

Challenging the Implicit Dominance of Individualist Freedom:
Toward a Strongly Relationalⁱ Freedomⁱⁱ
Brent D Slife, Brigham Young Universityⁱⁱⁱ

When Gary told me I'd receive this award, I couldn't help but reflect a bit on my life and work. Indeed, this presentation may be my last at the STPP. I'd prefer to love on my nine grandkids and do volunteer work at this point in my life. Consequently, I hope to bring together four threads of my career in this final paper. The first of these threads is the honoring of my beloved mentor, the late Joseph Rychlak, along with our collaboration on topics related to freedom.^{iv} The second thread is the honoring of the many graduate students I've had the privilege to work with over my 37 years in academia [on screen^v]. [As you can see, several are recent presidents of this Society, and some, I predict, will eventually receive this award themselves.]

The third thread of my work is my peculiar career through three different religious universities—the University of Santa Clara, which is Catholic, Baylor University, which is Baptist, and Brigham Young University, which is Mormon^{vi}. Yet I've never been connected to any of these religions. Perhaps the fourth thread is my own scholarship and research, which include three main themes: I mentioned my work on freedom and agency, but the last decades of my scholarship focused on strong relationality and the metaphysics of naturalism and theism.^{vii}

Today, as I try to weave these threads together, I'd like to honor my mentor, students, and universities by showing how a text normally associated with religion can be used to elucidate some vexing problems of our culture^{viii}.^{ix} I'll defend this text's critique of an individualist brand of freedom, a brand that both US political parties have adopted, at least implicitly. Then I'll champion this text's version of a strongly relational freedom that I believe could really help us navigate some of the difficulties the US is facing. This tack necessarily means that I'll be dealing with some taboo topics, particularly politics. I'll try to do that sensitively, but I ask your indulgence because US politics is hard for me to ignore when dealing with issues of freedom^x.

Saul of Tarsus

The text that forms the basis of this presentation is taken from the writings of Saul of Tarsus^{xi}, someone considered to be one of the most educated and wise persons of the first century (CE). Indeed, modern scholars agree that Saul of Tarsus — o the Apostle Paul as he is better known was himself educated by an eminent Jewish scholar of the law, Gamaliel. In honor of my dear friend, Phillip Cushman, I'll just mention that the Mishnah and other ancient Jewish writings speak glowingly of Gamaliel, especially his work related to community. The Talmud, for example, describes Gamaliel as Nasi or "prince," and Rabban "our master."^{xixiii} In fact, millions of thoughtful people today revere Paul's work as pivotal to their own wisdom and understanding of truth—my mentor, former students, and past university colleagues among them.

Yet I think it's fair to say that Paul's work is implicitly discouraged in psychology and the academy at large. Its association with religion, especially the Christian religion, means that it's

relatively off limits to academicians^{xiv}. I say “especially Christian” because we sometimes hear a teaching of the Buddha or a Hindu text. But Christian scripture is almost never cited, partly because it’s the most popular religion in North America, and partly because of the politics of some Christians. In fact, my students have frequently lamented not being able to quote frankly Christian literature in a presentation; they know through sometimes brutal experience that it won’t be received well. I believe it’s a tribute to the relative openness of this Society that I can have some hope of avoiding such brutal experience with this presentation (hint, hint)^{xv}.

As my former students know, Paul actually has a lot to say about freedom, though you rarely hear about it. In fact, he seems to characterize the pursuit of freedom with what seems like typical American, don’t-tread-on-me rhetoric: “Stand firm, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” A little later in this passage, he adds, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters!” Little wonder that many US Evangelicals have responded to passages such as these by championing their freedom. Even so, Paul seems to directly contradict himself just a few lines later. Using the slave metaphor again, he says that people should “become slaves to one another.”^{xvi}

Why would Paul call us to cast off the yoke of slavery and yet become slaves? Why would a leading thinker of his day seemingly contradict himself? The short answer is that he wanted us to consider a new perspective on the same metaphor, so that it has new meaning. As I’ll try to show, Paul was interested in challenging individualist or atomist freedom, the freedom that is so taken for granted in US politics on both sides of the aisle. He champions, instead, a fascinating brand of relational or holist freedom, what he considers authentic freedom. Unfortunately, the time limits of this presentation curtail my quotes from Paul. Rest assured, however, that my longer paper provides all the supporting quotes, if you’re interested.

