

The Splendor of Freedom in Theory and Practice: The Complementary Moral Theologies of John Paul II and Francis

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Abstract: Freedom is a central issue in *Veritatis Splendor*, with John Paul II particularly concerned about freedom's proper relationship to truth in contrast to a relativistic vision of freedom as complete license. In defending this position, John Paul II emphasizes the theoretical ideal of freedom as the abiding human capacity to do what is right, with the help of grace. This profound vision of freedom is best honored and preserved when joined in conversation with the understanding of freedom found in Francis's moral theology, which complements John Paul II's emphasis on the theoretical ideal by accounting for the challenges moral agents face in their efforts to put this ideal into practice. Recent developments in the concept of structural sin in Catholic theology help to explain how both John Paul II's and Francis's interpretations of freedom can be read in continuity with one another, yielding a more comprehensive vision of freedom that does justice to the already and not yet of Christian eschatology, ensuring that this crucial component of the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor* can continue to guide the church.

FREEDOM IS AT THE HEART OF MORAL THEOLOGY. FROM THE scriptural reflections of the Pauline Epistles, which wrestled with the constraints of sin on free will and stressed the renewal of moral agency in Christ (e.g., Romans 6–7), to Thomas Aquinas's decision to highlight the voluntariness of human actions at the outset of his moral treatise in the *Summa Theologiae* (ST I-II, q. 6, a. 1), and even to contemporary contextual theologies' efforts to lift up the agency and autonomy of the marginalized, the question of freedom is crucial to the work of the moral theologian.¹ Few were

¹ For two prominent examples of these concerns in contextual theologies, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Defining Our *Proyecto Histórico*: Mujerista Strategies for Liberation," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Readings in Moral Theology, no. 9, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (Paulist, 1996), 120–135; M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress, 2010). Notably, while freedom is always central to the work of moral theology, it is not the starting place for every moral theologian. See

surprised, then, that John Paul II's encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, prioritized freedom—and especially freedom's “essential and constitutive relationship to truth” (no. 4)—as one of its chief concerns.² An adequate evaluation of the legacy of the encyclical thus requires a careful examination of its teachings on freedom.

One valuable resource for this examination is a comparison between the encyclical's teachings on freedom and the subsequent reflections on the topic offered by John Paul II's current successor, Francis. While working in continuity with John Paul II, Francis nevertheless stresses different dimensions in his presentation of freedom and moral agency, reflecting both his own pastoral sensitivities and developments in Catholic theological ethics since 1993. By putting John Paul II and Francis in dialogue around freedom, a sharper picture of the priorities of *Veritatis Splendor* and the implications of its legacy emerges. More specifically, this comparison highlights John Paul II's commitment to developing a thorough understanding of the abstracted ideal of freedom in order to stress the full power of freedom in the moral life. This approach stands in contrast to Francis's efforts to evaluate the practical constraints on freedom experienced in the concrete particularities of ordinary life in a fallen world. Read together rather than against each other, the reflections of these two popes reveal the totality of freedom by exploring the concept both in theory and practice.

DEFENDING THE POWER OF FREEDOM: *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*'S THEORETICAL IDEAL

According to observers, there were multiple reasons spurring John Paul II to issue an encyclical on moral theology in the early 1990s, but one of the most pressing—at least according to the emphases of the encyclical itself—was a concern about the increasing cultural influence of moral relativism, a theory which suggests that moral judgments are relative to the individual and not truly universalizable.³

James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 10–14.

² In his freedom-centered analysis of *Veritatis Splendor*, Avery Dulles explained that “the rootedness of freedom in the truth has been a constant and central theme in the writings of John Paul II” (“The Truth About Freedom: A Theme from John Paul II,” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. J. A. DiNoia and Romanus Cessario [Scepter, 1999], 129).

³ For some illustrations of the various interpretations of the underlying motivations behind *Veritatis Splendor*, which ranged from a concern about the erosion of the Magisterium's teaching authority to an effort to reject the positions of specific moralists to a desire to propose a model for doing moral theology with closer connections to Scripture, see Servais Pinckaers, “An Encyclical for the Future:

This concern was not strictly cultural, as the encyclical responded to specific theological positions it described as emblematic of a relativist turn in moral theology. The encyclical explicitly critiques “*teleological ethical theories (proportionalism, consequentialism)*” (no. 75, emphasis original) as part of its challenge to relativism. Observers at the time were quick to read these labels as indictments of contemporaneous theologians’ scholarly positions, even as the recipients of this criticism insisted that the encyclical’s description did not apply to their work.⁴ This historical context is significant, because the positions rejected in *Veritatis Splendor*—whether they can be neatly attributed to individual theologians—establish some clear parameters for what it means to be in continuity with the encyclical’s teaching, a point that influences how John Paul II’s and Francis’s reflections on moral theology are read in conversation with each other.

Given the importance of continuity in Catholic teaching, it is not surprising that John Paul II would choose to use an encyclical, one of the most authoritative forms of papal writing, to respond to the threat of relativism, which opens the door to discontinuity in morality.⁵ What is striking in the text, however, is the way John Paul II links the rise of relativism back to a corresponding embrace of “an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 32).⁶ Due to this connection, freedom becomes an overarching concern for the encyclical, because disagreement about the degree to which each individual is free to determine what is right explains the disconnect between a growing moral relativism, on one hand, and the Catholic

Veritatis Splendor,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 12–17; Richard A. McCormick, “Some Early Reactions to *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Theological Studies* 55, no. 3 (1994): esp. 505–506, doi.org/10.1177/004056399405500303. For the encyclical’s explicit references to the dangers of relativism, see *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 1, 33, 48, 84, 101, 106, 112.

⁴ Russell Hittinger, “The Pope and the Theorists: The Oneness of Truth,” *Crisis* 11 (1993): 31–36, crisismagazine.com/vault/the-pope-and-the-theorists-the-oneness-of-truth; and Ralph McInerney, “Locating Right and Wrong: *Veritatis v. Muddled Moralizing*,” *Crisis* 11 (1993): 37–40, crisismagazine.com/vault/locating-right-and-wrong-veritatis-v-muddled-moralizing; Charles E. Curran, “*Veritatis Splendor*: A Revisionist Perspective,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Sheed and Ward, 1995), 233–238; Richard A. McCormick, “*Veritatis Splendor* and Moral Theology,” *America* 169, no. 13 (October 30, 1993): 8–11.

⁵ The importance of continuity can be seen in the care used to address obvious changes in moral teaching. See John T. Noonan, Jr., “Development in Moral Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (1993): 662–677, doi.org/10.1177/004056399305400404.

⁶ See also Lois Malcolm, “Freedom and Truth in *Veritatis Splendor* and the Meaning of Theonomy,” in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants Engage Pope John Paul II’s Moral Encyclicals*, ed. Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter (Eerdmans, 1998), 159.

Church's promotion of unchanging objective moral norms, on the other.⁷ In defending the latter position, John Paul II promotes a particular vision of "genuine freedom" in *Veritatis Splendor*, arguing that human freedom is most fully realized not in people's ability "to do anything they please" (no. 34), but in choosing to align one's actions with what is truly good, as revealed in God's law (no. 17).

