

AN EXPLORATION OF UNFREEDOM IN THE MORAL LIFE –  
SELECTED SESSION

Topic: An Exploration of Unfreedom in the Moral Life  
 Convener: R. Zachary Karanovich, Boston College  
 Moderator: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University  
 Presenters: Xavier M. Montecel, St. Mary's University  
 R. Zachary Karanovich, Boston College  
 Kate Jackson-Meyer, Harvard University

Xavier M. Montecel began the session with his paper, “Liturgical Vice: Unfreedom and Injustice in Christian Worship.” In it, he challenged a facile assumption that liturgy is necessarily an arena for positive moral formation and argued, instead, that there are circumstances in which liturgy negatively impacts human freedom and flourishing. He offered three examples when liturgy “practiced well” was harmful: the past practice of American Catholic churches requiring Black Catholics to sit apart from white Catholics and receive the Eucharist separately; the sexual abuse of minors taking place in proximity to the material markers of clerical authority and liturgical solemnity; and the ongoing teachings of the church denying blessings to same-sex unions because those relationships are without grace. Montecel pointed to the work of theologian Katie Grimes to better evaluate these complex realities at the intersection of liturgy and ethics. Discussing white supremacy, Grimes argues that the habitat in which Christians’ practice forms or deforms Christian habits. In light of Grime’s evaluation that sacraments can cultivate vice, Montecel offered the concept of “liturgical vice,” defined as those qualities of individuals and communities of faith, formed through liturgical practice, that undermine human freedom to embody in thought and action the promise of God’s eschatological future, which is the flourishing of all things in God and the universal enjoyment of love and justice. Therefore, he argued, it is the Christian’s obligation to unmask liturgical vice, despite its odor of sanctity.

R. Zachary Karanovich then offered his paper, “Agency on the Other Side of Oppression: Evaluating Moral Constraints on the Freedom for Solidarity.” In it, he used working-class, white communities—the context of his upbringing—to illustrate how virtue and vice uniquely coexist and reveal a complexity in their moral evaluation. Drawing on sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild’s notion of “deep narratives,” he argued that identities and worldviews are constructed through narratives often driven by feelings, not facts—the American dream being the prime example. Used as a carrot by political elites to entice working-class whites to vote and act in particular ways, the American dream is used by working-class whites as a cudgel against persons of color, immigrants, etc. The myth’s influence results in an invincible ignorance. Building upon the work of the theological ethicist Kate Ward, Karanovich asserted that those subjected to such a strong belief in the American dream should be evaluated through moral luck, which asserts that life circumstances shape human moral life. While moral luck applies to a person who is simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged in different dimensions of life, Karanovich argued that working-class whites are simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged in the same dimension—advantaged with a greater degree of social mobility and a “hyperagency,” but disadvantaged by the myth’s

affirmation of racial and racist stereotypes and caricatures. Instead of cultivating solidarity, the constraints on these communities under the American dream's influence result in vice's flourishing.

Kate Jackson-Meyer concluded the presentations with her paper, "Tragic Dilemmas and the Precarity of Moral Goodness in Light of Constrained Moral Agency due to Bad Moral Luck." In it, she foregrounded the concept of tragic dilemmas and argued that bad systemic and non-systemic incident luck are the sources for the moral constraints that define tragic dilemmas. Jackson-Meyer argued that tragic dilemmas are a type of bad incident luck that, although they do not necessarily undermine character, do render moral goodness precarious for moral agents and society. Against the backdrop of Aristotle, Kant, and Aquinas, Jackson-Meyer argued that circumstances alone cannot undermine moral goodness, but that there is an inherent messiness to ethics. Using the framework of ethicist Lisa Tessman, Jackson-Meyer argued that all tragic dilemmas are a result of bad incident moral luck—both bad systemic incident luck (e.g., when a Marine has to choose between killing an armed enemy or saving the life of the baby the enemy is using as a human shield in war) and bad non-systemic incident luck (e.g., when a natural disaster requires that we save only one loved one). Further, she argued that these circumstances of luck can eventually undermine moral goodness. Jackson-Meyer concluded by noting that moral luck offers a path toward better understanding moral dilemmas: God does not cause tragic dilemmas, social sin does. This should increase an awareness of personal and social guilt for participation or complicity in vicious systems and ultimately facilitate structural change.

Following the presentations, Daniel P. Scheid moderated a lively discussion during which implications were explored for each presenter's work and lines of commonality were drawn between the three.

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