Individualist Freedom

For Paul, individualist freedom is too “self-indulgent,” too selfish and transactional to allow for healthy community and culture. Its focus on the individual is simply too atomistic in his view. Now to understand Paul’s position I need to describe atomism and its effect on freedom. This description may seem merely theoretical, but I can assure you, it has vast political and social ramifications. Freedom is atomistic when it is thought to be, in the words of my dear friend Phillip Cushman, “self-contained” within the boundaries of our skin, specifically the brain. Just as the qualities of my pen are supposedly found by examining the self-contained characteristics of the pen itself, the essential qualities of a person are supposedly found by examining the individual. No reference to the situation outside the pen or the individual is needed, at least not for their essential identities. Consequently, an individualist freedom stems from the desires and choices that occur within the boundaries of our skin.

Now those scholars who argue for individualist freedom, including my late mentor, would immediately note that the context of our choices is *eventually* taken into account. It’s just that the choices themselves must *first* occur without context. For example, I *first* choose a flight schedule, *then* I actually fly to Boston. The original choice of schedule has to be free of past or

present context. Bad memories of a red-eye flight, for instance, cannot be responsible for my choice of schedule. The individualist would view those memories as *determining* the choice, and thus not *free* at all^{xvii}. All *true* choices, therefore, must be independent or free of context. Context does, however, play an important role for the individualist when free choices are *enacted*. As I fly to Boston, I'm obviously at the mercy of all sorts of contextual factors that are out of my control, such as the pilot, mechanical problems, etc. The point here for advocates of individualist freedom is that the choice itself — my free will — must be *independent* of such factors^{xviii}. Otherwise, those factors determine my choice.

As I mentioned, these theoretical points about individualist freedom sit at the fulcrum of important political and psychological ideas. In fact, they have at least two pivotal implications for Paul: they lead to a deserving economy, and they undermine moral traditions. To understand the latter implication, we should first note that the independence of free choice and context means that context is generally viewed as the enemy of freedom. To maximize freedom, from this individualist perspective, one must minimize the restrictions of context. Autonomy is often defined this way. Consider Christman (2020): [Autonomy] is a “capacity to be one’s own person, to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent” (para. 1).

Libertarianism, for instance, targets government regulation as the enemy of individual freedom, leading to a distaste, if not a disdain, for government generally^{xix}. This distaste, as several commentators have noted, is a primary motive of the MAGA movement. However, many movements on the left also embrace individualist freedom; they just target other aspects of context as the enemy of such freedom, such as moral traditions. For example, the moral tradition of sexual abstinence before marriage is viewed as limiting one’s freedom.^{xxxxixxii}. In this sense, the political right and left may disagree on which contextual constraints should be minimized, but they agree that such minimization helps to maximize individual freedom.^{xxiii xxiv}

Recall that the Apostle Paul also notes a second practical manifestation of the idea of individualist freedom — what some have called the “deserving economy” (Slife & Doherty). Because this freedom implies that each individual is personally responsible for their choices and actions, each of us gets what we deserve. If we’re rich, it’s because we’ve made the right choices. Even if we’re somehow disadvantaged — say, because we were raised in a poor family — the independence of context and choices in individualist freedom means that we can still choose to overcome that disadvantage. We just need to work hard on the right choices. This independence also means, of course, that the homeless are ultimately responsible for their plight, because they’ve chosen not to overcome their circumstances. They deserve what they get. Merit and effort are king, with this deserving economy even permeating sports. If an athletic team fails to meet expectations, it’s because “they didn’t want it bad enough,” and so on — all due to the presumed independence of choice and context.^{xxv}

Relational Freedom

I'm hoping at this point you recognize aspects of American culture in my description of individualist freedom^{xxvi}. Indeed, this notion of freedom is so widespread that many Americans would be hard-pressed to formulate an alternative. Paul, however, argues for just such an alternative — a brand of strongly relational freedom — even though many religious people rarely seem to recognize this alternative in his writing. My term “strong” here means ontological in the hermeneutic tradition, that we have a shared being with our context^{xxviiixviii}. Unlike individualist freedom, which ultimately separates us from and even vilifies its context, relational freedom cannot be separated from its context at any point in time or space. In this sense, the choices we often experience in our heads can only be part of what freedom is about. In fact, the research on “automaticity” is clear: only a small fraction of our actions are cognitively or even consciously chosen. For instance, few of my behaviors in this presentation — head movements, hand gestures — are consciously chosen.

Our freedom, in this sense, is not just about the conscious choices of our brains. According to Paul, it's about the *possibilities* we experience in particular contexts, where these possibilities are the joint action of our selves and our contexts. As an example, I experience the doors of this room as the possibility of exit. It's true that I do have some choices about when and whether to exit, but my physical context undoubtedly plays a practical role in those choices, because I'm unlikely to exit through a wall. For this reason, relational freedom entails both constraints and possibilities, walls and doors. My choice to fly to Boston is similar. How would I have known what flights to choose without those constraints and possibilities? How would my choices even be meaningful without this context always and already part of my choices?