John Paul II's account of freedom thus prioritizes the individual's unceasing ability to choose to do what God's law commands, no matter the circumstances, in order to preserve the universal objectivity of God's law (contra relativism) without undermining human freedom. Consequently, the discussion of freedom in *Veritatis Splendor* can be interpreted as an analysis of the theoretical ideal of freedom, in the Platonic sense of an ideal, or true form, which is properly "mind-independent" (i.e., not just something a thinking being creates on a whim) and therefore "immutable, timeless, unitary, . . . and knowable."⁸ To be clear, this is not to say that John Paul II was a Platonist; he was, after all, most closely associated with phenomenology, an altogether separate philosophical school. Rather than trying to place John Paul II firmly within Platonism, then, the appeal to Platonic idealism here is best understood as a heuristic and not typological category that helps illuminate the primary concerns about freedom explored in *Veritatis Splendor*.⁹

The argument for employing this heuristic is twofold. First, there is a genuine affinity between John Paul II's commitments to objectivity (certainly in a moral sense, but also in theology more broadly), which was a consistent feature of his approach to phenomenology, and the objective claims found in Platonic idealism, which stresses the unity and thus objective reality of each ideal.¹⁰ It is thus not unreasonable to explore John Paul II's thought while considering a Platonic perspective. Second, Platonic idealism is regularly defined in contradistinction to Aristotelian realism (sometimes dubbed "naturalism" or "empiricism"), reflecting a discernible debate between Plato and his student, Aristotle, on the epistemological

⁷ This notably was not a novel dispute in 1993, although the contours of the debate were still distinct at the time as relativism gained cultural influence. Dulles, "The Truth about Freedom," 129; McCormick, "Some Early Reactions," 502–503.

⁸ Tom Rockmore, "Idealism, Platonic Idealism, and the New Way of Ideas," in *Kant and Idealism* (Yale University Press, 2017), 25.

⁹ These caveats are particularly appropriate given the limits of "Platonic idealism" as a coherent typological category in philosophy (Rockmore, "Idealism," 24).

¹⁰ On objectivity as a distinguishing feature of John Paul II's philosophical commitments, see David Schindler, "Catholic Personalism up to John Paul II," in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe (Oxford University Press, 2015), 746. For objectivity and realism in Platonic idealism, see Rockmore, "Idealism," 25–27.

question of how best to understand the reality of any given thing. Offering one interpretation, Platonic idealism presumes that the fullest expression of reality is in the ideal, which exists beyond immediate evidence, and therefore promotes a contemplative process to understand reality in the theoretical realm. Aristotelian realism, meanwhile, insists that the universal reality represented in an ideal is only discernible through the particular manifestations of that concept in the real world and thus stresses empirical analysis of the world to develop an understanding of reality.¹¹ Even here the distinctions remain primarily heuristic, but they nevertheless reflect an identifiable set of assumptions about how best to proceed when a concept, like freedom, is subject to scrutiny.

The pairing of these two schools is particularly valuable in the analysis of *Veritatis Splendor*, because just as there is a defensible connection to Platonic idealism in John Paul II's concerns about objectivity and his appeals to universals, there is a case to be made that Francis adopts a more Aristotelian approach in his theology, attending first and foremost to the particular.¹² As a heuristic device, then, Platonic idealism and Aristotelian realism together provide a tool for interpreting the different emphases found in John Paul II's and Francis's reflections on freedom, showing that John Paul II is more intent on evaluating human freedom in its abstract reality while Francis relies more on the practical matter of how freedom is used in ordinary life to identify what freedom can achieve. The heuristic helps to sharpen these differences and also serves as a reminder of the search for unity, because Plato and Aristotle, despite their competing claims, had much in common and sought similar ends. However, before exploring the comparison with Francis this heuristic opens, it is crucial to evaluate John Paul II's vision of freedom in *Veritatis Splendor* on its own terms.

In a careful exegesis of *Veritatis Splendor*, the Lutheran systematic theologian Lois Malcolm has argued that there are fundamentally three features to the text's explication of freedom: freedom's inherent orientation to truth, freedom's expression in conscience, and

¹¹ For one account of these distinctions and their implications, see Duane H. D. Roller, "Science and the Fine Arts: Reflections of Platonic Idealism and of Aristotelian Naturalism," *Leonardo* 13, no. 3 (1980): 192–194, doi.org/10.2307/1577816.

¹² Analysis of Francis's implicit Aristotelianism is still underdeveloped in theological scholarship, but for two illustrations exploring the links with Aristotle in Francis's thought, see Yaakov Mascetti, "The 'Dictatorship of Relativism' Revisited: Platonism vs. Pneumatology in the Vatican," *Common Knowledge* 24, no. 2 (2018): doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-4362313; and Conor M. Kelly, "Pope Francis: Virtue Ethicist?," in *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope*, ed. Conor M. Kelly and Kristin E. Heyer (Georgetown University Press, 2024), 52.

freedom's impact on the self-determination of the personal moral agent.¹³ This is a succinct summary of the encyclical's most explicit discussion of freedom found in the letter's second chapter and encompassing three sections titled, "Freedom and Law" (nos. 35–53), "Conscience and Truth" (nos. 54–64), and "Fundamental Choice and Specific Kinds of Behavior" (nos. 65–70). The real significance of these different points, however, lies not in what any one of these features reveals about freedom in isolation but in the way the three work together to convey John Paul II's more fundamental vision of human freedom as a whole. Read in this way, the central thread uniting the different features of freedom presented in *Veritatis Splendor* is an underlying argument that freedom remains ever at the service of objective morality. This interpretation not only makes sense of the three explicit elements of freedom identified in Malcolm's analysis but also accounts for the larger structure of the encyclical, which introduces its discussion of freedom (in chapter two) "sandwiched between two chapters presenting an ascetical view of Christian life."¹⁴

The essential link between freedom and objective morality is easiest to see in the first section of chapter two, which explores freedom's relationship with truth. Stressing that the determination of good and evil lies with God, not humans (no. 35), John Paul II proclaims, "God's plan poses no threat to man's genuine freedom; on the contrary, the acceptance of God's plan is the only way to affirm that freedom" (no. 45). For John Paul II, then, freedom is less the ability to choose between as many options as possible and more the power to choose to pursue the good and do what is right. Scholars sometimes describe this approach as a vision of "freedom for excellence," or the ability to pursue the fullness of flourishing without constraints that would divert one's desires, intention, or will away from their proper telos.¹⁵ This vision also creates a compelling alignment with Augustine's view of freedom, which locates the fullness of freedom in liberation from slavery to sin that constitutes

¹³ Malcolm, "Freedom and Truth," 166.

¹⁴ John J. O'Keefe, "No Place for Failure? Augustinian Reflections on *Veritatis Splendor*," in Allsopp and O'Keefe, *American Responses*, 19. In fairness, Malcolm's account is not oblivious to the ways the vision of freedom in chapter two interacts with other portions of the text, but she mainly uses the discussion of asceticism—and especially martyrdom—to explain a tension between a "natural law" account of freedom and a "personalist" account in *Veritatis Splendor*. I maintain, however, that the structure of the encyclical and its argument makes martyrdom a crucial hermeneutic for interpreting freedom and not just one feature among many. See Malcolm, "Freedom and Truth," 161–162, 174.

