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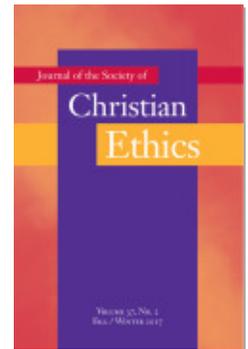
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# Sloth: America's Ironic Structural Vice

*Christopher D. Jones and Conor M. Kelly*

Individualism is a popular cultural trope in the United States, often touted for its promotion of industriousness and rejection of laziness. This essay argues that, ironically, America's brand of individualism actually promotes a more fundamental form of the very vice it purports to oppose. To make this case, the essay defines the unique form of individualism in the United States and then retrieves the classical definition of sloth as a vice against charity (not diligence), contrasting Aquinas and Barth with Weber to demonstrate that this peculiarly American individualist impulse undermines civic charity by reaping the benefits of civic relationships while denying any concomitant responsibilities. Identifying this narrative of individualism as a structural vice, the essay proposes structural remedies for reinvigorating civic charity, solidarity, and the common good in the United States.

IN THE UNITED STATES, LAZINESS IS A CARDINAL SIN. SIMPLY consider contemporary political discourse, which castigates myriad forms of laziness under the polemical label of dependency. Behind this indictment lies an assumption about the inherent value of industriousness, suggesting that hard work and personal dedication are the key to a successful life. In support of this presupposition, American culture has been shaped by an individualist ethos that characterizes each man or woman as master of his or her own fate. In theory, this rugged individualism creates social incentives for personal diligence, thereby undermining the vice of sloth. In practice, however, the idealization of this radically independent individual is actually a structural evil promoting the more fundamental form of the vice it purports to oppose. To articulate and defend this claim, we offer a three-part assessment. The first part outlines a distinctive brand of individualism in the United States, establishing the fully

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autonomous individual as a consistent cultural trope with moral implications. The second part explains how this ethos encourages sloth by distinguishing sloth as a vice against Max Weber's Protestant work ethic from its more classical formulation as a vice against charity. The third part describes how the individualist ethos enshrines sloth as a structural vice that can be countered with structural remedies to foster charity, solidarity, and the common good. The result is a fuller account of the influential role our cultural categories play in framing moral discourse and a clearer sense of how to mitigate some of the most damaging effects so that we might reinvigorate civic life.

### **An Individualist Ethos**

There is ample reason to assert that an individualist ethos shapes US culture, especially when one conceives of individualism broadly as the cultural identification of the individual human person as the primary agent in social, political, and economic life. This puts individualism in opposition to collectivism, which would identify a collective social unit or units (e.g., the nuclear family) as the principal agent in social, political, and economic life.<sup>1</sup> At this general level, studies routinely show that the United States is the most individualist-oriented country on the planet, in contrast to much more collectivist-focused nations.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, then, that political scientist Seymour Lipset identified individualism as one of the five central elements of the "American Creed" that makes the United States an exceptional (i.e., outlier) nation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a cultural ethos of individualism holds a certain pride of place in the United States insofar as this is not generally a collectivist nation. Such a description, while accurate, does not fully capture the contours of the unique brand of individualism that holds sway in the United States. To get a fuller picture of the specifics, one needs to appreciate the foundations and evolution of America's curious blending of individualism and moral responsibility.

The case for a distinct form of individualism in the United States begins with the Revolution. Admittedly, scholars debate the emergence of a uniquely American individualism during this period. On one side, Lipset insists that the Revolution gave birth to a political philosophy that prioritized individual freedom and rejected external (i.e., governmental) limitations on that freedom; on the other side, some historians contend that there were multiple forms of individualism and even a few forms of collectivism informing colonial life in the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> One of the strongest supporters of the latter interpretation is the political philosopher Michael Sandel, who argued in *Democracy's Discontent* that the United States has essentially had two competing versions of individualism: one aligned with republicanism and popular during the revolutionary era, which defended the rights of the individual in order to

encourage greater participation in the communal pursuit of the common good, and another aligned with procedural liberalism and increasingly popular during the twentieth century, which was more concerned with promoting individual rights as freedoms from interference rather than as the basis for contributing to civic life.<sup>5</sup>

Sandel's account is compelling, especially because he acknowledges the presence and influence of both of these forms of individualism at the birth of the United States.<sup>6</sup> The historical record bears out his claim, as the political discourse of the founders regularly appealed to the republican ideal of individuals free from external coercion precisely so that they could participate in collective self-governance.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary studies have uncovered a late colonial shift toward the presumption of individuals as more inherently self-interested and thus in need of the procedures of government chiefly to protect their personal rights, a view that eventually influenced the development of the Constitution.<sup>8</sup> Hence, it is appropriate to conceive of individualism in the United States as one genus with two species, a republican species oriented to civic participation and a liberal species oriented to personal freedom.