The constraints of context, then, cannot be the enemy of our freedom; constraints cannot be separated from freedom. It doesn't make sense to say that the walls of the room are preventing us from getting what we desire or deserve; the walls are, in part, the framer of the very possibilities we call choices and desires. A room of walls may not have the possibilities we'd *prefer*, but it presents other possibilities — lots of places to lean on, for example. Similarly, a room full of doorways limits the places we can lean. Doors and walls *both* involve constraints and possibilities. Likewise, government can never be the enemy of possibilities generally (Bozell). A particular government may not allow the possibilities we'd prefer, but whatever its constraints, it presents possibilities. Even totalitarian regimes, such as Iran, imply dialectically the possibility of rebellion. Paul, in fact, was quite noted for emphasizing his possibilities, even when imprisoned or tortured; he experienced possibilities wherever he was^{xxix}.

Paul argued that ethical traditions aren't the enemy either. As part of our context, these traditions serve the same function as doors and walls, framing our possibilities and constraints. Here, however, is where Paul begins to distinguish among the qualities of possibilities and constraints offered by various ethical traditions. Much as many of us would favor democracy, and thus its particular possibilities and constraints, over other forms of government, Paul favored an ethic that many major religions favor^{xxx} — a broad relational ethic — because he believed it fostered the most authentic freedom. If the strong relationist is correct and we have a shared being with our context, then the community of which we are part needs to be cared

for and cared about. Paul believed it takes a healthy “body” of people for the members of that body to experience the most freedom (Fowers, 2015^{xxxix}).^{xxxix}

Unlike individualist approaches, where persons can supposedly choose from among ethical systems based on their individual preferences^{xxxix}, Paul^{xl} maintained a kind of ethical realism^{xl}. Ethical realism is the position that a practical ethic involves us whether we like it or not, just like doors^{xlvi}. [As Charles Taylor (1989) put it, “What is real is what you have to deal with, what won’t go away just because it doesn’t fit your prejudices” (p. 59).] Parenthood is probably a quick relational example. Just as a person cannot magically choose to exit a room by passing through a wall, parents cannot magically choose for their ethical role qua parent not to matter.

Again, parents have choices about how they might respond to this ethic, perhaps even abandoning their children. But they cannot eliminate entirely their experience of their parental responsibilities. Those ethical issues remain, even when they try to escape them. As many parents have admitted when abandoning their children, parenthood “haunted” them “every day” (ref). And here Paul argues there are better ways to navigate the ethic of parenthood than trying to abandon it. Indeed, he contends these better ways lead to more meaningful possibilities and greater freedom, the freedom, for instance, to enjoy a son or daughter^{xlvi}!

To foster the kind of ethical community that facilitates this greater freedom, Paul challenges the other main implication of individualist freedom, a deserving economy^{xli}. He champions an *undeserving* economy, what some would call a gracious economy. Here, members of the community do not have to deserve, merit, or even qualify to be part of it^{xlii}. Indeed, Paul not only argues that anyone can join; he argues that the marginalized, rejected^{xliii}, and disenfranchised — whatever is the *other* of the community — should be given “respect” and even “honored” in this community.^{xliii}

The *enfranchised* members might feel good about their “charity,” but that’s not Paul’s main motive for inclusion. He sincerely believes the *disenfranchised* play an “indispensable” practical role in the common good of a group body. Indeed, as Richard Rohr describes, the absence of the other inevitably leads to the absence of the relational ethic Paul champions. First, loving someone who is like you is wholly different from loving someone who is unlike you. Second, those who have been excluded from the community nearly always reveal the hidden operating system of that community^{xliii}. In other words, their “outside” perspective gives them insights that those who live the core assumptions of the community don’t have^{xliii}. If this otherness is honored, as Paul suggests, the community is incalculably enhanced. Indeed, as Rene Girard contends, the common good isn’t even possible without the differences and distinctions that otherness brings^{xliii}.

To his credit, I believe, Paul also anticipates how hidden forms of deserving economy can infiltrate gracious economies. What if, for instance, you’re a member of a highly desired community, but you can see how its leaders are different from you. Will they eventually find you out and ostracize you? The anxiety alone might move you to mimic the leaders, and thus

defeat the needed richness of a gracious community. There are lots of comparable threats to gracious communities, but Paul explicitly counters what I believe is the major factor in Western culture (ref) — the notion that the bonds of member unity originate from our commonalities, our similarities. In fact, the members of most Western communities, from religious to political, tend to define their group unity in terms of their commonalities, especially common beliefs. BYU students, for example, routinely seek marriage partners through common beliefs.