¹⁵ Servais Pinckaers, "An Encyclical for the Future," 39. For more on the category, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble (The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 354–378.

the human condition after the Fall and undermines one's ability to pursue what is good.¹⁶ In these accounts, humans are free when they are not simply self-determining—the decision to do what is wrong is actually a corruption of human freedom that misuses this gift—but when their self-determination is properly ordered to achieving the good.¹⁷

Notably, for John Paul II, the good at which freedom is supposed to aim truly is singular. Following Jesus's guidance in his response to the rich young man in Matthew 19—the scriptural text framing *Veritatis Splendor*—John Paul II stresses that “*to ask about the good, in fact, ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness*” (no. 9, emphasis original). On this basis, a clear link between freedom and universal morality emerges, as the God whom Christians identify as one serves as the sole source of moral truth, setting a standard that is both objective and universal in stark contradistinction to moral relativism. Nowhere is this opposition with relativism clearer than in John Paul II's discussion of the natural law, which he presents, in good Thomistic fashion, “as the human expression of God's eternal law” (no. 43).¹⁸

For John Paul II, the natural law explains how human reason can know what God commands, creating a universal way of accessing the singular, objective moral truth all humans are supposed to use their freedom to pursue. This mechanism, specifically as interpreted through the richly theological vision of the natural law found in the work of Thomas Aquinas (see no. 44), allows John Paul II to state that the “positive precepts” of the natural law—the norms that explain what humans *should do* to pursue the good—“are universally binding; they are ‘unchanging,’” and that the “*negative precepts*” of the natural law—the norms that articulate what one *must not do* in order to avoid undermining the good by choosing evil—“are universally valid. They oblige each and every individual, always and in every circumstance” (no. 52, emphases original). There is thus a consistent vision of what the good requires common to all humans and which, significantly, can also be known by all humans via the natural law. More importantly,

¹⁶ O'Keefe, “No Place for Failure?,” 27. For more on the Augustinian conception of freedom, see Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 59–106.

¹⁷ Dulles makes this point by presenting a contrast between the “lower level” freedom found in the “absence of physical constraint” and the “higher level” freedom that also includes the “absence of psychological compulsion.” From this perspective, “if we reject the true good, we inevitably yield to the passions and instincts of our lower nature and thereby undermine our authentic freedom” (“The Truth about Freedom,” 130, 132).

¹⁸ See also ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2, cited in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 43, n. 82.

there is simultaneously a definitive set of rules humans must not violate, establishing a truly objective standard for morality.

This vision for objective morality, accessible through the natural law, puts a pivotal parameter on human freedom. There are, according to this vision, certain things the human person must not use their freedom to choose. In a world where freedom is frequently (mis)understood as license, this claim appears to represent an arbitrary constraint on freedom. John Paul II, though, quickly dismisses this interpretation as flawed by insisting, “The natural law . . . does not allow for any division between freedom and nature. Indeed, these two realities are harmoniously bound together, and each is intimately linked to the other” (no. 50). In his evaluation, the “nature” behind the natural law is the “proper and primordial . . . ‘nature of the human person’” (no. 50). The precepts of the natural law thus orient the human person to the fullness of their flourishing *as a human being*, allowing each person to become what they are meant to be in the order of creation (see nos. 38–41). The natural law’s negative norms are thus not a despotic restriction on freedom, but a guardrail that helps direct human freedom to its fullest expression, proactively forestalling detours down the pathways that lead to sin so that each moral agent can follow the road of life to its ultimate destination of union with God.

As discussed so far, then, John Paul II’s presentation of freedom in *Veritatis Splendor* includes two essential claims: freedom is oriented to the human person’s flourishing, and there are objective standards that constitute this flourishing and thereby establish limits for how freedom can be properly exercised to achieve its proper end. John Paul II advances additional corollary claims about freedom in the encyclical, including the notion that conscience has a primary role in helping the moral agent discern what God’s objective vision for flourishing demands in particular situations (nos. 54, 61) and the claim that a person’s individual choices in those particular situations have a formative effect on the person’s very being, to the point of defining their standing before God (nos. 65–67). These claims reflect the second and third features Malcolm identified in her overview of John Paul II’s account of freedom, but it is worth noting that they remain corollary claims, because they are at the service of John Paul II’s more fundamental assertion that freedom is ordered to flourishing and arrives at this end by observing objective moral norms. Significantly, while freedom can follow this pathway to flourishing by actively working to embody the prescriptive norms that encourage good behaviors (positive moral precepts), the encyclical puts its strongest onus on the obligation to steadfastly adhere to “the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behavior as intrinsically evil” because these “do not allow for any

legitimate exception” (no. 67). The interrelationship of these two obligations deserves further discussion because this is both a nuanced and pivotal point in the encyclical that elucidates key dimensions of John Paul II’s presentation of human freedom.

To begin, while there is a greater stress on obedience to the negative moral norms in *Veritatis Splendor*, this does not mean that the negative precepts have greater primacy than positive ones in the moral life. Indeed, the encyclical insists, “The fact that only the negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances does not mean that in the moral life prohibitions are more important than the obligation to do good indicated by the positive commandments” (no. 52). The encyclical attends more fully to the negative moral norms, however, precisely because they speak to the issue of universality and moral objectivity more fully. By their very nature, the positive precepts constantly call for more because they promote a closer union with God. There is no “higher limit” to this aim (no. 52), no threshold at which one is suddenly “close enough” to God that all attempts at progress can be abandoned. Consequently, exactly what it means to follow the positive precepts is a question that requires discernment in practice and admits variation to account for differences in circumstance (no. 67). The positive precepts therefore are not the most useful part of the moral law to which one could appeal when building an argument about moral objectivity to counteract the dangers of relativism, both across the Catholic theological landscape and in the broader culture. That honor falls on the precepts that explicate the “kinds of behavior which can never, in any situation, be a proper response” to the demands of the moral life. Thus, the negative moral norms receive more attention in *Veritatis Splendor* as a means of defending moral objectivity in the face of relativism.

In the encyclical’s argument, the most important aspect of the negative precepts is their exceptionless nature. This is evident when examining how the letter responds to the “teleological ethical theories” it associates with relativism. Offering a detailed analysis of this section of the text, the theological ethicist James Gaffney notes that “the crucial issue for the pope seems therefore to be the admission of at least the possibility of formulating negative moral norms that admit absolutely no exceptions.”¹⁹ Further comparing the generic criticism of consequentialism and proportionalism in the encyclical with the actual positions of the Catholic theologians who would self-identify with at least one of these schools, however, Gaffney explains that a total denial of the *possibility* of exceptionless moral norms was not a genuine position of Catholic moralists at the time. As a result, he

¹⁹ James Gaffney, “The Pope on Proportionalism,” in Allsopp and O’Keefe, *American Responses*, 63.

concludes—not unreasonably—that the real issue in this instance is ultimately “the denial that certain familiar and traditional moral prohibitions, as they are usually stated, admit no exceptions.”²⁰ In effect, the encyclical’s discussion of negative moral norms is meant to protect both the category of “intrinsically evil acts” and its use as a tool to proscribe specific actions in all circumstances (nos. 79–83).²¹

The thrust of this argument and the contours of the debate it enters are both significant for clarifying John Paul II’s assertions about freedom. Because John Paul II works to preserve the category of intrinsic evil as a means of solidifying the foundation of exceptionless moral norms in the face of relativism, *Veritatis Splendor* presumes not simply that intrinsically evil acts exist but also that they are knowable as such. Indeed, the debate with the theories the encyclical criticizes centers on the clarity with which specific intrinsic evils can be identified, and *Veritatis Splendor* maintains that the Catholic tradition—particularly through the guidance of the Magisterium—has the tools to define these acts. The relevant question for human freedom, then, is not how to exercise freedom in the discernment of whether a particular action constitutes an intrinsic evil but rather how to act freely once one has realized that an exceptionless prohibition is in force. How can one use their freedom to pursue the moral good and flourish when confronting something they fundamentally must not do? With its more Platonic attention to the ideal of freedom, *Veritatis Splendor* finds a compelling answer in martyrdom, arguing that while “it is always possible that man, as the result of coercion or other circumstances, can be hindered from doing certain good actions . . . he can never be hindered from not doing certain actions, especially if he is prepared to die rather than to do evil” (no. 52).