Tellingly, both of these brands of individualism offer a rational basis for the promotion of industriousness, and thus each has a potential contribution to make to the fight against sloth. The republican form suggests that personal diligence is required to form citizens' capacities for participation in shared self-governance. Indeed, proponents of republican individualism touted the importance of civic virtues, arguing that democratic engagement required moral formation.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, republican individualism touts industriousness at a general level, with respect to one's character development, for slothfulness in this area of life would do damage to both the individual and the community. Meanwhile, the liberal form of individualism critiques sloth and encourages industriousness primarily for the sake of self-sufficiency. In this view, individual autonomy is paramount, so a lack of industry is an inherent problem because lazy individuals lose their autonomy and have no hope for their own success.<sup>10</sup> These two species of individualism thus propose two distinct accounts of diligence and rejections of sloth. Although they are not mutually exclusive, they are different and their differences track, to a degree, with the distinctions surrounding the vice of sloth discussed in the next section.

On its face, this parallel with the competing conceptions of sloth would pose a problem for our argument, at the very least undermining our claim that individualism in the United States combats one form of sloth while promoting another. In truth, however, this would be a problem only if both versions of individualism were equally prevalent in our nation's cultural discourse. While both species have in fact persisted over time, their respective influences have seldom been the same. Indeed, the individualist ethos in the United States has evolved to elevate the liberal version of individualism over its republican

counterpart, to the point that only one version of sloth has been the target of cultural critique.

Certainly, the seeds of liberal individualism's success were present in the revolutionary period. The Declaration of Independence, for instance, argues for insurrection as a means of securing individual liberties. Although the document orients these personal rights to a common cause, the bearer of the rights in question remains the individual in se. In addition, the document's echoes of John Locke and other social contract thinkers, which emerged during the revisions of Jefferson's original draft, introduce a more liberal notion of the individual as inherently unencumbered by even social bonds.<sup>11</sup> These seeds quickly began to sprout, to the point that one of the earliest observers of the fledgling democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, recorded the prevalence of a distinctively American individualism "that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends; so that, after thus creating a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself."<sup>12</sup>

In fairness, some contemporary scholars challenge the quick equation of Tocqueville's French term, *individualisme*, with the contemporary version of liberal individualism, arguing that he was in fact describing a rejection of national solidarity in favor of links to the local community and not a wholesale renunciation of all social ties.<sup>13</sup> This makes sense, especially in the American context, where Tocqueville notes that free elections required aspirants to office to create bonds with other citizens in order to succeed.<sup>14</sup> Still, the critique is not as powerful as its proponents would suggest, for two reasons. First, liberal individualism does not deny the existence of social ties, it merely redefines their origin. On this point Tocqueville's *individualisme* does reflect the shift from a more republican form to individualism to a more liberal version because he indicates that American individualism creates voluntary ties "out of ambition" rather than natural order.<sup>15</sup> Second, even granting the critics' claim that Tocqueville's *individualisme* is not identical to contemporary liberal individualism is not a problem, for his descriptions still reveal a movement away from republican individualism, a point that aligns with the narrative of historical evolution.