Paul combats this reliance on similarity by pointing to a very different, more durable form of unity — complementarity^{li}. Much as a hand and an eye complement one another in our biological bodies through both their commonalities and differences, so too members of a community can complement one another through similarities and dissimilarities. If our biological bodies consisted only of eyes, it would hamper the body's function. Analogously, a community's function is hampered with only commonalities.^{lii} [I probably don't need to rehearse the virtues of diversity to this audience, but Paul's brand of complementarity even warns about groups that favor diversity. As Rohr notes: "When we are at the center of [a community], we easily confuse essentials with nonessentials, getting tied down by trivia, loyalty tests, and job security." In other words, groups that favor diversity can themselves become dogmatic and require what Rohr calls "loyalty tests" for beliefs about diversity.]

The Gracious Community^{liiiiv}

This last feature of Paul's thinking, complementarity, hints at how he coalesces this form of unity with his ethical realism and gracious economy. He brings them all together in a community of gracious love, where he believes real freedom is found. I'm betting all of you have experienced the freedom Paul talks about — the freedom you feel when you're part of a group or family that authentically accepts, values, and perhaps even loves you, warts and all. You sense less need for safety, approval, and control, and you experience more capacity for trust, kindness, and compassion, among other things. You're freed *from* certain attitudes and actions and freed *to* certain actions and attitudes. You are not freed from your context; indeed, your context is necessary to these possibilities. But you are freed from the worst aspects of your self, according to Paul, the aspects that most keep you from loving and being loved.

Now to unpack these freedoms-from and freedoms-to, we need to circle back to a phrase I glossed over, the phrase that the group or family loves you *warts and all*. This colloquial phrase belies an immensely important relational truth according to Paul — that the acceptance or love of the group should not be based on what you deserve or merit. If you're thinking of a family who loves you warts and all, for instance, you're likely aware of how you've hurt or embarrassed them in one way or another. But you *also* know they've somehow interpreted your actions in a charitable way, and accept and value you anyway.^{lv} Indeed, If you weren't accepted "warts and all," you'd be too vulnerable. You'd be too anxious to live up to the entrance requirements and ongoing desires of the group. Warts-and-all acceptance frees you to be authentically you.^{lvi}

Now when I say “authentically you,” I’m not meaning some sort of vague self-actualization. I’m meaning, rather, your *best self*, “best” in the sense of a relational ethic, a kind of ethical self that reflects a *you* from the loving eyes of your community.^{lvii} Your gracious community affects your heart so that you almost naturally want what’s best for everyone, including yourself. This is what Paul means by “becoming a slave to one another.” What you want is already moral, a shared heart, a contextually situated gracious love that’s freed from needing to deserve that love or to be like the others.^{lviii} Recall, for example, that you can’t avoid the relational ethic of parenthood, but there are better and worse ways to navigate that ethic. This navigation is not a one-size-fits-all. But the loving guidance of a group Spirit^{lix} can free you to find your ethically best navigation. Indeed, part of this relational freedom is that your best self makes options available that weren’t available otherwise^{lx, lxi, lxii}.

But how practical is such a gracious community? With individualist freedom dominating our cultural and political landscape, what on earth would make anyone think we could effect this loving coalescence of a relational ethic, an undeserved economy, and a complementary unity? Isn’t a truly undeserved love rare, if it exists at all^{lxiii}? Paul clearly disagrees. In fact, the largest portion of his writings consists of practical aid to *actual* communities that approximate *gracious* communities. Paul was not a wide-eyed idealist; he was a steely-eyed realist. His greatest strength was in facilitating these *approximations*, approximations that do a lot of good^{lxiv}. And given the individualist headwinds of our time, these approximations are sometimes the best we can manage.

As a case in point, I sincerely believe that this community, the STPP, is one kind of approximation of a gracious community. First, your embrace of me and my students has been a wonderful “approximation” in my estimation. But, second, the caring way in which we interact and show one another respect is an approximation. We aren’t embracing, caring, and respecting one another because we’re following APA’s code of ethics. Most of us, most of the time, I believe, *truly* embrace, care, and respect one another *from the heart*. In point of fact, this Spirit of the heart has given me the grace, support, and love to present this peculiar paper^{lxv}.