Ultimately, the turn to the witness of the martyrs in chapter three of *Veritatis Splendor* represents a logical extension of the encyclical’s presentation of freedom’s orientation to flourishing and its alignment with absolute moral prohibitions. More specifically, martyrdom highlights that in the Catholic understanding of theological anthro-

²⁰ Gaffney, “The Pope on Proportionalism,” 64.

²¹ Gaffney is not alone in suggesting that a defense of the category of intrinsically evil acts is at the heart of the encyclical’s claims. See Joseph A. Selling, “The Context and the Arguments of *Veritatis Splendor*,” in *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions Made by Veritatis Splendor*, ed. Joseph A. Selling and Jan Jans (Eerdmans, 1995), 49; and Martin Rhonheimer, “Intrinsically Evil Acts and the Moral Viewpoint: Clarifying a Central Teaching of *Veritatis Splendor*,” in DiNoia and Cessario, *The Splendor of Truth*, 161–193. Additionally, for one productive account of how the category is employed in *Veritatis Splendor* vis-à-vis the broader Catholic moral tradition, see Jean Porter, “The Moral Act in *Veritatis Splendor* and in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*: A Comparative Analysis,” in Allsopp and O’Keefe, *American Responses*, 278–295.

pology, humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God means that flourishing is exemplified not in self-preservation but through sacrifice. As the Second Vatican Council proclaimed, "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24). John Paul II builds on this conviction to provide a Christological description of freedom's fullest expression in flourishing. "*The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom*," the pope explains; "*he lives it fully in the total gift of himself*" (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 85, emphasis original). This gift of self is understood quite literally, in Christ's very "crucified flesh," which for John Paul II "reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth" because it shows Christ's willingness to suffer the ultimate price for his "total obedience to the will of God" (no. 87). The martyrs bear witness to this same fullness of freedom and flourishing. "Martyrdom is also the exaltation of a person's perfect 'humanity' and of true 'life,'" John Paul II proclaims, because "martyrdom, accepted as an affirmation of the inviolability of the moral order, bears witness both to the holiness of God's law and to the inviolability of the personal dignity of man, created in the image and likeness of God" (no. 92). In this manner, martyrdom reiterates that human freedom must be aligned with the objective requirements of the moral law and affirms "the absoluteness of the moral order" (no. 91), by showing that humans can always use their freedom to observe the demands of that moral order, even when faced with extreme costs for doing so.

That John Paul II completes his discussion of freedom with a reflection on martyrdom is no accident. His account of freedom's relationship to human flourishing and sense of the objective nature of that flourishing as defined by God's commandments and contained in the precepts of the natural law—particularly exceptionless negative norms—demands the martyrs' witness. Without their sacrifices, a logical inconsistency in John Paul II's appeals to objectivity emerges, as one could rightly question whether the human person would always be capable of using their freedom to honor the demands of the objective moral order. By presenting Christ's crucifixion as the highest example of freedom and appealing to the martyrs to show that Christ's example is not unattainable for the rest of humanity, John Paul II has a rational response to this potential inconsistency. Even when it appears that there are no good options left, one at the very least remains free to refuse to violate the absolute norms that set the boundaries for what one must not do, even if the cost is death. Or, as John Paul II puts in somewhat understated terms, "Certainly, maintaining a harmony between freedom and truth occasionally demands uncommon sacrifices, and must be won at a high price: it can even involve martyrdom" (no. 102).

While John Paul II argues that martyrdom is a form of ultimate “witness to moral truth . . . to which relatively few people are called” (no. 93), he nevertheless stresses that all Christians are, in fact, called to share in Christ’s model of total self-gift displayed on the cross (no. 85). Similarly, he argues that “there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice” (no. 93). As a result, the *possibility* of martyrdom is decisive for John Paul II’s account of freedom, allowing him to maintain that human freedom never loses its capacity to remain in alignment with the will of God, the objective standard of morality. Recalling the Platonic heuristic, what John Paul II is most keen to preserve is the theoretical ideal of freedom as the ability of the moral agent to choose the good. By establishing martyrdom as the pinnacle of human freedom, John Paul II can assert that this theoretical capacity remains an option at all times, for even when one does not actually give their life for the objective moral truth, their freedom is preserved by the simple fact that they could.

Importantly, two nuances are necessary to yield a full picture of John Paul II’s conception of freedom. First, John Paul II does not present the theoretical ideal of freedom as a simple achievement of the human will; grace is a requisite component. From the very beginning of the encyclical, the pope notes that the necessity of grace for the moral life is one of the most important conclusions supported by the account of the rich young man in Matthew 19 (nos. 17, 21–24). He then doubles down on this point when discussing the witness of the martyrs, arguing that the call “to a sometimes heroic commitment” is encountered “with the grace of God invoked in prayer” (no. 94). His ultimate point is that the observance of God’s commands is never easy—hence, again, the paradigm of martyrdom—but the theoretical ideal of freedom remains and God’s grace makes it possible to exert this capacity to follow the law (no. 103).²²

Second, John Paul II is aware that moral agents often confront constraints in their efforts to put the power of their theoretical freedom into practice in the real world. The most obvious constraints are ignorance (no. 70) and concupiscence (no. 86) which, respectively, can make it difficult to know the right thing to do and challenging to do the right thing once it is known. At the same time, John Paul II also acknowledges larger external forces, including “the enormously complex and conflict-filled situations present in the moral life of individuals and society today” (no. 95), that pose obstacles for anyone seeking to use their freedom to observe the objective moral law. He

²² For more on the way *Veritatis Splendor* builds on Jesus’s conversation with the rich young man to draw out the necessity of grace in support of the demands of the moral life, see Pinckaers, “An Encyclical for the Future,” 34–37.

similarly accepts the insights of “a number of disciplines, grouped under the name of the ‘behavioral sciences,’ [which] have rightly drawn attention to the many kinds of psychological and social conditioning which influence the exercise of freedom” (no. 33), suggesting an awareness of the way external pressures, and not just internal obstacles like ignorance and concupiscence, can condition human freedom. What he refuses to abide, however, is the notion that these constraints erode that freedom. Given his absolutization of freedom in its theoretical ideal, John Paul II rejects the claim that any of these constraints result in a determinism that would force someone to choose to act against the demands of the moral order (no. 33) or somehow make those norms obsolete for a particular individual (no. 81). He can accept, in a claim that has clear resonance across the Catholic moral tradition, that these internal and external forces might mitigate subjective culpability, but they will never, in his estimation, shift the demands of the moral law itself, which remain objective and universal (nos. 63, 81–82, 95).²³ Freedom, at least at the theoretical level, always persists.

