Virgil’s *Aeneid* presents, at the same time, an epic and glorified justification for the legitimacy of Octavian’s rule in the wake of civil war and an idealistic vision of a peaceful future based on Roman *mors moralis* and *virtus*. Virgil’s prophetic optimism reflects a broader trend in Roman literature and philosophy in the late Republic. This trend speaks of a common human inclination toward progress and idealism in the midst of political and social disillusionment. I will juxtapose the political and national idealism of Virgil and Cicero to modern political idealism spanning from Rousseau and Kant, to Chomsky and Rawls. My overall intent is to emphasize the possibility and necessity of working to create an equitable, socio-political system based on laws that account for our mutual interests, as opposed to a system that favors the pursuit of self-interest.

In his article, *Murder and Marriage in Virgil’s Aeneid*, David Crump discussed the ambiguities relating to Roman conceptions of murder and marriage and contrasted the subsequent legal implications with similar issues regarding murder and marriage laws in the American justice system. Crump rightfully recognizes the timeless relevance and importance of the *Aeneid*, as well as the moral and legal ambiguities that Virgil intentionally left for his readers. However, Virgil’s primary purpose for writing his epic poem, qua beneficiary of Augustus’s patronage, was to propagandize Augustus’s reign and foster support for his moral and legal reform platforms. Augustus legitimized his rule on the justification of ending the civil war...
war and restoring Republican values and traditions.\(^3\) As such, the *Aeneid* presents parables that highlight *virtus* (civic virtue) and *mors moralis* (ancestral ways or values).\(^4\) These parables were meant to foster values on which Augustus’s legal reforms were to be based; these laws in turn served as the foundation for lasting stability and justice.

Virgil also provided a vision of *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) in the *Aeneid*. The following passage from Book I provides profound insight into Roman conceptions of political idealism in the late Republic:

From this noble stock there will be born a Trojan Caesar to bound his empire by Oceanus at the limits of the world, and his fame by the stars. He will be called Julius, a name passed down to him from the great Iulus. In time to come, have no fear, you will receive him in the sky, laden with the spoils of the East. He too will be called upon in prayer. Then wars will be laid aside and the years of bitterness will be over. Silver-haired Truth and Vesta, and Romulus Quirinus with his brother Remus, will sit dispensing justice. The dreaded Gates of War with their tight fastenings of steel will then be closed, and godless strife will sit inside them on his murderous armour roaring hideously from bloody mouth, hands shackled behind his back with a hundred bands of bronze.\(^5\)

Although this passage is blatantly panegyrical toward Augustus, it also reflects Virgil’s personal view of his times. The *Aeneid* was composed in the wake of a series of bloody civil wars between rival members of the Roman elite. Virgil’s weariness of constant conflict and political instability is evident. He also promotes a progressive vision of the Roman state – a state free from conflict and instability. In his poem, *Georgics*, Virgil described a form of social organization based on mutual interests and common needs. He offers a vision of an ideal society, represented by an allegorical beehive:

They [bees] alone share the care of their young and live united in one house, and lead lives subject to the majesty of law. They alone recognize the full worth of home and homeland. Mindful that winter follows, they set to work in summer and store what they acquire for the common good. Some are responsible for food and by a fixed agreement keep busy in the fields, others stay within the walls and lay down as the first foundation of the comb the tear of a narcissus and sticky resin from the bark of trees from which they then suspend the clinging honey cells.