Conclusion

I need to conclude my too-brief description of Paul’s vision of relational freedom, but I want to first acknowledge an understandable response to it. Come on, Brent, you might say, “you’ve moved from some impossible ideal of a community of undeserved love to something like our own community, which is commonplace and practiced by most everyone most of the time.” Oh, but I beg to differ. I would contend that the rise of several recent national and international leaders demonstrates that approximations of gracious love, such as our community here, are not a given. They are not a typical form of freedom we all enjoy. On the contrary, these leaders and their followers are reflections of our baser instincts — what Paul calls the “flesh” — and thus self-indulgent forms of freedom. When prominent leaders model and give permission for these instincts to flourish, they present as an ideal what Paul calls the “self-indulgence” of

individualist freedom. Instead of offering community support to beat back these instincts, this ideal becomes what we ought to do and who we ought to be.

And, unfortunately, clever politicians in the US have framed this ideal as patriotism. Support for this ideal is taken as support for something America has stood for since its inception: freedom. What is rarely questioned, however, is the type of freedom. Is the freedom envisioned by America's founders the self-indulgence of individualist freedom, where people should avoid all moral traditions, get what they deserve, and form communities of similarity? Or is it just possible that real patriotism is the pursuit of a some kind of relational freedom, where a relational ethos is incorporated, an undeserved loved is cultivated, and the inclusion of the other is highly valued? Thank you!

ⁱ "We go through our lives, our years on this earth, thinking of ourselves as separate. That sense of separateness basically causes every stupid, sinful, silly thing we ever do. The little, separate self takes offense when people don't show us proper respect. The separate self lies and steals and does unkind things to other people. When we're separate, everything becomes about protecting and defending ourselves. It can consume our lives. One word for overcoming that false sense of separateness, that illusory self, is heaven, and, quite frankly, that is what death offers us. It is simply returning to the Source from which we came, where all things are One. The whole gospel message is radical union with God, with neighbor, and even with ourselves. I think that's why so many of us are drawn to church each week—to receive communion and to eventually, hopefully, realize that we are *in communion*." (Rohr, 12/28/22)

ⁱⁱ Jesus consistently stands with the excluded, the outsider, the sinner, and the poor. That is his place of freedom, his unique way of critiquing self-serving cultures, and his way of being in union with the suffering of the world" (Rohr, 9/9/22)ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ "Economist John Maynard Keynes wrote in the 1920s that "the struggle for subsistence" would eventually cease. Another century of growth would mean that "for the first time since his creation man (sic) will be faced with his real, his permanent problem — how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares ... to live wisely and agreeably and well." (

^{iv} Joe was the past president of this Society on two occasions as well as the second person ever to accept this award.

^v Partial collaboration list (those active in STPP): Jeff Reber, Joe Ostenson, Josh Clegg, Steve Yanchar, Dennis Wendt, Amy Fisher Smith, Brady Wiggins, Ed Gantt

^{vi} I could easily cite my teaching at the secular institution of Purdue University here. In my view, the assumptions of secularism are just as "faith-driven" as the assumptions of religion.

^{vii} As if this isn't ambitious enough, I'd like to add a fifth and final thread, the relatively unexamined assumption of secularism in our Society and our discipline. At our pre-pandemic meeting of 2019, I described how pleased I was with the many psychological manifestations of modernism and postmodernism that our Society had critically assessed and even challenged: [on screen]. But anyone who knows modernism and postmodernism would be struck immediately by the one manifestation that is missing from this list, secularism. I speculated about the reasons for this exclusion in that presentation. I pointed to many of the problems this omission has created for our work, and I even sketched some ways in which we could begin to examine, if not challenge, the secularism of psychology.

^{viii} John Maynard Keynes (Will column, 11/25/22) said the economic problem, "the struggle for subsistence," was approaching solution. Another century of growth — by around now — would mean that "for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem — how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares ... to live wisely and agreeably and well."

^{ix} All strong academic institutions, all with very different religious affiliations.

^x I'd distinguish the issue of freedom from the classical philosophical issue of free will. The latter tends to entail comparisons to various forms of determinism, while the former tends to presume the some kind of free will. For that reason, I do not discuss the free will/determinism issue, at least not explicitly. I presume that possibility (aka free will) is possible. Only a hard naturalism, which itself presumes hard determinism, actually eliminates the possibility of possibility.

^{xi} Jesus called him "Saul, Saul" in "the Hebrew tongue" in the Acts of the Apostles, when he had the vision which led to his conversion on the road to Damascus. Later, in a vision to Ananias of Damascus, "the Lord" referred to him as "Saul, of Tarsus". When Ananias came to restore his sight, he called him "Brother Saul". In Acts 13:9, Saul is called "Paul" for the first time on the island of Cyprus – much later than the time of his conversion. The author of Luke–Acts indicates that the names were interchangeable: "Saul, who also is called Paul." He refers to him as Paul through the remainder of Acts.