Even with these nuances, John Paul II’s primary emphasis on the theoretical ideal of freedom remains. The fundamental vision of freedom that emerges from *Veritatis Splendor* is thus a capability that, as a result of grace, every human being preserves even in the face of the strongest countervailing forces. This vision is valuable for its clear defense of the dignity of the human person, who always and everywhere retains the possibility of honoring the demands of God’s law. This approach likewise provides a staunch defense of moral objectivity, justifying the claim that morality is not a relativistic code that shifts with changing circumstances but rooted in a universal vision of the good that applies to all people in all times and places. Helpfully, the nuances to John Paul II’s vision of freedom also underscore the role of grace in the moral life, with his acknowledgment of external and internal constraints confirming both the necessity of grace and its transformative power.

Despite these genuine assets, John Paul II’s decision to emphasize the theoretical ideal of freedom also presents some liabilities for those searching for a complete understanding of human freedom. Chief among them is the way the idealization of freedom’s absolute power in theory can seem at odds with the human experience of feeling the limited power of one’s own agency, particularly in a fallen world. One patristic theologian, John J. O’Keefe, has articulated this liability in Augustinian terms, arguing that while the encyclical clearly embraces Augustine’s account of moral freedom as fundamentally freedom

²³ For more on the role of these claims in the broader theological tradition, see *Catechism*, no. 1735; ST I-II, q. 6, a. 8; q. 18, a. 10.

from sin, it nevertheless fails to appreciate the ways Augustine's eschatology made this form of freedom inherently incomplete in this life.²⁴ Put another way, one might say John Paul II's emphasis on the theoretical ideal of freedom puts too much stress on the "already" to the detriment of the "not yet" in Christianity's eschatological convictions. O'Keefe's assessment is not out of place, as one can see a similar trend in other areas of John Paul II's moral theology. Consider his work in sexual ethics, for example, where his influential theology of the body has faced criticism for an overly optimistic view of the capacities of married couples and insufficient attention to the breadth of real-life human experiences of love and sexuality.²⁵ There is, of course, an acknowledgment of fallenness in John Paul II's work—his theology of the body notes the dangers of lust, for instance, and *Veritatis Splendor* accounts for the "weakness" of concupiscence noted above. Acknowledgment in the abstract, however, is not the same as dealing with the pervasiveness of this fallen nature and its effects, which John Paul II is at times too quick to dismiss. One result of this insufficient attentiveness to the fallenness of the world is a potential disconnect between John Paul II's staunch, and necessary, emphasis on the theoretical ideal of freedom, and the limitations this freedom encounters in real life. Helpfully, this fallenness is a point Pope Francis seems keen to recognize and address in his descriptions of freedom, making his contributions to the theology of freedom a vital complement to John Paul II's reflections in *Veritatis Splendor*.

ACCOUNTING FOR CONSTRAINTS ON FREEDOM: FRANCIS'S PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Much, of course, has been made of the distance between the theologies of John Paul II and Francis, but for all the perceived conflict, one cannot deny that Francis, at least in his explicit statements, adamantly insists that he views his pontificate in continuity with his predecessors.²⁶ For example, in a letter to a

²⁴ O'Keefe, "No Place for Failure?," 17, 23, 27.

²⁵ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and Joseph Coray (Liturgical Press, 2011), 269–288; Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body': John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," *Commonweal* 128, no. 2 (January 26, 2001): 12–13, 14, 15–16, www.commonwealmagazine.org/disembodied-theology-body.

²⁶ The most famous illustration of allegations about Francis's departure from the teachings of John Paul II is the *Dubia* submitted by four cardinals in late 2016 to question the interpretation of teachings found in *Amoris Laetitia*. For the text of the *Dubia* as well as a defense of a greater continuity between John Paul II and Francis, see James Bretzke, "*Responsum ad Dubia*: Harmonizing *Veritatis Splendor* and

Catholic author preparing a book about *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis insisted that the teaching in the exhortation emerges from “the magisterial hermeneutic of the Church, always in continuity (without ruptures), yet always maturing.”²⁷ Taking Francis at his word, this continuity challenges the church to engage both Francis and the tradition more fully, militating against reductionistic readings that put the two in opposition and instead inviting an analysis that must reconcile any superficial disconnect with a deeper appreciation of the shared concerns that unite even Francis’s most dramatic claims with the tradition preceding him.

Of course, not all scholars are ready to read Francis with this hermeneutic of continuity. Some wish to stress a dramatic departure in Francis’s theology, either as a rationale for condemning his teachings as an inauthentic exercise of magisterial authority or an argument for inaugurating more dramatic changes across the Catholic Church.²⁸ I believe a reading that presumes continuity while acknowledging the possibility for development is preferable, however, for two reasons. First, this is not only how Francis presents his own teaching but also how the Catholic Church envisions the broader relationship between popes.²⁹ Presuming continuity thus offers a decidedly Catholic way of reading the papal magisterium in general, not just for this specific pontificate. Second, in the particular case of this pontificate, the search for continuity amidst any development helps to make sense of what Francis is doing because it brings certain interpretations to the forefront more readily. This is not insignificant, because Francis’s theological style is much more pastoral than systematic, leaving room for ambiguity and heightening the need for

Amoris Laetitia through a Conscience-Informed Casuistry,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 15, no. 1 (2018): doi.org/10.5840/jcathsoc201815111; for other theologians criticizing potential discontinuities between Francis and John Paul II, see John Finnis and Germain Grisez, “The Misuse of *Amoris Laetitia* to Support Errors Against the Catholic Faith,” *Catholic Culture*, November 21, 2016, www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11463; Nicholas J. Healy, “Interpreting Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia* in Light of the Incarnation,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 2 (2021): 144–159, jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/25767.

²⁷ Francis, “Preface,” in Stephen Walford, *Pope Francis, the Family, and Divorce: In Defense of Truth and Mercy* (Paulist, 2018), xi.

²⁸ Richard A. Spinello, “*Amoris Laetitia*: A Ticking Moral Time Bomb,” *Crisis*, June 8, 2022, crisismagazine.com/opinion/amoris-laetitia-a-ticking-moral-time-bomb; Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, “*Amoris Laetitia*: Has Anything Changed?,” *Asian Horizons* 11, no. 1 (2017): 62–74; Emily Reimer-Barry, “*Amoris Laetitia* at Five,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 115–122, doi.org/10.1177/00405639211070199.

²⁹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 77.

interpretive analyses.³⁰ Continuity can help with this interpretive task, often yielding insights that might otherwise be overlooked.³¹

On the specific matter of Francis's account of freedom there is a particular type of continuity at work. Here, the continuity is less about extending or expanding what has already been said and more about adding a complementary perspective that, together with those previous reflections, can produce a more complete picture of freedom. The complements largely emerge due to Francis's pastoral instincts, which give him a distinct perspective on the challenges that arise when the faithful try to put the theoretical ideal of freedom championed by John Paul II into practice in their own lives. Following the heuristic mentioned earlier, Francis embodies a more Aristotelian approach that gives primary attention to the concrete particulars of the intersections between the theoretical potency of freedom and the constraining forces of a world marred by sin. Consequently, Francis evaluates freedom with a different emphasis than the one employed by John Paul II, prodding the church toward a more complete vision of freedom that can build on the strengths of the model found in *Veritatis Splendor* to help more people identify the genuine freedom championed by John Paul II as a viable capacity in their lives.