Tocqueville's account of individualism in the early years of the United States shows the emergence of a more independence-oriented cultural ethos. Tocqueville explains that the United States' democratic individualism created a class of people who believe they "owe nothing to anyone, they expect nothing so to speak from anyone; they are always accustomed to consider themselves in isolation, and they readily imagine that their entire destiny is in their hands."<sup>16</sup> This vision of the individual certainly stands in stark contrast to the republican notion of an individual with a specific set of civic obligations, but it also lends itself to the condemnation of idleness because the logical implication of asserting the total control of one's own destiny is to place the burden of success

on the individual alone. The famously popular work of Horatio Alger made this connection abundantly clear one generation later. Alger's "rags to riches stories" are intentionally didactic, presenting a way of life that shaped popular imagination in the United States after his tales morphed into a form of cultural currency idolizing the triumph of self-reliant individuals who owe success to no one else.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Alger's name became synonymous with a radically liberal brand of individualism that increasingly gained steam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite its distance from reality, both at Alger's time and since, this simple elision of independence and industry in individualism has been a cultural trope of profound significance in the last 150 years, eclipsing its republican rival for most of that time.

One major exception to the triumph of the liberal over republican form of individualism would seem to be the Great Depression, when dire economic circumstances challenged the myth of total personal control over one's fate. In response, communal efforts and government intervention both received widespread support, suggesting the emergence of a more communitarian and less individualistic ethos. Such an account of the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal policies proceeds too quickly, though, for the New Deal as actually enacted evinces the continued persistence of liberal individualism rather than a republican resurgence. Precisely because the New Deal championed government intervention without reforming the basic structures of the capitalist system, it reinforced the economic freedoms of decidedly liberal individuals, both presuming and preserving the right of each economic actor to choose what he or she saw fit while never orienting that personal discretion to some common project.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, once the Depression faded and economic prosperity returned, liberal individualism reigned again with explicit force. Consequently, even if one accepted a victory for republican individualism in the New Deal, this would merely cede the battle without altering the course of the war.<sup>19</sup>

This history sets the stage for today, when the liberal species of individualism is far more influential than the republican one. In fact, the individualism that makes the United States exceptional now is a full-fledged cultural trope that shapes our public discourse in politics and beyond. Thus, in the 1980s Robert Bellah and his colleagues identified individualism as the "first language" of Americans, pointing to a form of "expressive individualism" that encourages individuals to see themselves as set apart from others, pursuing their own self-defined goals without any need to envision a common project.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, contemporary libertarians epitomize this conviction, but the expressive individualism described by Bellah and colleagues is not restricted to one corner of public life; instead, it is readily apparent in the commonly accepted claim that each individual possesses a set of rights that serve as trumps far more than duties, prioritizing nothing more than "the right to be free of others' demands."<sup>21</sup> The effects of this trend on civic life are hard to overstate, as Americans are

becoming increasingly less invested in civic projects and in the basic building blocks of self-governance, eroding social capital and jettisoning the more republican species of individualism.<sup>22</sup>

For all these reasons, one can legitimately speak of an individualistic ethos in the United States that presumes the ideas associated with Alger and insists on the self-sufficiency of the liberal individual to the point that he or she has no obligations to the community except for the ones he or she has freely chosen to affirm. A few additional nuances are in order. First, this cultural trope is not reducible to the philosophical interpretation of the individual in political liberalism. Although they share common roots, the liberal individualism that colors popular imagination today represents an extreme distortion of political liberalism's account of the individual, which would not so readily decouple freedom and social responsibility.<sup>23</sup> Second, the prominence of this species of individualism does not imply that everyone in the United States subscribes to this vision of the individual. A host of critics representing a wide variety of commitments from feminism to communitarianism to conservatism prove that this is not so.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, some religious groups embody a communitarian spirit that rejects the liberal species of individualism and creates communities of shared responsibility in its stead.<sup>25</sup> Yet, insofar as these alternatives define themselves in explicit contrast to, or direct retreat from, the broader culture and its individualism, they use that individualism as a foil and thereby confirm its prominence as a cultural force.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, the significance of this historical overview lies in the emergence of liberal individualism as the first language of public discourse today. By setting the terms of the debate, the current ethos of liberal individualism impacts how people approach contested questions as well as how they think about moral responsibilities. In this case, the message that each individual is descriptively capable of ensuring his or her own success is quickly married to the prescriptive implication that he or she has the obligation to work toward that end. Thus, liberal individualism ostensibly counteracts sloth by encouraging industriousness. Yet the manner in which this individualist ethos prescribes diligence is inherently problematic, for the idealization of independence masks the realities of human interdependence, creating a myth of autonomy that falsely shrinks one's moral responsibilities. As a result, America's individualistic ethos may oppose laziness, but only at the cost of reinforcing sloth. To understand how this is possible, one must appreciate an essential distinction in the definition of sloth.