^{xii} Paul was a master debater and polemicist, though the ancient Jewish modes of argumentation he used make him difficult for modern readers to understand. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle/Theological-views>

^{xiii} The book of Acts depicts the leading Pharisee, [Gamaliel](#), as defending Christians (Acts 5:34).

^{xiv} There are many who would claim, including me, that Christianity is not a religion, at least in the conventional sense. In fact, one of the great observers of religions, Rene Girard, contends that Christianity undermines all cultural religions, past and present (Things Hidden..., Girard).

^{xv} Even so, the secularism of the academy rears its head in all sorts of hidden ways, providing us with covert rules that discourage even the consideration of Paul's work. It's likely secularism that leads some of you to fear that this paper will shape into some sort of sermon, as if we don't already preach our values and beliefs to one another. Well, religious preaching isn't going to happen tonight, at least not by me. Still, I'm going to take the risk this evening of breaking these implicit secular rules and attempt to demonstrate the theoretical and philosophical use of this important religious thinker. I'll argue, in fact, that Saul of Tarsus has pivotal insights to offer us in our practical understandings of personal freedom along with their social and psychological implications for our present era, especially US politics.

^{xvi} There are questions about whether Paul endorsed slavery. In his letter to Philemon he clearly wants him to accept back his runaway slave, Onesimus, without consequences. Philemon could have lawfully shot Onesimus. But Paul tries to persuade Philemon on relational grounds (Onesimus is like a son to me) that he should accept Onesimus into the family.

^{xvii} In other words, the extent to which external factors are responsible for our actions and choices is the extent to which those actions and choices aren't really free.

^{xviii} This is what most think of as "autonomy." As Christman (2020) defines it, autonomy is a condition or "capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent" (para. 1).

^{xix} The enemy status of context even extends to the point that many libertarians believe that freedom can only occur in a contextual vacuum, virtual contextlessness. For instance, no one should even be allowed to be aware of my free actions. Making public the name of large donors is considered a violation of freedom. *Law Vegas RJ lead editorial*, 9/22/22.

^{xx} Moreover, this tradition has no moral force with this form of freedom, because it doesn't claim us; we claim it, or not, depending on our choices. Indeed, some movements from the political left consider moral traditions in general to lose their force because individualist freedom implies that they never have to be affirmed. Neither the political right nor the political left believe that these contexts — government or moral traditions — have any ultimate claim on us. We have the autonomy not to choose them, because these contexts are independent of our process of choosing.

^{xxi} Many on the left consider this moral tradition a basic impediment to freedom, something that should be minimized, much like government for people on the right

^{xxii} Moral traditions are also undermined when they are viewed as instrumental to and in the service of, individual wants and desires. In fact, such traditions are often seen as chosen by rather than a guide to the individual.

^{xxiii} Social justice is a minimization pursuit for both the right and left.

^{xxiv} Even so, the disagreements has led to several intractable debates in the US, the abortion issue, for example. The abortion issue sets up a conflict of the freedom of the unborn versus a women's freedom to control her own body. Unfortunately, individualist notions of freedom seem to bring few conceptual resources for resolving this issue. The abortion debate becomes an intractable conflict between two factions who supposedly deserve their freedom and autonomy.

^{xxv} Community is obviously not ignored in a culture of individualist freedom^{xxv}. However, community is viewed as any other facet of context, both secondary to the individual and mainly an instrument of individual choices. Indeed, it's often considered to be the sum of individually chosen preferences. In fact, many Americans see democracy in this manner: democracy is the sum of voting preferences^{xxv}. Moral traditions have no essential role in this summing process. People are expected to vote their own self interest, with collections of individuals rivaling one another in power to promote their own group interest and power.^{xxv}

^{xxvi} Even in community activity the American ideal of freedom implies what the Apostle Paul calls "self-indulgence." My late father-in-law's advice typifies this individualist ideal: our duty to the community is to vote our individual wallets.

^{xxvii} Girard's work is a great example of shared being: "...metaphysical desire is projected mediate 'being' for us; it is via them that we seek to become real" (Fleming, p. 24). "There is no 'subject' that is temporally (or ontologically) antecedent to the inter subjective" (p. 36). The "self" is a "convergence point" in a field of memetic desire. Individuality, strictly speaking, doesn't exist; it is always already inter-individuality (p. 36).

^{xxviii} 9/3/22 Rohr email says that Franciscans are panentheists.

^{xxix} "I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (Philippians 4:11), so he can instruct, "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

^{xxx} Galatians (5:22-23) lists the "fruits of the spirit," this broad ethical tradition, and then claims "against such things there is no law." One way to interpret the latter quote is that no ethical tradition, especially religious, would challenge these fruits.