The first thing to note about Francis's reflections on freedom is that they are not nearly as systematic as John Paul II's. Francis has not authored an entire encyclical on moral theology in which he expounds upon the theme of human freedom. He has, however, dealt with the question consistently throughout his pontificate, but one must read through multiple texts to appreciate the content of his claims about freedom. One implication of these different teaching styles is that exploring the theme of freedom in John Paul II and Francis is not strictly an "apples to apples" project. Whereas *Veritatis Splendor*, as a single document, offers a relatively comprehensive account of John Paul II's view of human freedom, Francis's views on the same topic must be drawn out of disparate texts crafted for different audiences and distinct purposes and representing varied levels of authority. This is not inherently a problem, but it bears acknowledging that the process of identifying Francis's contributions to the question of

³⁰ For one discussion of how this unsystematic approach plays out in ethics, see Conor M. Kelly and Kristin E. Heyer, "Introduction," in Kelly and Heyer, *Moral Vision of Pope Francis*, 3–4.

³¹ Elsewhere, for instance, I have argued that this hermeneutic of continuity reveals ways that Francis's teachings on the specific topic of the theology of the family manifest not an invitation to disruption but rather a call to a fuller embrace of impulses found in John Paul II's pontificate. Conor M. Kelly, "From John Paul II to Francis: The Widening Pastoral Trajectory of the Catholic Theology of Family," in *Alegria et Misericórdia: A teologia do Papa Francisco para as famílias*, ed. Miguel Almeida (Frente e Verso, 2020), 133–156.

freedom requires more constructive analysis and is thus inevitably open to more interpretation.

When embarking on this constructive project, one of the most important points to emerge is the number of overlapping concerns Francis shares with John Paul II. Francis endorses the vision of Christian freedom as a freedom from sin that allows the human person to pursue the fullness of their flourishing (*Christus Vivit*, nos. 119–123). Consequently, he too insists that freedom is only fully realized when exercised in accordance with God’s plans (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 32). Indeed, with words that would not have been out of place in *Veritatis Splendor*, Francis argued in his first Apostolic Exhortation that “some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 171). Furthermore, just like John Paul II, Francis pinpoints the roots of this erroneous conflation of “true freedom” (no. 171) with complete license in the loss of moral objectivity and the rise of an individualistic moral relativism. “Ultimately,” he writes, “it is easy nowadays to confuse genuine freedom with the idea that each individual can act arbitrarily, as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 34; see also *Laudato Si’*, no. 6).

In crucial ways, then, Francis embraces the theoretical ideal of freedom championed by John Paul II. He accepts that freedom is properly exercised in accordance with God’s will and rejects the idea that the constraints of the moral law are somehow a restriction on freedom. Notably, Francis even endorses John Paul II’s fundamental claim that this theoretical ideal of freedom always remains a possibility in the moral life, allowing one to honor the demands of the moral law at all times. In reflecting on the damage humanity’s misuse of freedom has wrought in *Laudato Si’*, for instance, Francis insists, “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom” (no. 205). Like John Paul II, he also stresses that grace is the requisite ingredient that facilitates this transformation. In *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Francis cites the Argentinian theologian Lucio Gera to underscore that “our freedom is a grace” (no. 55) and explain that the human person’s ability to use their freedom to transform themselves is properly not an independent act of the person but a form of cooperation in the work of God (nos. 52–56). Despite these clear alignments, however, the shared recognition of the necessity of grace in empowering human freedom is also the point at which Francis’s account of freedom begins to depart

from John Paul II's, introducing new insights that sharpen John Paul II's theoretical account of freedom and make it approachable for the faithful in a new way.

There are, in essence, two key developments Francis adds to John Paul II's account of freedom, both of which invite deeper reflections on the practical implications of the freedom *Veritatis Splendor* presents in more theoretical terms. Significantly, both developments reflect renewed attention to the impact of the fallen state of the world on human agency, offering a response to the overly sanguine eschatology that at times influences John Paul II's promotion of a more Platonic ideal of freedom. In keeping with that heuristic framing, Francis's insights on these matters emerge from his keener attention to the particular, an Aristotelian trait that has been a common thread across Francis's theological reflections and reflects his pastoral, rather than academic, background.³²

The first development is Francis's insistence that the particulars matter in the moral life, leading to the notion that one crucial exercise of freedom is to determine how to meet the demands of the moral law in the concrete contexts of a person's own life. Of course, John Paul II hardly opposed this idea. In *Veritatis Splendor* he stressed, for instance, that the positive precepts of the natural law "are applied to particular acts through the judgment of conscience" (no. 52) and championed the traditional description of the work of conscience itself as "the application of the law to a particular case" (no. 59). Francis embraces the same principles but suggests that their application extends more broadly than John Paul II's presentation of human freedom would seem to imply. There is a difference in degree alongside an agreement in kind.

Consider the most prominent example of the appeal to the particular in Francis's moral theology, the question of the pastoral response to couples in "irregular" situations explored in chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* (nos. 291–312). While the exact nature and significance of *Amoris Laetitia*'s "solution" to the specific question of communion for the divorced and remarried is open to interpretation, as ongoing scholarly disputes demonstrate, one point is very clear: the exhortation creates room for a plurality of answers, presuming that the proper decision can and will vary according to the particulars of different couples' circumstances.³³ Stressing "the immense variety of concrete

³² Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Moral Theology of Pope Francis: Contextual, Collaborative, Charitable, and Not Always Clear," in Kelly and Heyer, *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis*, 16–20.

³³ On the debated interpretations, see, for instance, Matthew Levering, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context* (Ignatius, 2019); James F. Keenan, "Receiving *Amoris Laetitia*," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2017): 193–212,

situations” in which couples find themselves, Francis rejects the articulation of “a new set of general rules . . . applicable to all cases” and instead offers “a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases” (no. 300). Should this process yield different outcomes for different couples, Francis maintains that such plurality will not amount to “any kind of relativism,” because “to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being” (no. 307). Instead, it reflects “a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love” (no. 312), which accepts that “a general law or rule” in isolation “is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being” (no. 304). For Francis, there is good to be found in giving moral agents the freedom to discern their response to God.

In significant ways, Francis’s emphasis on the particular and his corresponding tolerance for plurality embodies a willingness to take the fallenness of the human condition seriously. He resists the pursuit of constant uniformity and absolute certainty because he does not want the narrow confines of humanity’s finite, creaturely understanding to limit the “unruly freedom” of the infinite God (*Evangeliu Gaudium*, no. 22). “By thinking that everything is black and white,” he cautions, “we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305). Thus, in his first major interview, Francis articulated his conviction that “if one has all the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself.”³⁴ Counteracting this temptation, Francis promotes freedom for discernment and accepts the corollary possibility of ambiguity as a corrective to the arrogance that haunts humanity’s fallen condition, ensuring that no one presumes to define the will of God in advance.

This position neither requires nor implies a rejection of any of John Paul II’s claims about the universal applicability of moral norms (as explored in more detail below), but it does represent a shift in emphasis away from the identification of the norm and toward the use of freedom to discern its applicability in particular circumstances. One way to recognize the shift is to consider how Francis’s guidelines for

doi.org/10.1177/0040563916681995; Gerhard L. Müller, “What Can We Expect from the Family?,” trans. Matthew Sherry, *Chiesa*, April 5, 2016, chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351294bdc4.html?eng=y.