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3. **KLADIUS BRINGMANN, A HISTORY OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC** 305 (Polity Press, 2007). Augustus professed himself to be the savior of the Republic and initiated a strict moral reform program which resulted in the exile of the poet Ovid as well as his own daughter. Moreover, he claimed that the civil wars resulted from moral decadence which was a popular rhetorical claim in the late Republic. *Ambitio* (ambition) and *avaritia* (avarice) were commonly noted as the primary vices of Roman aristocrats. These vices were blamed for rampant political and social instability which led to civil war.
5. **VIRGIL, THE AENEID** I 12 (David West trans., Penguin Group, 1990). In this passage, Jupiter is offering a prophecy to the other gods regarding Aeneas’s destiny and the future of the Roman people.
Others are appointed to bring up the young, the future of the race, while others still pack the honey, the purest honey, and stuff the cells with perfect nectar. Some, allotted to be sentries at the alighting boards, take turns to keep an eye on clouds and coming rain and to relieve the homing bees of their burdens, or, having rounded up a troop, keep out the drones, that lazy shower, from the mangers. Virgil’s allegory of the beehive bears similarities to some of Cicero’s views in De Officiis, which I will discuss later. The social organization of bees takes the mutual interests of all members of the hive into account. The bees distribute goods according to the common good and each member of the hive has a specific role. They are also subject to equal laws that govern the hive as a whole. This allegory reflects a broader political discourse regarding social and economic disparity in the late Roman Republic, which manifested itself in a vehement conflict between the populares and optimates. The Georgics promotes a simple, agrarian society, free from political conflict and personal ambition – a society in which mutual interests and well-being serve at the primary bond of social cohesion.

To achieve lasting social and political stability, Virgil and many of his contemporaries such as Cicero spoke of a peaceful and just state grounded upon reason and virtue. Cicero and Sallust, in particular, spoke vehemently against a perceived decline of civic virtue and the rise of decadence and avarice at the expense of the interests of the Republic as a whole. Although such tirades were largely hyperbolic at times, and most often political and rhetorical, they speak to a common human reaction to political instability, conflict, and economic disparity. To establish a society of peace and justice, they suggested a return to traditional laws and values.

In the midst of the civil war between Octavian and Mark Antony, against the Roman Senate led by Cassius and Brutus, Cicero lamented the collapse of the Roman Republic, and outlined the proper form of civic governance and social order:

It was the life men led in these cities which led to the creation of laws and customs, to the equitable distribution of rights, to an established social system. And these developments, in their turn, gave rise to a spirit of humanity and mutual consideration. The result was that life became more stable, and by mutual

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6. VIRGIL, GEORGICS IV 153-168 (Peter Fallon trans., Oxford World’s Classics, 2006). Virgil composed the Georgics while under the patronage of Meacenas. Thus, the Georgics is far less panegyrical toward Augustus than the Aeneid. Virgil’s true thoughts and feelings regarding the state of the late Roman Republic are also far more candid.  
7. Populares were a party of aristocrats who were concerned with the well-being of the plebeians, or general populace (primarily for their political power base), while the optimates defended the rank and privilege of the ruling senatorial elite. Julius Caesar and the Grachii were leading members of the populares.  
8. See generally SALLUST, CATILINE’S WAR (A. J. Woodman trans., Penguin Group, 2008) (The views of Cicero and Sallust regarding political instability in the late Republic are captured in their works on the Catilinarian conspiracy. Cicero was involved in a feud with Catiline, a political rival.) Sallust recorded the subsequent trial and death of Catiline in his work, Bellum Catilinae (Catiline’s War). See generally id.  
9. BRINGMANN, supra note 3, at 113.
giving and receiving, by placing our resources at one another’s disposal, we succeeded in ensuring that all our needs were met.\(^1\)

This excerpt from Book II of *De Officiis* reflects Cicero’s concept of social justice. Cicero’s emphasis on peace and the obligation of individuals to their fellow citizens is similar to the value Virgil placed on Aeneas’s duty to the Trojan people and the allegory of the beehive. Moreover, it further reflects Roman conceptions of justice in the late Republic. Cicero and Virgil both shared a common political discourse. This discourse was a manifestation of growing discontent in the midst of social injustice and political instability.

Virgil’s *Aeneid*, while a work of literature, political propaganda, and panegyric, is also a marvelous early example of political idealism.\(^2\) Aeneas encounters a plethora of human emotions and experiences on his journey to Italy and presents an interesting contrast of character and personality. Aeneas, despite his treatment of Dido and the murder of Turnus, sought peace and stability for the Trojan people. Rome was destined to be a light in a world of darkness. While the reality was far from true, the idea reflects a universal inclination toward justice and progress. Crump rightfully pointed out the seemingly timeless relation of Aeneas’ experiences with those of our own. This is true not only in regard to questions of law or ethics, but also in those relating to aspirations toward a better state and peaceful future. In this case, Virgil aspired to a more just and stable Rome. Virgil’s optimistic view of humanity’s potential for improvement is part of a broader form of classical idealism spanning from Plato to the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment restored classical forms of idealism and provided new concepts of progress and justice after centuries of religious conflict and suppression. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* formed a new framework of social organization based on mutual obligation and justice.\(^3\) Rousseau argued that a social contract exists between all members of society with the purpose of overcoming natural weaknesses and obstacles.\(^4\) Moreover, this contract necessitates that each individual’s self-interest is common to that of all members of society. As such, society must be moderated by rules of law and justice that serves the general will.\(^5\) The laws of society must reflect and maintain the mutual interests of all under the social contract.