^{xxxi} "The book makes a case for seeing humans as ethically minded down to our core. I don't write about dna because I did not want to make it seem causal. I think we are constituted as relational beings as humans. Of course, whether one learns a good relational ethic, a mixed one, or a bad one depends on a lot of things (learning, environment, choices, etc.). But infants recognize and respond to fairness and helping before they can walk or talk. They grasp others' attention and interaction before they can grasp an object. So it is really built in there." (Fowers, personal communication, 10/14/22)

^{xxxii} I think of how civil rights activists like MLK pressed on the walls of the room (i.e., cared for the community) to see if they were budgeable

^{xxxiii} As Chris Fleming (2004) puts it, the "substantive basis" of psychological well-being and modernist morality is "what people want" (p. 141).

^{xxxiv} By moral absolutism, I mean more the rationalist tradition of ethics (e.g., Kant) where absolute principles can be derived as universals, which requires the principles to be separable from context. Some forms of moral realism, on the other hand, can unify context and choice and consider that unity as real.

^{xxxv} You might be surprised at the number of contemporary philosophers who embrace moral realism [partial list on screen]^{xxxv}. [Indeed, a recent investigation concluded that no less than a majority endorse the notion of moral realism^{xxxv}.]

^{xxxvi} To quote Charles Taylor (1989), "What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices" (p. 59).

^{xxxvii} A Case for Utopia: "We would be better off if people tried to become better, and people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off. For when everyone tries to become better off nobody is better off. But when everyone tries to become better everybody is better off. Everyone would be rich if nobody tried to become richer, and nobody would be poor if everybody tried to be the poorest. And everybody would be what they ought to be if everybody tried to what they want the other person to be" (Peter Maurin's "Easy Essays", 1933, cofounder of the Catholic Worker).

^{xxxviii} Again, in the simplest and most obvious physical terms, you can choose to jump from a two story window to exit the room, but it clearly is a bad choice compared to using the door. The realism cannot be ignored.

^{xxxix} I'll say more about this greater relational freedom later, but permit me first to correct a few misconceptions about Paul's ethical stance. Foremost perhaps, it does not rely on absolutist, contextless principles that are imposed from the "outside." Rather, the realism of his ethic emerges from the working out of good relationships. The ethical claims of fatherhood, for instance, do not stem from philosopher-formulated principles but from the Spirit of caring relationships. Caring communities may vary greatly, but they eventually learn to allow a kind of broad social ethos to prevail, what Paul calls the "fruit of the [group] Spirit." He provides a partial list of these fruits: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" [list on slide?] [This list is not an external code to be followed. Paul allows for wide variance in how these fruits might be practiced.] The point is that the possibilities and constraints of a particular community originate from the particular Spirit of the group Body.

^{xl} Forgiveness is the great thawing of all logic, reason, and worthiness. It is a melting into the mystery of God as unearned love, unmerited grace, the humility and powerlessness of a Divine Lover. (Rohr, 9/15/22 email)

^{xli} This repositions the whole role of religion. Didn't most of us think that it's all a meritocracy? I certainly did! Many religious people think that it's all a merit badge system—all achievement, accomplishment, performance, and perfection. The good people win and the bad people lose. Of course, once we cast anything as a win-lose scenario, the irony is that everybody loses. Why can't people see that competitive games are not the way to go? I'm convinced that Jesus' good news is that God's choice is always for the excluded one. Jesus learned this from his Jewish tradition: God always chooses the rejected son, the barren woman, the people enslaved in Egypt or exiled in Babylon. It's not a winner's script in the Bible—it's a loser's script. It's a loser's script where, ironically, everybody wins.

^{xlii} Author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor considers the parable of the Sower scattering seed on different types of ground. (Matthew 18–23):

"...That is my usual response to this parable. I hear it as a challenge to be different, as a call to improve my life, so that if the same parable were ever told about me it would have a happier ending, with all of the seed falling on rich, fertile soil. But there is something wrong with that reading of the parable, because if that is what it is about, then it should be called the parable of the different kinds of ground.

Taylor asks whether our familiar interpretation may miss the more dramatic message of God's radical grace: Instead, it has been known for centuries as the parable of the Sower, which means there is a chance, just a chance, that we have got it all backwards. We hear the story and think it is a story about us, but what if we are wrong? What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?

If this is really the parable of the Sower and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite new. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of his truth. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 25–26.

^{xliii} They cannot, then, join the community just to destroy or spite it or to variously misbehave.

