
[2] While I will not be concerned with drafting a modern approach in this section, such an endeavor will characterize this paper's final section.

American Dream to necessarily persist upon the oppression of Black people, whereas Buckley sees the oppression of Black people to directly hinder the promise of the American Dream and understands the dream as one that promises to liberate Black people from the oppression they have experienced in the past. The practical ramifications of this difference in opinion are that Baldwin does not see the the American Dream as a vehicle for amelioration of the Black struggle, whereas Buckley does. For Baldwin, the American Dream is actually an active vehicle that functions to *maintain* the oppression of Black people in this country. While this nuanced difference is slightly confusing, I will spend time in an analysis paragraph further deciphering it for the sake of clarity.

I am first concerned in my analysis with the debate's structure. The debate begins with Cambridge students first introducing the participatory speakers. These introductory speakers outline the affirmative and negative positions taken on the topic at hand about the American Dream's relationship to the Black experience. My brief summary in the previous paragraph of Baldwin and Buckley's positions maps directly onto the positions given by these introductory speakers. After these introductions, Baldwin speaks for roughly 30 minutes, and Buckley then speaks for approximately 20 minutes. The debate's structure from beginning to end is notable in facilitating both dialectical and rhetorical elements. From the debate's beginning, the notion that both speakers are to debate about is made quite clear: "the American Dream exists at the expense of the American Negro" (NET). That both speakers even arrived to the Cambridge hall to conduct this debate indicates basic agreement upon the

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debate's terms. This agreement upon terms exemplifies a key tenet of dialectical engagement: we recall from Plato that terms and definitions agreed upon at the outset of an engagement are to be used as centralizing points of reference throughout a dialectical debate (Plato, 237d). Moreover, in effective dialectical debate, involved parties agree upon terms and definitions in order to seek and yield further truth about a set subject (Plato, 265d-266a). Baldwin and Buckley's agreement to engage with the debate's centralizing notion is thus formally consistent with a dialectical endeavor.

Baldwin and Buckley both received 30 minutes apiece to speak in the debate consecutively. While Buckley only took about 20 minutes of the allotted time, the debate's organizers set aside equal amounts of time for both speakers. By setting aside equal amounts of time for Baldwin and Buckley to make their arguments, the debate's organizers implemented conditions for effective dialectical engagement—neither position was explicitly privileged by the debate's structure, and as such, both parties' arguments were subject to being challenged by the opposing party. This ability to be challenged is a dialectical quality, as it provides a "double-checking" function in which a debate's listener is exposed not only to the favorable position of an argument's author, but also to the critical perspective of an argument's opponent. The ability to consider both the favorable and critical positions and to then draw truth from one's independent interpretation of these positions allows for the possibility for the interpreter to detach the matter at hand from the authority of an orator's favorable argument on that matter. This detachment from the orator's authority

and immersion in the matter at hand in pursuit of further truth lies at the core of dialectical engagement.

While the debate strives to offer an arena for dialectical engagement, its structure is not devoid of rhetoric; rather, it inherently encourages rhetorical speech. In providing Baldwin and Buckley with uninterrupted speaking time, the debate's organizers place authoritative agency upon the speakers. We recall from Section 1 of this paper that continuous unchallenged speech is characteristic of a rhetorical appeal. The uninterrupted quality of rhetorical speech provides the orator with authority over the listener, as the listener becomes a captive audience so to speak. Without the orator's being interrupted with an opposing argument, the listener is not formally tasked with assessing the truth value of any argument being posited. Without such a task, the listener's agency is stripped, and the listener is made a passive recipient of the content espoused by the orator. Although both speakers are placed on equal footing in this debate in what is ultimately an example of effective dialectical engagement, the provision of uninterrupted speaking time does give the orators room to make rhetorical appeals to listeners.

Now having discussed the debate's structural allowance for both dialectical and rhetorical speech elements, we can proceed with a discussion of the presence of both elements in the content of Baldwin and Buckley's engagement. This move in this section of the paper is, in philosophical parlance, a shift from a discussion of form to one of content.

Baldwin's speech is rich with both profound dialectical insight and rhetorical flair. In arguing in favor of the notion that the American Dream exists

at the expense of the American Negro, Baldwin constructs a narrative thread

that emphasizes the importance of dialectical engagement in the creation of a

just society; he describes the American Dream as an intended product of an

unjust society that is fueled in large part *by* the lack of such engagement. He

begins his speech by contextualizing the assumptions underlying the positions

held by parties affected by the creation of conditions necessary for the American

dream itself to exist. Baldwin remarks that one's reaction to the debate's topic

"has to depend… on where you find yourself in the world…what your system of

reality is. It depends on assumptions which we hold so deeply and to be scarcely

aware of them" (Baldwin 16:00). With this statement, he indicates the

importance of orientation in interpretation on an epistemological[3] level, as

one's system of reality is comprised of a collection of past experiences, beliefs,

and assumptions. This collection colors how one interprets information, as

information that one is exposed to operates against the backdrop of one's set of

experiences and beliefs. This set is not universal; rather, it is unique for

everyone, and it is structured at some level by one's culture and existence within

society. Without universality in orientation, universal meaning—and even

universal agreement—cannot occur. A lack of universality lends itself to the

creation of difficulty in the search for objectivity. Baldwin's acknowledgement of

orientation is formally dialectical, as he seeks to identify the assumptions that

hinder the location of something resembling an objective answer to the debate's

core question. He is concerned with a matter that makes the elucidation of truth

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[3] "Epistemological" refers to knowledge's validity.

more difficult. Plato conceived of agreement upon definitions as starting points of fruitful dialectical engagements, and Baldwin identifies assumptions that are primary to even agreed upon starting points. He makes a dialectical appeal in which he seeks to clarify that interpretation of the debate's question cannot be divorced from underlying biases. For Baldwin, even the interpretation of basic truths necessary for dialectical engagement is tinged by these biases. Nonetheless, his acknowledgment of these biases renders these biases accessible to view, and in this accessibility, he transcends the limiting lack of awareness of these biases that he identified in this same section of his speech as a fundamental factor in the maintenance of systems of reality that make dialogue difficult.