Immanuel Kant, building on Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, argued that humanity has a teleological duty to progress due to our reasoning faculty and the possibility of improvement as

\(^1\) Cicero, *De Officiis* II 4.15 (Michael Grant trans., 1971). Cicero completed *De Officiis* a year before his death. It was most likely intended for his son Marcus as a manual for living.


\(^4\) Id.

\(^5\) Id. at 56.
intended by nature.\textsuperscript{15} Humanity can accomplish this only in a free and equal society with a just constitution.\textsuperscript{16} Like Virgil’s vision for Pax Romana in Book I of the Aeneid, the civil association of mankind with one another requires equitable justice and social stability. Kant’s justification for humanity’s social progression rests as follows:

Such a justification of nature, or perhaps one should say of providence, is a not unimportant reason for selecting a particular outlook for observing the world. For what good is it to praise the majesty and wisdom of creation in the realm of nature, which is without reason, and to recommend contemplating them if that part of the great arena of supreme wisdom which above all contains that purpose, namely, the history of mankind, remains as a constant objection because its spectacle compels us to turn away our eyes in disgust and as we despair of ever encountering therein a completed rational end causes us to expect such perfection only in another world?\textsuperscript{17}

Thus, for Kant, humanity must not be content to remain passive toward the teleology nature has set for us. Since it is possible to create a better form of social and political organization, humanity is obligated to do so. One must not look toward progress or peace in another world or a future state of existence when progress is possible in our current state. As such, progression requires a dialectic between all members of society in regards to the creation of moral and just laws and forms of governance.

Kant’s political idealism, like Virgil’s, is the product of disillusionment resulting from years of political, and in Kant’s case, religious conflict. The experience of strife, violence, and social instability evokes the desire for peace and stability. Conflict serves to motivate progress, which as Kant argued, is humanity’s ultimate purpose. Taking Virgil and Kant’s concepts of social justice and idealism into consideration, what is necessary to create an equal and just society? What will the result look like? Several modern intellectuals have offered recipes for progress, including Noam Chomsky and John Rawls.

Noam Chomsky and John Rawls represent a generational reaction to the conflict endemic to the twentieth century. The two world wars and the culture wars that followed influenced pessimistic world views among many individuals and vehemently progressive attitudes in others. The Second World War, in particular, led to growing pessimism among academic intellectuals and influenced movements such as existentialism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism – all of which have relatively bleak and negative views of human nature and are fatally skeptical about the concepts of morality, justice, and idealism.

\textsuperscript{16} Id. at 124.
\textsuperscript{17} Id. at 132. Thomas Paine and Johann Gottlieb Fichte shared similar ideas about human progress.
Noam Chomsky dispelled postmodernism in favor of an idealistic view of humanity influenced in part by Rousseau, and progressive thinkers such as John Dewey and Rudolph Rocker, as well as his own research in linguistics. Despite the difficulties inherent in the process of changing long-standing traditions and institutions of authority, Chomsky, like Kant, argues that we must act. Although our position as individuals to effect change is limited, we have a position nonetheless. The position we occupy as free-thinking, rational individuals necessitates positive aspirations and ideas for a better society. The idea of progress is often met with skepticism in light of the many horrors and difficulties that humanity has faced throughout history. The idealistic vision of Pax Romana promoted by Virgil and his contemporaries disintegrated because of the internal and external conflicts faced by the Roman Empire. Likewise, Kant’s concept of perpetual peace was shattered by two world wars.