^{xliv} Dr. Barber builds on Psalm 118:22–23, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone! This is God's work. And it is marvelous in our eyes!": The rejected must lead the revival for love and justice. The cornerstone is that part of the foundation upon which the whole building stands. And the Psalmist says, speaking metaphorically of how we view human beings in society, that it is God's intent that the stones that were once seen as unfit to be a part of the architecture—the stones that were once thrown away or kept in the quarry—have now

been called to be the most important stones. The rejected stones make the best cornerstones. The rejected stones actually make the best foundation holders. And whenever you see rejected stones becoming the focus of society, it is the Lord's doing. [2]

^{xlv} Valuing the other: The Prodigal Son,

^{xlvi} The word "respect" means "to look at a second time": Re-speculate. Re-spect. I'm afraid our first gaze at anything is always utilitarian, and it almost totally takes over after a while. (Rohr, 10/8/22)

^{xlvii} As Paul's day, the Gentile converts revealed the Pharisaism of many Jewish members.

^{xlviii} Part of that "core" is connections to the past. As Paul puts it (along with many indigenous Americans): "I'm grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience, as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. When I remember your tears, I as my ancestors did long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. I'm reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I'm sure that this faith is also inside you" (2 Timothy 1:3–5, emphasis mine).

^{xlix} Girard specifically challenges the modern Western understanding of group unity, which depends on some type of sameness, whether similar values, beliefs, or philosophies. Girard, instead, demonstrates across cultures and histories that unity depends upon distinctions: "Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinction [which do not necessarily mean hierarchical distinction]; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that give birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another's throats" (p. 43, Fleming; p. 49, VS).

^l When we are at the center of something, we easily confuse essentials with nonessentials, getting tied down by trivia, loyalty tests, and job security. Not much truth can happen there. When we live on the edge of anything, with respect and honor (and this is crucial!), we are in an auspicious and advantageous position (Rohr email).

^{li} Rohr (11/1/22) "Within this worldview, we are saved not by being privately perfect, but by being "part of the body," humble links in the great chain of history. This view echoes the biblical concept of a covenant love that was granted to the Jewish people as a whole and never just to one individual like Abraham, Noah, or David.

^{lii} Paul would obviously want to contend that some types of order and peace are better than others. He, in fact, accuses Peter of not living truthfully when he's not open [?] about the Gentiles being part of the community, Gal 1: 11? Paul, valuing and even loving the Gentiles, but should be openly honest about including the Gentiles.

^{liii} Love is the greatest of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 13)

^{liv} Paul [reconciles](#) Jewish law with Christian faith by using [Jesus'](#) words "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" (John 13:34). He states that this single commandment is a fulfillment of the entire Jewish law (Galatians 5:14).

^{lv} I know, given the same pressures and circumstances, I am capable of the same monstrous acts as any other human on this achingly beautiful planet. It is this knowledge of my own frailty that helps me find my compassion, my empathy, my similarity, and my forgiveness for the frailty and cruelty of others. (Rohr, 9/12/22)

^{lvi} It is not that the community does not see your failings and weaknesses or ignores or even condones them. They accept you with them and recognize the possibilities and constraints of them. Someone with a temper and a history of physically attacking people can be loved, forgiven, accepted, and included, but the possibility of them babysitting my children unsupervised is not ethically realistic or best.

^{lvii} When we truly and fully belong, it is natural to believe and to become. Rohr, 9/9/22 email

^{lviii} As Diana Bass puts it, "Grace begets grace..." (Rohr, 11/20/22).

^{lix} Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17 NIV

^{lx} Despite your parenthood fears, for instance, you engage in aspects of parenting that have unexpected rewards, opening up still other possibilities. The parenthood ethic, like the more general relational ethic, is not rationalist in the sense of abstract principles you're supposed to follow. It's, instead, something you find yourself doing, sometimes in spite of old habits, due to the practical nature of the group Spirit.

^{lxi} As Augustine once said, "Love and do what you will". Augustine believes you can do what you want because it's already moral. Unlike individualist freedom, where you can supposedly pick your ethic, the realist ethic of Paul and Augustine picks you, in consonance with the gracious community.

^{lxii} Augustine, Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John to the Parthians, tractate 7.8

^{lxiii} I immediately think of a recent mass shooting in an Amish community in which the shooter committed suicide. This community went to the shooter's family to ask them to remain in their community, and proceeded to love and support them emotionally and economically. (Ref?) Mark Freeman also described similar instances of welcoming the other in his book on Otherness.

^{lxiv} "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." — G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*.

^{lxv} We surrender our ego defenses and open ourselves to others in a more charitable way. Our hearts are softened.
8/15/22 Rohr