Baldwin continues in his dialectical elucidation of these biases by explaining *how* they limit discourse in the United States of America. He notes that the beneficiary of the system that produces the American Dream "must be insane to attack the system to which he owes his entire identity" (16:34). The beneficiary he identifies is the white man, and for Baldwin, the white man is not encouraged to attack this system because such an attack would delegitimize a system that centralizes him and guarantees him the provision of socioeconomic resources sufficient for a high quality of life. In other words, the white man's questioning of the system would entail questioning the moral cost of his own just treatment under that system. Such is a thought that inhibits one, as Baldwin's argument goes, from attaining full enjoyment in reaping the benefits of the system. As such, the thought is disincentivized for the society's beneficiary, as it complicates the source of one's own identity. This

disincentivization of questioning the system creates a sense of ignorance of the basic assumptions underlying it and its creation of one's interpretation of truth. As a result of this ignorance, the difference in the white individual's reality and the black individual's reality becomes shielded from view in the eyes of the white individual. The white beneficiary—in ignorance of difference—thus sees the system that produces the American Dream as a just one.

Such a view of the American Dream is reified by the provision of material socioeconomic resources, and it is mythologized and held up as something unquestionable by an immovable sense of positive historicity within American society. This historicity centralizes the white man, and it is ignorant of the morality of the subjugation of black and brown people. The ignorance emanates from a set of assumptions that allow white Europeans to view Black and Brown people as beneath them such that white Europeans can subjugate them. The subjugated classes are made to be savages that lack a history—they are fit conveniently within white history (30:30). Subjugation is implicitly justified and retroactively defanged within the history necessary for the creation of the American Dream.

The individual subjugated by the system responsible for the American Dream however, is born into a system of reality characterized by subjugation. The sense of justice or fairness felt by the white beneficiary is merely illusory for the subjugated individual. In Baldwin's argument, the subjugated person is the Black person in America. The subjugation felt consumes the subjugated class's life and destroys any preexisting sense of reality or history underlying that reality—it destroys the Black boy's "father's authority over him. His father can

no longer tell him anything because the past has disappeared, and his father has no power in the world" (18:05). Here, Baldwin constructs the practical delineation between the systems of reality experienced by white and Black individuals. In identifying how these systems of reality differ, he demonstrates how they inhibit dialectical engagement. They prevent agreement upon the quality of a singular set subject at the center of the debate for which Baldwin and Buckley were called to speak on: the American Dream. We recall from Section 1 of this paper that " singularity of form is an important characteristic element of dialectical engagement, as it imbues discussion with a set subject that involved parties can focus on while attempting to seek further truth". Beneath the surface-level agreement upon the definition and reality of the American Dream that is necessary for this debate to even occur, there exist biases born of differing realities that limit the possibility of real, full-bodied agreement upon the term's meaning. The reality that denotes the American Dream as something just and attainable for the white individual is something far from realistic in the Black individual's reality. For the Black person in America, the Dream is rather a root mechanism by which the oppression of Black people is maintained.

The inhibition of dialectical engagement in the United States that is created by disparate lived realities presents grave problems for Baldwin. This inhibition operates on a practical level by shutting off dialogue between communities, and over time, this shutting off of dialogue becomes reified and acculturated such that the individual subjugated by the country's institutions

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becomes wholly foreign to the beneficiary of these institutions. Baldwin remarks that,

> In the deep south, you are dealing with a sheriff or a landlord or a landlady or the girl of the Western Union desk and she doesn't know quite who she's dealing with [when interacting with a Black individual]... So she simply knows that it is an unknown quantity and that she wants to have nothing to do with it, so she won't talk to you. (23:38)

The ignorance practiced by the girl of the Western Union desk here is manifested as a result of a fear of the unknown. This fear functions to deepen the divide between the subjugator and the subjugated. As such, fear of the unknown is also a factor that Baldwin identifies as an inhibitor of dialogue; moreover, it is in itself a dangerous degenerative consequence that is a product of a history of the acculturated closing off of dialogue. It is a psychological consequence that produces further willingness to maintain a system that keeps the two groups apart; it thus shields the system from questioning for those who benefit from it. The exclusion of the subjugated class from the system and its benefits is justified by fear.

This degenerative fear is already a consequence that warrants prevention in its own right for the capacity that it gives the beneficiary of systems of oppression to mistreat others, but it is not the only consequence of the shutting off of dialogue. Baldwin warns that, "unless we can manage to establish some sort of dialogue... we will be in terrible trouble" (32:55). This trouble comes not just from the reification of systems of oppression, but also from the wreckage of the American Dream itself by the people who are denied participation in it

(37:47). To be clear, the wreckage of the systems of oppression underlying the American Dream is not so troubling to Baldwin as is the reality of the violence that would ensue in response to the threat of this wreckage. Effectively, Baldwin is concerned that a lack of dialectical engagement sets the stage for violence that would create mass amounts of death and even deeper injustices than those already existing.