## The Distinctions of Sloth

The vice of sloth has a complicated history within Christian ethics and popular morality. Christian theologians have associated the vice with a range of

phenomena, including melancholic sadness, spiritual indifference or sorrow, laziness or hyperactivity, and moral apathy. This sense of sloth traces its roots back to the ancient monastic concept of *acedia* or “lack of care.” Monks like Evagrius Ponticus saw *acedia* as a lack of care for God, while others like John Cassian thought *acedia* could keep one from productive labor or encourage service as a selfish cure for boredom.<sup>27</sup> In short, the classic Christian conception of sloth is a vice against love (or charity) with a wide range of manifestations.

Popular morality drops the psychological, spiritual, and moral problems associated with *acedia*, and construes sloth more narrowly as the laziness constitutive of a deficient work ethic. The liberal individualist ethos described above arguably opposes this secularized form of sloth by praising hard work and industriousness. The problem, however, is that the individualistic ethos achieves this end by resisting the demands of love, which is a central aspect of the classic Christian understanding of sloth. In this manner, the liberal individualist ethos ironically enshrines sloth as a structural vice in contemporary America while ostensibly striving to undermine it as a personal one. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to consider three sources: Thomas Aquinas, Max Weber, and Karl Barth.

For Aquinas, sloth is a vice against charity, the chief theological virtue. Charity unites humans to God in a deep bond of friendship and initiates similar friendships with our neighbors.<sup>28</sup> Charity does this by shaping character and action in a number of respects, three of which are germane to our purposes. First, charity shapes joy, a habit of rejoicing in the presence of what one loves.<sup>29</sup> Joy, then, is a social emotion that is shared with friends. Second, charity helps one to love God, self, and neighbor in the right order and in the right way. That is, charity corrects disproportionate and deficient forms of love, such as disinterest in God, excessive self-love, and hatred of others.<sup>30</sup> Third, charity makes one zealous for God and neighbor. A zealous person voluntarily promotes the good of others and works to remove obstacles or hindrances to their good.<sup>31</sup> Together these dispositions inspire the various works of charity, which include making peace in a divided society, showing mercy, serving others, and sharing with those in need.<sup>32</sup>

Sloth opposes charity in each of these respects and fosters a number of harmful dispositions. As an “oppressive sorrow,” about spiritual good, a slothful person is joyless because he or she perceives the good as evil, and so has nothing to celebrate.<sup>33</sup> A joyless person can become sad and despondent, and retreat from relationships.

Sloth also disorders love. By mistaking the good for evil, it becomes hard to love, for nothing is desirable or interesting, not even God, the supreme good. This does not mean that all slothful people are resigned to total indifference though. Since humans are naturally drawn to the good and seek

happiness, some slothful people vainly attempt to find total satisfaction in created things rather than in God.<sup>34</sup> The result of this search, however, is that sloth makes one unhappy, and unhappy people can become spiteful or malicious rather than loving. One in the grips of spite or malice may engage in all sorts of combative behaviors and thereby tear the fabric that binds social relations.

Finally, sloth curbs zeal, for one becomes weary of work and has no interest in doing good deeds to benefit others.<sup>35</sup> Sloth, therefore, fosters sluggishness or greed for self-gain, both of which can harm or erode relationships.<sup>36</sup> For example, one engrossed in achievement at work may neglect spending time with one's partner or children. Importantly, then, hard work can be an expression of sloth, as it may be motivated by any number of things, including a desire to cure boredom, dominate others, or acquire goods so that others do not enjoy them.

Aquinas holds that by keeping one from rejoicing in God and the good of the neighbor, sloth refuses to love and do the works of charity. As a result, sloth neglects the daily actions that sustain bonds of affection between friends and other neighbors.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that sloth has a number of psychological, spiritual, and moral effects for Aquinas.

Popular conceptions, on the other hand, equate sloth almost exclusively with laziness. Max Weber's "Protestant work ethic" is perhaps the single most influential account of this view, as it indicates modern industriousness as the counterpart of sloth. Weber suggests that Calvinism developed the view that God created humans to glorify God by obeying God's commandments, one of which is a command to work.<sup>38</sup> Weber's characterization of this Reformed conception of sloth has two results.