³⁴ Francis in Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America* 209, no. 8 (September 30, 2013), 30, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis.

accompanying divorced and remarried couples compare to John Paul II's treatment of the same issue. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II proposed that divorced and remarried couples who "for serious reasons . . . cannot satisfy the obligation to separate" could be readmitted to the Eucharist under certain conditions, which he then explicated in detail: when they "live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples" (no. 84). In *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis likewise argues that divorced and remarried couples who might be "in an objective situation of sin" can nevertheless "also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end," including, according to a now famous footnote, "in certain cases . . . the help of the sacraments" (no. 305n351). While some have argued that these statements are merely references to John Paul II's original solution, Francis himself has indicated that the resolution in *Amoris Laetitia* is not so narrowly confined.³⁵ Regardless of the interpretation, the mere fact of this disagreement demonstrates the larger point, which is that Francis has not outlined one specific remedy in the same way John Paul II did in *Familiaris Consortio*. Whereas John Paul II took pains to articulate the path forward in order to help steer the freedom of moral agents toward its proper end in these matters, Francis moved away from such specificity entirely, preferring instead to encourage moral agents to exercise their freedom in the work of discernment.

To appreciate how these distinct emphases can be complementary rather than contradictory, consider again the matter of negative precepts and exceptionless moral norms. John Paul II closely connected these categories with the notion of intrinsic evil and stressed the clarity with which certain actions could be universally prohibited based on the object of the act (*Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 79–80). Francis has given far less attention to the category of intrinsically evil acts, but he certainly accepts the notion. Indeed, the one reference to the idea in his encyclicals to date occurs in a quotation from *Veritatis Splendor* offered as part of a rejection of relativism (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 209, quoting *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 96). Francis's own writings, meanwhile, contain emphatic condemnations of various immoral behaviors, from "unbridled consumerism" in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 60) to environmental degradation in *Laudato Si'* and the death penalty

³⁵ Angel Perez-Lopez, "Veritatis Splendor and Amoris Laetitia: Neither Lamented nor Celebrated Discontinuity," *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 4 (2018): 1183–1214, doi.org/10.1353/nov.2018.0044; Gerald O'Collins, "The Joy of Love (*Amoris Laetitia*): The Papal Exhortation in Its Context," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2016): 918–919, doi.org/10.1177/0040563916666823; Andrea Tornielli, "Pope Francis on the Correct Interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*," *La Stampa*, September 12, 2016, www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2016/09/12/news/pope-francis-on-the-correct-interpretation-of-the-amoris-laetitia-br-1.34803710/.

in *Fratelli Tutti* (nos. 263–270). These and similar judgments show that Francis is not averse to the kind of clarity John Paul II sought to emphasize in his discussion of intrinsic evil and universal moral norms. By giving less weight to general categories, however, Francis presents these indictments as particular conclusions rather than abstract norms. Thus, the rejection of capital punishment hinges both on the observation that “the death penalty is inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 263), signaling an evaluation that, in a more Aristotelian fashion, reflects an understanding born of a particular time and place. The implication for freedom is that moral agents must exercise their freedom not only in determining what to do after a norm has been identified—the point at which John Paul II’s consideration of martyrdom became so important—but also in deciding which norm truly applies. In effect, John Paul II’s and Francis’s distinct approaches to freedom can be merged sequentially: Francis stresses freedom’s responsibility to discern whether an intrinsic evil is involved and define the relevant norm in a given situation, and John Paul II stresses freedom’s power to adhere to the norm once defined.

If the first development in Francis’s analysis of freedom accounts for the epistemic effects of the Fall, by tolerating plurality and ambiguity as a hedge against false certitude about the ineffable ways of God, the second development attends to the fallen nature of the world more broadly. Reflecting the same Aristotelian impulse that spawned his attention to particularity in discernment, Francis is much quicker than John Paul II to take the impact of worldly constraints on freedom into account and reshape the discussion about the shift from the theoretical ideal of freedom to its practical embodiment in real life accordingly. Whereas John Paul II was willing to acknowledge that there can indeed be external (and internal) influences on the moral agent that would impact their *perceived* degree of freedom (see again *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 33), he appealed to the witness of martyrs to insist that the agent’s actual freedom—at the level of its Platonic ideal—can never be diminished.

Francis, on the other hand, in his more Aristotelian fashion, appears skeptical of the degree to which this theoretical ideal is encountered in practice, particularly in this fallen world. “Situated freedom, *real freedom*,” he declares, “is limited and conditioned. It is not simply the ability to choose what is good with complete spontaneity. . . . A person may clearly and willingly desire something evil, but do so as the result of an irresistible passion or a poor upbringing. In such cases, while the decision is voluntary . . . it is not free” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 273, emphasis added). Here one can see an appreciation of the imperfections of the “not yet” that received less attention in the implicit eschatology shaping John Paul II’s discussion of freedom, as

Francis incorporates the influence of a fallen world as a constraint on the practice of moral agency in a way John Paul II's focus on the theoretical power of freedom could not fully recognize. Francis's appeals to freedom in discernment make sense as a response to this problem, granting each moral agent the room to meaningfully pursue the good even as they navigate the particular web of intersecting influences that conspire to constrain their practical ability to exercise the full potential of the freedom John Paul II outlined as a theoretical ideal.

Although Francis is not especially clear about the mechanisms by which freedom "is limited and conditioned" in its translation from theory to practice, one plausible explanation can be found in recent developments in Catholic moral theology surrounding the concept of structural sin. The turn to these developments is justifiable for three reasons. First, the idea of structural sin has already received magisterial recognition, making the category relevant for interpreting Francis's magisterial teaching.³⁶ Second, Francis has explicitly noted the way economic structures (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 108), social institutions (*Laudato Si'*, no. 142), and "cultural factors" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 33) serve as constraining influences on freedom, bringing a decidedly structural perspective to his ethical analyses.³⁷ Because these are all relevant elements in the theological discussion of structural sin, this concept has added value as an interpretative tool for the claims Francis is making.³⁸ Finally, the understanding of structural sin currently advocated by Catholic moral theologians does justice to Francis's insistence that even when freedom is limited, it remains "real freedom." In fact, the desire to find a "non-deterministic" explanation that can both "appreciate the radical character of human freedom . . . [and] recognize the constraints on that freedom which individuals face in their daily life within social structures" has been a driving force in the refinement of the theological understanding of structural sin for

³⁶ For more on the incorporation of this concept into magisterial teaching (before Francis), see Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of the Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27, no. 2 (2002): 132–152, doi.org/10.2143/LS.27.2.932. For the ways Francis has embraced a "structuralist approach," see Thomas Massaro, *Mercy in Action: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 28–33.

³⁷ Kristin E. Heyer, "Walls in the Heart: Social Sin in *Fratelli tutti*," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 19, no. 1 (2022): 25–40, doi.org/10.5840/jcathsoc20221913.

³⁸ Notably, social structures, institutions, and culture are all central elements in the specific analysis of structural sin that has the most prominence in Catholic moral theology today. See Daniel K. Finn, ed., *Moral Agency Within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, 2020).

Catholic ethicists.³⁹ This priority means that the contemporary Catholic theological analysis of structural sin is particularly helpful for the task of reading Francis's views on freedom in continuity with John Paul II's, because its non-deterministic account of social constraints on freedom allows Francis's depiction of "situated freedom" that is "limited and conditioned" to coexist with John Paul II's theoretical ideal.