Now having deconstructed the dialectical elements and references of Baldwin's portion of the debate, it is clear that Baldwin holds dialectical engagement in high esteem. By highlighting the negative consequences of its lack in the United States and the qualities of American society that inhibit dialectical engagement, he clearly emphasizes its importance in preventing devolution into violence.

At this point, I will now move to discuss the dialectical elements of William F. Buckley's portion of their debate. Much as Baldwin makes use of a dialectical appeal to the audience—calling for the audience and his opponent to acknowledge and challenge the biases underlying their interpretation of basic truths—Buckley begins his speech by engaging with Baldwin's central thesis. This thesis, in Buckley's eyes, is the basic sense that the American community refuses to treat Baldwin as anything other than as a Black man (Buckley 40:05). Buckley acknowledges the truth of this assertion. He indicates that Baldwin's lived experiences—including those of being mistreated and ignored by the white American community—did indeed happen. In this agreement upon the basic truths that drive Baldwin's argument, Buckley exhibits a dialectical command at the beginning of his speech that would make Plato proud. We recall from

Section 1 that effective dialectical engagement proceeds from agreement upon basic truths, as this agreement allows for focus on a set subject that provides a centralizing point of reference that streamlines truth-seeking discussion. Buckley's agreement upon a) the racism experienced by Baldwin and b) the debate's subject—whether or not the American Dream exists at the expense of the Black man in America—provides the conditions for effective dialectical engagement.

Buckley then actually makes note of what he takes as an error in Baldwin's construction of a dialectical appeal in this debate. This error, as he understands it, is that of failing to remain objective in discussing the subject at hand in the debate. In elucidating this error, Buckley notes that, "It is impossible... to deal with the indictment of Mr. Baldwin unless one is prepared to deal with him as a white man" (40:53). For Buckley, it is clear that Baldwin's lived experience as a Black man has justifiably given him contempt toward American society, but this contempt has no place in an argument about the debate's subject, as it biases Baldwin and colors his argument with a rhetorical coat. Basis for Buckley's critique can actually be found in Plato's writings, and I referenced these writings earlier in Section 1 when I mentioned that the set subject of a debate is to be removed from oneself—that it is "something to be held independently of one's biases and instead to be shared by each of the involved parties in discussion". Buckley goes so far as to say that Baldwin's skin color and lived experiences are wholly irrelevant to the bones of Baldwin's argument (41:05). While the soundness and humanity of this claim can be debated—both of which present further questions that cannot adequately be

answered in this paper—the claim has technical basis in ancient philosophical definitions of dialectic.

However, this technical mastery displayed by Buckley is really only limited to the first two minutes of Buckley's argument. After this point, Buckley slides into what is primarily rhetorical speech. In an effort to posit Buckley's rhetorical speech against Baldwin's in a structure similar to the one that I made use of in discussing the dialectical aspects of their speeches, I will now spend time discussing Baldwin's use of rhetoric before moving on to discuss Buckley's use of it.

Baldwin makes use of rhetoric throughout his speech, but he makes especially prominent use of it at two points: once at its beginning and later toward its midpoint. At the beginning of his speech, Baldwin situates his position within the broader canon of Black intellectuals and time at large. In doing so, he says, "I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiad" (Baldwin 14:40). Immediately, Baldwin is conscious of his power in the pulpit. In this consciousness, he makes a spiritual reference to represent the significance of his position. The history of the Jeremiad is one that begins with Old Testament prophet Jeremiah's lamentations, and in the American context, the Jeremiad expresses a need for reform and warns of imminent societal downfall in the absence of such reform (Nordquist). By situating himself within the legacy of the Jeremiad, Baldwin historicizes his speech and imbues it with religiosity—he makes his speech and his presence at Cambridge bigger than just himself. This elevation of the status of his speech is a characteristic rhetorical device, as it places a divine sense of power upon the orator, and the listener is

made to feel spiritually guided by the orator and the content of the orator's speech. Such an occurrence is what Plato would refer to as a "guiding of souls through words" (Plato, 261b).

Baldwin again employs rhetoric as a driving force in his speech a few minutes later to emphasize the significance of its content. He bellows, "I picked the cotton, and I took it to market, and I built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing" (Baldwin 22:08). This is arguably the most powerful single sentence of the debate, because it links Baldwin to the history of the Black experience in the United States. While he himself may not have literally done each of these things, he indicates that he is emergent from the legacy of his people—a legacy which is characterized by the white oppression and expropriation of value generated by Black labor. Baldwin's use of "I" allows him to attach himself to a people—to a group larger than himself. This purposeful enlarging allows him to create a sense of weightiness in argumentation. The weightiness comes not from the truth value of the statement, but from the emotional cord that it strikes with the audience. This is not to say that the statement lacks truth value; rather, with the statement's weight making it more appealing to listen to, the statement's substantive truth-seeking value becomes clearer. The truth value lies in Baldwin's positing of the idea that American society exists upon a foundation built by Black labor yet excludes Black people from reaping its benefits. In this portion of the speech, Baldwin's employment of rhetoric allows him to generate an argument that appeals to the public emotionally to grab the audience's attention. The audience's attentiveness facilitates the resonance of the truth value of his argument.