First, sloth rejects the basic demands of God's covenant. Weber writes, "Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. . . . Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health . . . is worthy of absolute moral condemnation. . . . [Time] is infinitely valuable because every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God."<sup>39</sup> The "spirit of capitalism" that emerges from this position affirms the "self-made man" as its ethical exemplar; this person opposes sloth by working diligently in response to God's calling and thereby fulfills the commands to glorify God and love the neighbor.<sup>40</sup> Second, sloth reflects a lack of faith that calls one's standing as a member of God's elect into question. Given God's transcendence and inscrutable will, the best way to be assured that one is in fact a member of God's elect is by demonstrating faith through work.<sup>41</sup> Weber states: "However useless good works might be as a means of attaining salvation . . . nevertheless, they are indispensable as a sign of election. . . . In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves."<sup>42</sup> Hard work, therefore, gives glory to God, demonstrates faith in God, and avoids the vice of sloth.

The strength of this Weberian version of the Reformed perspective is that it takes sloth seriously and devotes substantial theological and ethical attention to it. The weakness of this view—which Weber acknowledges—is its failure to grapple with the ways in which hard work can promote an isolated individualism that reflects deficient love of God, self, and neighbor.

This problem is especially clear today in light of the ways in which the liberal individualist ethos has secularized the concepts of hard work and sloth. Hard work is no longer the primary means of giving God glory and ensuring one's election; rather, it has become a way to secure individual well-being. Enjoying the fruits of labor is the ultimate incentive to diligence. Those who are slothful, however, gain nothing and are owed nothing. Lack of industry is their problem, not failing to obey God. In this way, liberal individualism's secularizing effects mirror Weber's own sense that the "religious roots" of the spirit of capitalism have "died out," leaving "sober economic virtue" and "utilitarian worldliness" in their place.<sup>43</sup>

This secularization of sloth has the unfortunate consequence of reinforcing a brand of individualism that refuses the demands of love and relationship. Karl Barth's account of sloth demonstrates this connection even more emphatically. Barth views sloth as the human rejection of God's reconciling grace that elevates human beings from the effects of sin.<sup>44</sup> As such, sloth is a form of hate that prefers isolated existence apart from the relationships with God and neighbor that constitute human nature.<sup>45</sup> For Barth, then, the characteristic feature of liberal individualism—namely, the right to be free from the demands of others<sup>46</sup>—is actually best seen as the sin of sloth. This is why Barth calls sloth "graceless being for ourselves."<sup>47</sup>

The logic undergirding this connection of sloth and individualism is relatively straightforward. Human beings were made for fellowship with God and neighbor; by rejecting this fellowship, we curve inward on ourselves and become hostile to the claims of others and their demands on us. Barth likens the slothful person to a hedgehog who has rolled into a ball with "prickly spikes" that threaten others.<sup>48</sup> This hostility is evident in a range of dispositions and behaviors. Among other things, slothful individuals are characterized by excessive or deficient self-respect, by total disinterest in activity or work, by workaholic striving for individual gain, and by disordered relationships with God and neighbor.<sup>49</sup>

Barth critiques the ideal of "conscientious work" on the grounds that it refuses to rest in God's promises and gracious acts.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Barth argues that leisure affirms that God is in control and so is "far superior in dignity" to workaholicism, which promotes self-mastery and self-sufficiency.<sup>51</sup> The ethos of individualism therefore rejects grace because it is free, not earned. Seen in this light, the workaholicism and laziness of sloth are mirror images of one another: both avoid relationship and obligations to God.

Moreover, a society composed of slothful individuals experiences a range of social effects that are highly reminiscent of the structural evils present in our own day. Barth specifically notes that sloth gives rise to callous indifference, racism and xenophobia, increasing competitiveness, excessive consumption, the desire for total security from threats, and a willingness to use violence to achieve one's ends.<sup>52</sup> For example, if one can expect nothing from one's neighbors, it is plausible to construe them as potential enemies that need to be defeated. Foreigners and those of other races are also seen as threatening, so violence, exclusion, and oppression become attractive means to monopolize social benefits and secure one's property. Those in the grips of these thoughts often struggle with anxiety and fear, and so are not free to live an unencumbered life. Barth claims that each of these social effects stem from sloth's divestment of relationship in favor of individualistic existence.