In the intervening years since the publication of *Veritatis Splendor*, Catholic moral theologians have developed this non-deterministic account of the operation of structural sin through the incorporation of insights found in critical realist sociology. Broadly speaking, critical realism defends the idea that society is organized in such a way that the connections between people create "social structures" that have a real impact in the world. These social structures exert their influence through the incentives and restrictions they impose on the people who interact with the structures. Thus, a corporation is a structure that emerges from the relationships that link a company's employees to their bosses and the corollary relationships that then link all these workers to the customers. Within the corporate structure, certain behaviors are incentivized (behave this way and you may see a promotion) and others are restricted (behave that way and you will be fired), exerting an influence on the people who interact within the structure. The critical realist argument that Catholic moral theologians have appropriated contends that these incentives and restrictions have a tangible effect on the decisions people make as they navigate the structures in their lives. These structures never *make* somebody do something, because each agent remains free to ignore the incentives and accept the consequences for violating the restrictions, but the structures do have a causal impact by shifting the costs associated with certain behaviors. Indeed, if the incentives are particularly high or the restrictions particularly severe, then fewer people will buck the trend and many (or most) will choose to work within the system.⁴⁰

The upshot of the recent Catholic theological appropriation of this critical realist description of social structures is that Catholic theologians have a way of explaining how an individual moral agent can simultaneously preserve the freedom of self-determination while nevertheless facing real constraints that may make the exercise of that

³⁹ Daniel K. Finn, "What is a Sinful Social Structure?," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 143, doi.org/10.1177/0040563915619981.

⁴⁰ For an explanation of the critical realist account of social structures that gives attention to its potential compatibility with Catholic theology, see Finn, "What is a Sinful Social Structure?," 151–154. See also Daniel J. Daly, *Structures of Virtue and Vice* (Georgetown University Press, 2021); and Daniel K. Finn, "Social Structures," in *Moral Agency Within Social Structures and Culture*, esp. 31–32.

freedom difficult to achieve. This approach provides, in other words, a way of affirming Francis's claims about the limited, conditional nature of "real freedom" without denying John Paul II's insistence that freedom retains its full power as a theoretical ideal. Yes, all options remain on the table, but some options are much more viable than others.

The critical realist account of the structural conditioning of freedom used in Catholic moral theology helps to make sense of Francis's famed assertion in *Amoris Laetitia* that "conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God . . . amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while not yet fully the objective ideal" (no. 303). Two points from this quotation bear emphasis in the context of the discussion of freedom and constrained agency.

First, Francis appeals to "the concrete complexity of one's *limits*" to make the case that conscience can come to terms with an agent's regrettable but nevertheless real distance from what ought to be. In this manner, Francis accounts for the fact that human freedom is often constrained in ways that are not strictly traced back to an agent's own culpable failures. This suggests a contrast, to a degree, with John Paul II, who had a tenuous relationship with the concepts of structural and social sin as a result of his interest in their diagnostic power (see *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36) alongside a fear that they could be used to undermine personal responsibility (see *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 16). Francis is more convinced by the former and less concerned with the latter, resulting in a willingness to attend to the structural forces shaping and constraining human freedom.⁴¹ Indeed, his earlier comments in *Amoris Laetitia* about the influence of mitigating factors (nos. 301–302) indicate that Francis not only acknowledges the possibility of these forces in the abstract but also attends to their power in practice. Quoting the final Synod document with approval, Francis insists that "under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases" (no. 302). What he suggests, then, is that the lofty ideal may not be immediately attainable to the same degree for every moral agent, a conviction easiest to understand if one appreciates the critical realist notion that agency can be meaningfully constrained—but, again, not

⁴¹ Heyer, "Walls in the Heart," 30–31; see also Kristin E. Heyer, "'Hearts of Flesh': Structural Sin and Social Salvation," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 78 (2024): esp. 59–69, ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/18527.

altogether eliminated—by structural factors. Francis’s attentiveness to the limits of freedom in practice therefore offers a compelling nuance to John Paul II’s emphasis on the persistent power of freedom in its theoretical ideal.

The second point from the quotation, which concerns Francis’s appeal to the “objective ideal,” helps to explain how this nuance functions alongside rather than in opposition to John Paul II’s account of freedom. Assuming genuine continuity with John Paul II, Francis’s recognition of an individual agent’s distance from the objective ideal along with his insistence that conscience can accept this distance as “the most generous response which can be given” cannot amount to the license to dispense with moral norms nor to the suggestion that different rules apply to different people. Instead, reflecting the “law of gradualness” John Paul II outlined in *Familiaris Consortio* (no. 34), the same objective ideal remains in effect and establishes expectations for the individual who recognizes that the best they can offer in a given situation still falls short of that ideal.⁴² This is the significance of the caveat that such a recognition applies “for now.” As the same section in *Amoris Laetitia* goes on to explain, “This discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (no. 303). Francis has opened the door for the freedom to discern that one might not be able to achieve all the good the objective ideal found in a general norm promotes, but this cannot be a static state of affairs. One is constantly called to moral growth. To accept that such growth is genuinely possible, however, one must maintain that the moral agent’s deepest, existential freedom retains its potential to shape the agent and empower their choice to pursue the good no matter the circumstances. This claim, of course, is precisely what John Paul II’s account of freedom stressed, meaning that Francis’s reminders about the limitations on human freedom in practice need the complementary reinforcement of John Paul II’s promotion of the absolute power of freedom in theory to avoid a reductionistic determinism that portrays every agent as nothing more than a product of their circumstances.

What the continuity of John Paul II and Francis provides, then, is a critical reminder that the moral question must not be reduced to an either/or choice between realizing the ideal no matter the cost and giving up on the ideal altogether. The fallenness of the human condition means that everyone needs a degree of humility in their efforts to discern the best path toward the objective ideal and also that some will face more limitations than others in their pursuit of the ideal.

⁴² On the various uses of gradualism and its presence in the Synod that shaped *Amoris Laetitia*, see Jason King, “Which Gradualism? Whose Relationships,” *Horizons* 43 (2016): 87–98, doi.org/10.1017/hor.2016.4.

Francis's reflections on freedom help to call attention to both these features of life in the already but decidedly not yet, offering a dose of Aristotelian realism to complement the Platonic idealism found in John Paul II's defense of freedom.

CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, what this article has asserted is that there is a productive tension that emerges when reading the legacy of *Veritatis Splendor*'s teachings on freedom in light of developments in Francis's subsequent reflections on the same theme. There are, indeed, distinctions between John Paul II's prioritization of the theoretical ideal of freedom, as the perennial capacity to cooperate with the unfailing power of grace and choose what is good, and Francis's assertion that *real* freedom is always conditioned. Yet, nevertheless, these two constructions of freedom can functionally coexist and, in fact, must do so for Catholics to avoid two equally dangerous poles. On one hand, a complete embrace of John Paul II without Francis would suggest that there is only ever one way to follow the demands of God, robbing the Christian moral life of its dynamism and making the summons to discipleship seem hopelessly unattainable for people who feel the burden of structural injustices most fully. On the other hand, a wholesale decoupling of Francis from John Paul II would imply that there is no reason to work against unjust structural constraints, inviting a form of complacency that would dismiss Jesus's assurance that "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Happily, by honoring the productive tension that emerges from keeping both John Paul II and Francis together, Catholics can evade these pitfalls and pursue a bold vision for the fullness of freedom, as a theoretical ideal already possible through grace, while grappling with the numerous structural constraints that mean its full realization is not yet a reality in practice. **M**

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