Buckley also uses rhetoric extensively throughout his speech. Near the opening of his speech, he actually calls out Baldwin's employment of rhetoric and consciously attempts to use Baldwin's rhetoric against Baldwin in structuring his own argument. He says to Baldwin: "You sit here as is your rhetorical device, and lay the entire weight of the Negro ordeal on your own shoulders" (Buckley 41:12). In saying this, Buckley is not so much employing his own rhetoric as much he is calling attention to Baldwin's persuasive device. In highlighting Baldwin's rhetoric, he attempts to reveal that race's role in Baldwin's argument is merely superficial—that it has little bearing on the content of the argument. As such, he attempts to strip Baldwin's argument of the element of race before responding to it. He proceeds with such an attempt by saying, "I propose to pay him the honor this night of saying to him, 'Mr. Baldwin, I am going to speak to you without any reference what ever to those surrounding protections which you are used to in virtue of the fact that you are a Negro'" (43:00). He attempts to remove race from the equation and speak to Baldwin as a white man, but in doing so, he implicitly acknowledges two concepts: 1) that the Black experience does indeed subject one to a life of oppression not felt in the white experience, and 2) that one can consciously decide to strip one's own biases from a discussion on a given subject. I would like to break each of these points down and understand their rhetorical effect. As to the first point, that the Black individual is subjected to oppression that cannot be felt by the white individual, Buckley notes the value of this point and chooses not to engage with it. This choice is one that can be made effectively in a rhetorical setting, as in his uninterrupted speech, he will not be challenged on

this choice. In such a setting, the orator is more concerned with persuasion than with the seeking of truth. To not engage with this truth aside from this one-sentence acknowledgement is to value persuasion over truth-seeking. As to the second implicit point, that one can consciously decide to strip one's own biases from a discussion on a given subject, Buckley is refuting a central tenet of Baldwin's argument—that disparate lived realities structure interactions such that they inhibit dialectical engagement. Here, Buckley runs into a roadblock that he fails to address further in his speech: he is effectively countering the American historical record. He fails to explain how or why segregation exists at the time of the debate, and he is ignorant of the history of slavery in the United States. At a basic level, he fails to acknowledge the impact that relations of subjugation have on the production of knowledge or culture. By ignoring the rootedness of biases and viewing them as merely superficial, Buckley makes a rhetorical appeal grounded more in feeling than in fact, as "rhetoric is premised on the endeavor of seeking what *seems* to be true rather than that which is indeed true" (Kapur 14).

In addition to these explicit instances in which he employs rhetoric, Buckley's general speaking style itself lends itself to what one would consider classically rhetorical speech. As I was transcribing the debate, I found Buckley's portion especially difficult to transcribe, as he speaks almost without interruption between any of his words. Each of his words blend together in a choreographed rhythmic manner. What results is a situation in which the listener is disincentivized from hanging on any individual words or concepts; rather, the listener is tasked with following the rhythm of Buckley himself. This

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is classically rhetorical, as it "is a style of engagement that places authority and control in the voice of the orator and places little agency upon the listener" (Kapur 12).

Having now walked through salient points in this 1965 debate, it is clear that Baldwin and Buckley employ dialectical and rhetorical elements in their respective speeches to great logical and persuasive effect. This debate has provided me with a brilliant example of an engagement in which both parties had the freedom to appeal to listeners with both fact and emotion, and as such, it serves as a model for what respectful public political debate can look like. Such debate has immense value, and as evidenced by this debate, this value comes in the productive exchange of ideas.

Section 5: Rhetoric in the Trump-Biden Debate

In this section, I will conduct a philosophical analysis of September 2020's Presidential Debate between then-Republican party nominee Donald Trump and then-Democratic party nominee Joe Biden to demonstrate how authoritarian rhetorical tactics dominate the modern American political arena. In my analysis, I will posit this debate as an example of the breakdown of effective dialectical engagement that gives way to authoritarian rhetoric. To do this, I will first briefly contextualize the debate and its participants. After providing brief context, I will analyze the debate to locate the participants' employment of rhetoric and propensity for authoritarian communication.

This debate occurred in the leadup to the 2020 United States Presidential Election amid the COVID-19 pandemic and on the heels of a

summer of deep racial unrest. Then-president Donald Trump presided over the United States during both of these existential crises, and his administration was widely panned for its failure to adequately respond to either of them. At the time of the debate, over 200,000 Americans had died from coronavirus—this number was significantly higher than any other country's death toll up to that point. At the time of writing (March 25, 2021), the United States had almost triple the number of coronavirus cases of the second most affected country globally with upwards of 30 million cases (CSSE). The Trump administration's ignorance of Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines contributed to the incredibly high death toll, as the administration repeatedly held in-person "super spreader" events, undermined federal public health authorities by spreading misinformation, and failed to take decisive action to curb the spread of coronavirus (Boland et al).

The spread of misinformation was characteristic of the Trump administration's operation, as Trump had spent much of his two presidential campaigns and the 4 years of his presidency spreading misinformation. In his 2016 campaign, 78% of his factual claims were false (Snyder 58). In his 4 years in office, he told a total of 30,573 publicly recorded untruths (Kessler et al). This enormous amount of falsehoods was largely by design, as it echoed the authoritarian propagandic style in its endless repetition. In a manner similar to propaganda of old, Trump's blunt repetition of false claims over Twitter made "the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable" (Snyder 59).

In this same moment as the pandemic, the United States went through a summer of civil unrest sparked by the police murders of George Floyd and

Breonna Taylor. Between the May 25th murder of Floyd and the 22nd of August, 7,750 demonstrations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement took place in the United States (Kishi). In light of the Black Lives Matter movement's public resonance, then-president Trump did not support the movement; rather, he voiced his public opposition to the movement and its protests numerous times and even made his opposition to BLM a theme of his campaign. In his immediate response to demonstrations occurring in Minnesota, Trump supported the use of force against demonstrators, tweeting, "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" (@realDonaldTrump). In July, Trump called 'Black Lives Matter' a "symbol of hate" (Cohen). During the same month, he also requested the use of federal force against protestors in numerous cities including Washington D.C. and Portland (Vance).