In these respects, Barth expresses a conception of sloth that is similar to Aquinas's vice against charity.<sup>53</sup> Sloth shapes harmful dispositions in individuals and can be seen in social structures that promote an individualistic impulse that rejects God and neighbor.

This brief historical survey allows us to draw two conclusions. First, liberal individualism and sloth reflect an atomistic anthropology that opposes charity. The individualist ethos seeks protection of individual rights while limiting social duties and responsibilities. Similarly, sloth curbs love and zeal and makes us indifferent to relating with and assisting others. In contrast, Aquinas affirms a social anthropology on which humans were created for friendship with God and neighbor and so have duties to promote the common good, which secures the well-being of each individual and society as a whole.<sup>54</sup> Charity pursues the common good, while liberal individualism and sloth refuse this.

Second, the individualist ethos and the vice of sloth are actually product and producer of one another. Barth argues that individualism and sloth foster social structures of competition, dominance, exclusion, and harm. These structures in turn shape individuals who seek self-sufficiency and security on their own terms and act in ways that sustain harmful structures. Ironically, the ethos of individualism and hard work ordered to individual gain perpetuates a set of social circumstances that fracture society and cause sloth.

In summary, sloth rejects relationship and the civic demands of charity, much like the liberal brand of isolated individualism. Indeed, as this account of sloth reveals, the values of the reigning form of liberal individualism that pervades contemporary culture are precisely the values promoted by the vice of sloth itself. One can rightly indict this cultural trope as a form of sloth, and this, in effect, makes sloth a peculiarly powerful structural vice in the United States today. In the final section of our essay, we elaborate on this point,

specifying the ways in which the ethos of liberal individualism embodies sloth as a structural vice so that we can then employ this category to propose viable structural remedies.

### **Sloth as America's Structural Vice**

While there are a number of terms to identify social structures with negative moral impacts (e.g., structural sin, structural evil, structural violence, and structural vice), we opt to use “structural vice” because we focus on sloth and retrieve its classical definition as a capital vice. This language highlights what is at stake in the case of sloth and the United States’ individualist ethos, which is first and foremost an impact on dispositions and only then an impact on actions. Naturally, an emphasis on dispositions is consistent with the concept of virtue, but it also aligns with the more particular notion of a structure of vice as articulated by Daniel Daly, who argues that “structures of vice are the social structures that in some way consistently function to prevent the human good, the common good, and human happiness.”<sup>55</sup> Significantly, in identifying the social structures that might become structures of vice, Daly lists “a value laden narrative” alongside three other examples.<sup>56</sup> Given that the American ethos of individualism is a value-laden narrative valorizing a form of isolation and self-concern that amounts to the vice of sloth in its Thomistic and Barthian formulations, it is a structure of vice violating each of Daly’s key areas of assessment.

First, the narrative of liberal individualism suggests that each person is sufficient on his or her own, both generating and supporting a form of sloth that resists the demands of love by denying the very existence of relationships in the first place, to say nothing of their responsibilities. This frustrates the human good, especially as that good is conceived in theological terms, for Christians argue that the example of Christ shows that the true nature of the human good lies in kenotic service to others.<sup>57</sup> Given this conviction, a cultural ethos that encourages people to view themselves as closed off from others, like Barth’s prickly hedgehog, certainly amounts to a structural form of sloth that undermines the human good.

Second, the narrative of liberal individualism also undermines the common good. By reinforcing the notion that each individual is entirely the master of his or her own fate, this cultural trope downplays the many ways in which our well-being depends on shared public goods. A classic example would be the environment, for the car-centric economy of the United States is designed around a desire for immediate access to transportation on our own schedules despite the fact that an excessive reliance on automobiles seriously harms the environment. In contrast, more collectivist societies in Europe have embraced

an intentionally sustainable infrastructure built around public transit, which literally forces individuals to share a common space and schedule.<sup>58</sup> Whereas we have prioritized personal convenience over collective benefit—in keeping with our individualist ethos—those in collectivist societies have accepted a degree of individual inconvenience for the sake of a shared benefit; they have put the common good ahead of private, personal gain. In theory, we might do the same, but in truth, such personal sacrifices require an awareness of one’s place within a broader community. Sadly, this connection is exactly what the slothful narrative of liberal individualism masks. By promoting self-love and corrupting the order of charity, this structural vice leaves the individual focused on maximizing personal gain regardless of social costs, a process that undermines the common good not only by facilitating the destruction of public goods but also by eroding participation in communal life more generally.