Regardless of the challenges that hinder progress, Chomsky highlighted the social improvements made only within his lifetime - namely, improvements in social justice and equality. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s resulted in greater equality and toleration for minority groups. Furthermore, the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s led to improvements in gender equality. As Chomsky asserts, “All those changes took place because of constant, dedicated struggle, which is hard and can look very depressing for long periods. . . . Overall change is toward greater humanity.” Thus, the aspiration for a better society and the will to effect change is required for progress. The difficulty lies with establishing a society based on laws that accommodate a plurality of human ideologies, values, and political views. An ideal society must extend justice to all equally.

In his works, A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism, John Rawls provided a framework for creating an equal and just society. Like Rousseau, he argued that a progressive and politically liberal state is possible only when political power is exercised in accordance with the mutual interests of all citizens. To this end, absolute freedom and equality are essential. Moreover, Rawls’s A Theory of Justice attempts to address the possibility of creating laws that accommodate political and ideological plurality within a society. As such, the concept of justice, as well as the laws derived from that concept, must coincide with the equitable benefit and interests of all, regardless of individual principles or self-interest. Rawls refers to this theory of justice as “Justice as Fairness.” Taken as a whole, “Justice as Fairness” emphasizes that any individual interests that require the violation of the interests of society as a whole are unjust - actions, institutions, and laws must serve to maximize equality and overall satisfaction.

Unlike Kant’s concepts of social justice and political idealism, Rawls’s theory of justice is not teleological - in other words, Rawls does not suggest that humanity is on a historical
progression toward any form of moral or political culmination or an ideal state. Rawls merely proposed his theory as an alternative to utilitarianism and as a defense of classical contract theory.24 Moreover, Rawls based his concept of social justice on a hypothetical assumption that all individuals would favor laws that benefit society as a whole were they not pre-conditioned by their personal circumstances and experiences.25 It creates a framework with which to create a free and equal society.

All of the ideas and concepts discussed above speak of *pax humanitas*, or human peace. Much of what drives and motivates me as a historian is my sincere belief in a Kantian notion of political liberalism and the progression of humanity toward a just and cosmopolitan society. As such, the past serves as a guide to correcting and transcending previous mistakes and failures in order to establish a better form of social and political organization. The human intellectual dialectic provides the ideas and concepts necessary to achieve such an end. The lessons and examples of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Cicero’s *De Officiis*, as well as the experiences that influenced the political idealism of Rousseau and Kant, speak of a common human inclination – the aspiration of peace and justice. What is the purpose of dialectic and academic disciplines such as philosophy, history, and law, if not to achieve progress? What else justifies the humanities as a field of academic study?

Like the Roman civil wars in the first century B.C.E. and the religious conflicts in Early Modern Europe, the present is rife with conflict and dissent. Growing economic disparity and social tension leads to pessimism and discontent. The ever present threat of war creates global unrest and instability, while discontent mounts against leaders and governments. Yet, in the midst of such challenges and adversity, there remains the possibility of improvement. As Noam Chomsky once said to me in an email correspondence, “There’s plenty to be tormented about, regrettably. Those who don’t share these torments are blind. Those who don’t try to do something about it will not be thanked by generations to follow.”26 With the economic disparity in the United States growing to record highs, the persistence of intolerance and discrimination toward minorities, and the rise of environmental threats, it is imperative that conscientious citizens and intellectuals work vigorously to provide meaningful contributions to society.

Despite polarizing concepts such as liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, undeniable truisms remain. Regardless of individual perspectives, ideologies, or experiences, we occupy the same globe, and ultimately share the same fate. Our interests are invariably linked. To say that self-interest or individual gain has primacy over the interests of society as a whole is to ignore our objective reality. If a mining company alters the topography of a region indiscriminately for the purpose of maximizing profit and market-share for itself, it incurs environmental consequences to the detriment of all. Similarly, if an individual seeks to maximize personal profit indiscriminately in the global economy, it incurs economic

24. *Id.* at 22.
25. *See id.* at 21.
consequences to the detriment of all. Laws and actions must serve the overall well-being and mutual interests of all members of society. If laws do not provide equitable justice, a society will never be truly equal or free. The aspiration toward *pax humanitas* must be reflected in the laws we create. They must be founded on justice and account for the plurality of ideologies and socio-cultural backgrounds that exist in our society. To this end, the creation and defense of law is an essential practice within which all academic disciplines and professionals have a stake.