All told, Donald Trump entered the September debate having made a number of conscious decisions to stoke division and tensions among the debate's intended audience: voters. By constructing a sense of chaos and uncertainty, Trump created conditions that yielded anticipatory obedience among voters. This is consistent with the way in which authoritarian rhetoric has been implemented in the past, as authoritarian rhetorical tactics are most effective when an increased level of chaos is present.

In recognizing Trump's raising of the nation's temperature, Joe Biden's campaign was supportive of federal public health initiatives and the Black Lives Matter movement. Biden was concerned with uniting Americans, saying at many points throughout his campaign: "Together, we can restore the soul of this nation we love" (Biden). Trump and Biden's conflicting agendas—those of force

and division and peace and unity respectively—structured their approach to the first 2020 Presidential Debate.

The debate itself was relatively standard in format. It was to be divided into six segments about topics that would be discussed for 15 minutes each, and within these 15-minute periods, the moderator would pose multiple questions that the participants would get two minutes each to answer. For a brief moment, the viability of this format looked promising; however, the debate lasted exactly 3 minutes and 30 seconds before Donald Trump's first interruption of Joe Biden. In the 2 minutes following this first interruption, pure chaos ensued. With two forceful stoppages by the debate's moderator, disagreements between Trump and Biden upon basic facts, and incomprehensible crosstalk, the debate shifted from a platform for civil dialogue to a clouded shouting match in a matter of minutes.

After these forceful stoppages, the debate's moderator, Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, attempted to wrestle control of the debate from Donald Trump by making note of Trump's interruptions and attempting to ask a question about healthcare. Before Wallace could finish asking his question, Trump simply began speaking over the moderator and remarked, "I guess I'm debating you, not him" to Wallace as the moderator and Trump's crosstalk continued for over a minute (Trump 37:33). In intentionally interrupting the moderator, Trump attempted to cast the moderator as an opponent and broke with the fundamental terms of the debate. His casting of the moderator as opponent establishes Trump's standing as an outside challenger to an arena in which the debate's mechanisms are intentionally set against him. Of course, this is difficult

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to verify in truth, but Trump is not so much concerned with truth-seeking as he is with the persuasive endeavor of convincing voters to vote for him. As such, this action's truth value is of little significance in Trump's rhetoric. This challenger mentality is intended to display that Trump is fighting against our institutions—the same institutions, that in his telling of the story, are to blame for the pandemic, racial unrest, and a whole host of other societal issues. By failing to abide by the basic norms of the debate in his consistent interruption, Trump foregoes a willingness to engage in dialectical exchange entirely and makes the debate a rhetorical playground.

A few minutes later, Trump's rhetoric is again on display when he calls out Joe Biden's track record during a discussion about healthcare. With reference to fixing the healthcare system, Trump remarks to Biden: "You could have done it during your 47 year period in government, but you didn't do it" (39:00). Here, Trump is ignoring the truth of Biden's track record and Biden's work in the Obama administration to pass the Affordable Care Act. He is instead emphasizing the idea that if Joe Biden has spent a long career in public service without making any substantive helpful impact on Americans' lives, he will continue to do the same if elected as President. This idea was prevalent throughout Trump's campaign, and Trump repeated this idea at multiple points during the debate. In doing this, Trump constructs a selective version of the truth that, as discussed in the previous section, is formally reminiscent of propaganda in Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In this same discussion about healthcare, Trump unleashes more authoritarian rhetoric, interrupting Joe Biden's answer to state, "So you agree with Bernie Sanders, who is far left,

on the manifesto, we call it, and that gives you socialized medicine" (40:25).

There are a few rhetorical pieces at play here. First, there is the connection

made to Bernie Sanders, a progressive U.S. Senator who was Biden's primary

challenger during the Democratic Presidential primary elections. While Sanders

is progressive and arguably "far left" relative to other American politicians,

Biden himself is demonstrably not. As one of the more prominent centrist

politicians of the last century and having been quoted as saying to his donors

that "nothing would fundamentally change" if he were elected President, Biden

is a far cry from Sanders in both action and rhetoric (Derysh). Along with this

reference to Sanders and the far left, Trump refers to the Sanders- Biden task

force's draft healthcare plan as a "manifesto" to give "socialized" medicine.

Trump drops these terms very purposefully as dog whistles for Soviet-style

communism. In association with one another, "manifesto" and "socialism" have

the potential to trigger thoughts about the Communist Manifesto and the Soviet

Union. This coded language links Biden's answer on healthcare with the United

States' most prominent Cold War challenger, and from a strategic perspective,

this links Biden with America's "Enemy No. 1". Linking Biden to the enemy

enables Trump to mark Biden as an "other" who is not concerned with the

wellbeing of Americans. Again, there is little truth, if any, to the implied

association Between Biden's proposed policy and communism, but Trump is

able to use the mere stated idea as a tool to generate fear and a grave sense of

the danger of a potential Biden presidency. This instilled sense of fear makes

Trump's word—proposed as a solution to the object causing fear—more

powerful.

Much as he has done throughout his time in the public eye, Trump makes frequent use of falsehoods throughout the debate. When responding to Biden's claim that the United States has the most COVID-19-related deaths out of any country in the world, Trump says, "when you talk about numbers, you don't know how many people died in China. You don't know how many people died in Russia. You don't know how many people died in India. They don't exactly give you a straight count, just so you understand... It's just fake news" (48:26). Here, Trump is using the perceived absence of evidence in favor of other countries' to slough off the traumatically large counts in the United States. Moreover, he uses this perceived absence of evidence elsewhere to cast doubt upon the truth of basic evidence domestically. By casting doubt upon basic truths, Trump delegitimizes the value of truth, and in doing so, he delegitimizes the grounds for any criticism or objective evaluation of his policy.

Trump is not alone in his strategic use of rhetoric throughout the debate. Biden also spends time attacking Trump's credibility and branding him unfit to serve as President. At one point, Biden says outright of Trump that, "everything he's saying so far is simply a lie... everybody knows he's a liar" before asking listeners exasperatedly, "Folks, do you have any idea what this clown is doing?" (40:55). Although Biden is calling Trump a liar here, Biden himself is not entirely truthful in making this claim. While much of what Trump had stated in the debate up to that point was indeed false, not all of it was false. However, Biden is not too concerned with proving the truth of his claim about Trump; rather, he uses the claim in service of a primarily persuasive endeavor. When he says that "everybody knows he's a liar," Biden imbues his claim with the

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authority of universality. There emerges a sense that this idea is not just a claim made solely by Biden, but one that is believed by many. That it is believed by others confers the idea with social capital that makes it more appealing to believe. In calling Trump a "clown," Biden seeks to associate Trump with improper behavior, and this association assists his broader point that Trump is unfit to serve in office.

Biden's use of rhetoric is not limited to drawing attention to Trump's behavior. He also uses it to obscure truths about his own plans. At one point, the debate's moderator asks Biden: "are you willing to tell the American tonight whether or not you will support either ending the filibuster or packing the court?" (44:23). Rather than answering the question as asked, Biden responds with misdirection. He replies by saying, "Whatever position I take on that, that'll become the issue. The issue is the American people should speak. You should go out and vote. You're voting now. Vote and let your Senators know strongly how you feel". In refusing to answer the question and simply calling for people to vote, Biden performs a political "pivot" maneuver. This maneuver has its roots in Plato's philosophy of rhetoric, as Biden is effectively performing a "guiding of souls through words" (Plato, 261b). He is using words to shift the listener away from the thought posed by the question that was asked and to instead think about voting. This is the same rhetorical tactic used by Trump when he attempts to misdirect attention in his answer to moderator Chris Wallace's request for Trump to denounce white supremacy: "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what somebody's got to do something about Antifa and the left because this is not a right wing problem this is a left wing

[problem]" (1:33:40). Here, Trump fails to adequately denounce white supremacy, but he quickly directs attention away from this failure and onto left-wing violence, even when violence may not really be a partisan issue (Kishi).

Ultimately, this debate is a difficult one to sift through. With a lack of basic respect for the terms of the debate and frequent interruptions and mistruths, it is a striking product of the last 50 years of escalation in the presence of rhetoric in American political debate.

Section 6: What is the path forward?

A Prelude for Dialogue

The story presented thus far is a rather dire one. In the last 60 years, American political debate has undergone transformative shifts that characterize a long-term devolution. As dialectical communication falls out of favor and gives way to rhetorical communication, we find ourselves in a position in which productive communication is more difficult than ever. We spend more time talking *over* each other than we do talking *to* each other.

This shift has not occurred overnight. Rather, it is one that has taken place as a result of a series of technological advancements in the last 60 years. The rise of television and later the Internet have put us in a communicative environment in which we have access to and are frequently exposed to amounts of digital information that we never could have dreamed of processing in humanity's past epochs. In an information-rich environment, we have so much stimulus on a daily basis that we cannot possibly pay attention to the nuances of each individual stimulus we encounter. Our attention is limited. Commanding our limited attention has thus become an exercise that seems almost incompatible with nuance. It has instead become an exercise beholden to the logic of spectacle and sensationalization. As this logic of spectacle devoid of

truth has guided successful political and economic actors, it has become normed in society. It would seem that dialogue and concern for truth have thus become relics in the modern day—rhetoric, meanwhile, is king.

I see the loss of dialogue as a pressing problem, as a sustained lack of communication between people of differing viewpoints has the potential to create harmful irreparable divisions over time. So, I would like to spend this concluding section discussing proposals for a path forward toward the restoration of more productive dialogue. This discussion will first require contextualization within the parameters of what I consider to be productive dialogue in the modern age. To establish these parameters, I will draw from Bruce McComiskey's *Dialectical Rhetoric*, as insights from this book provide a clear picture of what effective dialogue can and should look like in the modern day. Once I have established these parameters and sufficiently qualified what productive dialogue might look like today, I will engage in a mock dialogue between myself and a fictitious *other* who holds a point of view different from mine. This dialogue will help me outline and strengthen potential proposals to encourage dialectical communication in the modern day and in the future.

A modern approach to dialectical communication must account for the development of technology over the last 60 years. This development has fundamentally shifted how we think as individuals and constituents of a broader public for the reasons described in Section 3. It has largely been fueled by an incentive structure that prioritizes spectacle and places little weight on truth. Today, social media companies and internet entities adhere to this incentive structure to gear much of their operation toward increasing traffic and user

engagement. In the last decade, such operation has led to the spread of massive amounts of misinformation that is circulated and recirculated among various Internet communities, and it has also led to the congealing of "bubbles" of people who agree with one another and do not often find their opinion being challenged on social media. Communicatively speaking, this has led to a marked increase in the presence of rhetorical engagement and the loss of a dialectical kind.

With that said, the Internet is capable of more than suppressing dialectical engagement. Rather, it has the ability to facilitate such engagement. This ability becomes clear when considering what dialectic actually is and can be. As digital scholar Michael Heim indicates, dialectic is "the inner logic of differences [not oppositions] exposed over an extended period of exchange. . . . What more fitting support to dialectic could we have than the technological medium we call cyberspace?" (Heim 1999, 40). There are a few salient takeaways from this piece of text; first, there is a distinction made between "differences" and "oppositions". Differences of opinion are to be expected in any interaction between thinking beings; they are the fuel of effective dialogue, as they confer discussion with dimensionality and prompt involved parties to think differently than they would otherwise in response to one another. Oppositions, however, are more severe and less productive. They exist on the level of orientation, and they imply a will to refute what an opponent says without attempting to understand the opponent's word as holding value. So, from this distinction, it is clear that effective dialogue is reliant on an exchange of differences, not of oppositions. Heim indicates in that same piece of text that

cyberspace is a fitting home for this extended exchange of differences. This is the case because cyberspace—the Internet—has something of an eternal connective quality. A statement which appears in cyberspace continues to exist long after it was first uttered. Cyberspace provides in one place what is theoretically an undying and unending record of content that exists within it. As such, it *extends* the possible period for exchange of differences and has the ability to connect otherwise disparate communities.

In light of his definition of dialectic, Heim remarks that "the challenge is not to end the oscillation" of differences in dialectical engagement, but instead it is to "find the path that goes through them. . . . [It] is an existential process of criticism, practice, and conscious communication" (McComiskey 148). I find this insight particularly valuable to my endeavor in this thesis and our existence as participating citizens of our society. We should not spend time attempting to suppress difference or expressly engender unity at the cost of losing difference; rather, we should attempt to understand how best we can communicate with one another such that ideas are challenged and our knowledge is advanced in dialogue. We should view dialogue not as a negation or refutation practiced between those with disagreeing views, but as an amplification through which differing views can be understood. This attempt to understand lies at the heart of the restoration of dialogue in the modern public sphere. Technology, while previously having been a corruptive influence on dialogue, can play a role to enhance this process of attempted understanding. In the following subsection, I will engage in a mock dialogue to outline how society might go about restoring this process of understanding at scale. In this dialogue, I will play two roles: that

of myself, and that of an *other* who offers a critical perspective on almost everything that I say. The purpose of my use of a mock dialogue is to tangibly depict an advancement in understanding born of dialogue regarding the feasibility of my proposals to restore the presence of dialectical communication in society.

A Brief Dialogue on the Feasibility of Proposals to Restore Dialectical Communication

Sumit:

Hi Other! I figure we should get started with our dialogue on how we restore the presence of dialectical communication in society.

Other:

Well, I am sure that you and I will disagree a lot in this discussion, but I'm game.

Sumit:

Of course—I know we will have our differences, but at the same time, I think we can model an effective dialogue by agreeing on some basic premises of this discussion. How do you feel about that?

Other:

Okay, I can agree to that. What do you want to agree on?

Sumit:

Let's agree to something pretty minor: in the political arena, people spend a lot more time talking *over* each other than *to* each other. How does that statement make you feel?

Other:

I agree with that, and I find this to be a big problem in communication. I think that the purpose of our discussion should be to figure out how to solve this problem.

Sumit:

I agree. So, let's go ahead and figure out how to solve it. I have a few solutions in mind that I want to run through with you. Sound good?

Other:

Yes! Let's do this.

Sumit:

So the first—and main—idea I have in mind is this concept of "Controversy with Civility". If we practiced this as a society, I think that we would be better communicators and collaborators. Have you heard of it?

Other:

Hmm. I can't say I have. Would you mind telling me what it is and walking through it?

Sumit:

Yes, absolutely. "Controversy with Civility" is an approach to discussion developed by an academic named Cecilio Alvarez. In very basic terms, the approach is designed to generate trust and feelings of collaboration among participants in a given discussion. No one party in the discussion necessarily has a right or wrong answer.

Other:

So, you're telling me that this approach suppresses disagreement? It just encourages everyone to get along and be happy?

Sumit:

No, not quite. It actually encourages disagreement to a degree. The approach just outlines an approach to how we should express our disagreements. We should express them with a degree of civility. In line with this approach, when people disagree,

> those holding contrasting perspectives and opinions are encouraged to share their views with the other group members. By committing themselves to understand the nature of the disagreement and to seek a satisfactory resolution "with civil-ity," the group provides a "safe" environment for acting with congruence and for enhancing knowledge of self and of others (Alvarez 151).

Alvarez makes note of a group here, but this approach can be just as easily

applied to a discussion between two people. The goal is not to suppress

disagreement, but to appreciate it and to allow it to expand the knowledge of

disagreeing parties.

Other:

This approach sounds interesting, but I have a concern. Providing a safe

space and handling disagreement sounds great in theory, but what is to be done

when disagreement occurs along the lines of basic human rights? How am I

supposed to approach disagreement with a white supremacist civilly?

Sumit:

You raise a good point. Even in matters of existential disagreement,

civility is deeply important to a functioning democratic society. When I say we

should approach controversy with civility, I do not merely mean that we should

stand pat in service of peace; rather, it is something deeper. It is "a moral

obligation borne out of an appreciation of human equality. The active practice of

civility serves a critical democratic purpose in helping us engage the plurality of

different beliefs, cultures, and identities in society" (Alvarez 154). To approach

white supremacists with violence is to fail to respect their humanity. That is the

same sin committed by the very same white supremacists in their oppression of

people of color. Sure, we can commit that same sin, as we don't owe white

supremacists anything on the basis of their white supremacy, but we do owe it

to humanity to at least attempt to engage them in productive discussion to change their hearts and minds.

Other:

That is an incredibly naive view, don't you think? Even after years of nonviolent protest, Martin Luther King Jr. was still assassinated. Nonviolent protest movements do very little without the presence of violence. Moreover, hesitance to take direct action through violence just serves to normalize and perpetuate the behavior espoused by white supremacists. Civility validates white supremacy.

Sumit:

Controversy with civility does not mean that "every person's perspective is consid-ered valid—reasoning based on credible evidence should always prevail—but all perspectives are given the consideration they are due" (Alvarez 156). A white supremacist perspective is invalid, but this invalidity can be corrected through engagement. A failure to even engage with such a morally reprehensible perspective simply closes off the possibility of dialogue that can change minds. It creates the formation of ideological echo chambers that are corruptive to the health of our democracy. If our democracy is to survive and advance toward a better world, it is everyone's moral responsibility to prevent the further development of such echo chambers.

Other:

Is it really our responsibility to educate white supremacists? Is it the responsibility of the oppressed to educate the oppressor? If the inhumanity behind 400 years of oppression could not educate the oppressor, what makes you believe that we can?

Sumit:

You're right in questioning whether it is even our responsibility to educate the oppressor. In my estimation, it is not solely our responsibility. Rather, it is the responsibility of all members of a society to practice controversy with civility. If all members are actually practicing it, then it has the potential to really change hearts and minds.

Other:

See, now that's the issue. What makes you think that we could suddenly get so many people to practice a rather advanced form of intellectual engagement rooted in academia when almost a third of high school graduates don't pursue higher education (Admissionsly). I just don't think that people *want* to learn.

Sumit:

That is a good point. However, I do not think that this lack of enrollment in higher education is attributable to not wanting to learn. Rather, I think it is largely a product of the rising cost of higher education. If we reduced the cost of

higher education for potential students—let's say we make it free—I would imagine that many more people would pursue higher education.

Other:

How would we go about making higher education more affordable, let alone free, given the forces that have been contributing to rising tuition?

Sumit:

If the federal government were to get more involved with the subsidization of higher education, we could effectively make college free. 2020's CARES Act, passed at the beginning of the pandemic, could serve a model for how the federal government could finance free college, as those "funds were drawn against the national debt, to be paid off through the sale of treasury bonds" (Brooks). Free college is absolutely feasible so long as the public supports it.

Other:

There is so much in what you just said. I do not want to get bogged down with the specifics of its feasibility, because we both know that there is so much energy in Washington directed against free college, but let's just say that for the sake of discussion, we were able to make college free. So many people pursue higher education to study in STEM. The kind of advanced intellectual engagement that you want to see everyone practice is not exactly emphasized in

STEM. How would you expect people to learn such engagement if they are not studying the humanities?

Sumit:

In a free college model, I think that humanities training is essential to the collegiate curriculum of all individuals pursuing higher education. People should be required to take at least one class per year in the humanities. This would make people more adept at engaging in controversy with civility.

Other:

It is easy for you to say that as a humanities major, right? You are a biased party, and the market just doesn't bode well for humanities. There is not much demand for them at this point, and there does not seem to be immediate financial value to studying them. So, why would people want to study them; moreover, why should the federal government fund humanities curriculum?

Sumit:

The value of humanities education is not found in its students' potential for short-term profit; rather, its value is understood over time in enhancing discourse and critical thinking and protecting the health of our democracy (Nussbaum). Frankly, I think that we should value our democracy's health more than short-term profits.

Other:

Sumit, I can agree with you on that point. However, markets seem to dominate so many decisions at this point. Think about how technology has developed in the last 60 years. It seems as though our society has let markets dictate the development of ideas and technology for so long that we cannot suddenly prioritize the public good over markets and their tendencies.

Sumit:

I worry about this as well. That is partly why I wrote this entire thesis! Nonetheless, I think that our society has the potential for change, especially when our democracy's survival depends on it. I have outlined one proposal for the restoration of dialogue on a philosophical and policy-oriented level, and I am confident that more solutions exist. I found your point about the development of technology interesting, because while this development has contributed to losses in dialectical communication and gains in the rhetorical space, I think that proper communicative training can allow us to use new communicative tools to actually *enhance* dialogue.

Other:

Why do you say that?

Sumit:

Well, we have new tools now! We cannot use old methods when using new tools. Our status quo education system and the government's involvement in it—or lack thereof—is not apt to teach society how to handle the massive

amounts of information we suddenly have at our fingertips. Technology has radically shifted how we think about the world, and as a result, technology has exerted power over public discourse. If we are to protect the health of our democracy and our sanity, I find it essential for us to learn how to navigate technology such that *we* control *it*, and not the other way around. Once we have this control at scale, I think we will emerge a better-informed citizenry with a greater capacity for dialogue.

Other:

I can agree with that. What do you think happens if we fail to take action to restore healthy dialogue?

Sumit:

Truthfully, I think we will expose ourselves to the hyper-escalation of rhetoric which will lead to the further crumbling of our democracy. If we cannot talk to each other, we cannot agree on much of anything. If we cannot agree on anything, the connective tissue of our society falls away. While I personally found the BLM protests of 2020 to be immensely valuable and justified, the level of unrest and division witnessed last year is unsustainable. The right and the left, while both deeply engaged within their respective political circles, wholly disengaged from talking to each other. Instead, members of both sides opted to wage violence. On the right, this violence became destructive at the largest scale. We saw so many people attach to then-President Trump's false rhetoric in the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential Election, and this culminated

in the Capitol riots of January 6th, 2021. If we fail to clean up our act and actually talk to each other, I fear that we are in for more of the same in the future.

Other:

I agree with you there. The impetus for our society to restore dialectical engagement truly could not be greater.

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