Finally, the cultural trope of liberal individualism frustrates human happiness as well. By suggesting a moral obligation to ensure one’s own success exclusively, the narrative of liberal individualism values relationships in solely utilitarian terms. This slothful rejection of charity harms the human happiness of those who are used for utilitarian ends, since their personal needs are subordinated to an agent’s self-interested aims. Just as importantly, this form of sloth harms the human happiness of the agent as well. The basis for this claim lies in empirical work, primarily in psychology and economics, which has demonstrated that human happiness is most powerfully affected by “relational goods,” not by financial or other material goods. Relational goods are the benefits that arise from relationships and other social connections, and, significantly, the strongest of these benefits are tied to “*non-instrumental* social interaction.”<sup>59</sup> There is also a theological parallel for this observation, as the relational anthropology of a human being made in the image and likeness of the Holy Trinity suggests a natural affinity (and thus eudaimonistic fittingness) for relationships, especially relationships in which the inherent distinctiveness of each party is affirmed for its own sake.<sup>60</sup> In both empirical and theological terms, then, the slothfulness of our liberal individualist ethos frustrates human happiness.

The narrative of liberal individualism is laden with the values of the vice of sloth, and through those values this narrative “function[s] to prevent the human good, the common good, and human happiness.”<sup>61</sup> As such, we are confident in our diagnosis of liberal individualism—and, by association, sloth—as a structural vice. This diagnosis provides a useful basis for constructing a solution because the twofold description of the individualist ethos as a structure and a vice indicates that the problem will best be countered by structures that promote opposing virtues. Although there are a number of structures that could be well suited to this task, church communities are especially valuable since moral formation is a central part of their mission. Given what has been said above about religious communities’ existing efforts to create alternatives to

America's unique individualist ethos, the way churches go about this task will be particularly important. If the structures of vice in American society are going to be transformed, churches will need to promote their alternative visions as reforms within rather than retreats from the broader culture of individualism. Furthermore, these communities will need to harness their power as agents of collective action, providing the structural supports to encourage personal formation not just in virtue generally but also in the specific virtues that can oppose sloth in its structural forms. While the well-documented rise of the "Nones" suggests that religious communities will face an uphill battle in this project, churches that embrace their structural role might actually appeal to the large portion of the unaffiliated that still openly longs for community, thereby extending the reach of the alternative vision.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, the effects of a church's structural reforms should expand beyond its members anyway, so the success of this project does not hinge exclusively on religious affiliation. Given the importance of this task and the real opposition it will face, we would like to close by proposing two essential virtues for this type of structural reform.<sup>63</sup>

Since sloth is, in the classical formulation retrieved here, a vice against charity, charity itself offers a helpful corrective to sloth's structural instantiations because this virtue can be used to establish a counternarrative and an alternative structure to effects of liberal individualism. First, charity directly addresses the myth of self-sufficiency by reminding us that "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "*Charity in truth* places [us] before the astonishing experience of gift," and "because it is a gift received by everyone, charity in truth is a force that builds community," bringing people together with a shared narrative of inherent interdependence.<sup>64</sup> Second, charity also directs the individual away from exclusive self-concern by introducing a proper ordering of love that necessarily acknowledges not only God but also the neighbor whom God also loves.<sup>65</sup> As Eric Gregory has artfully demonstrated, this understanding of charity is not some parochial tool exclusive to Christians but a helpful category for the revitalization of civic commitment in a pluralistic context and thus a corrective to the isolated individualism of our preferred cultural trope and peculiar structural vice.<sup>66</sup> Finally, charity is oriented to structural reform. Martin Luther King Jr. made this abundantly clear sixty years ago when he spoke of "the beloved community" as the end game of the civil rights movement, suggesting that it was the love of God, agape, that would inform the restoration of a just and equitable society.<sup>67</sup> Significantly, King also argued that this love directs our attention to "the unjust system, rather than the individuals who are caught in that system."<sup>68</sup> With this claim, King points toward charity as a structural virtue capable of motivating actions targeted at systemic change without turning anyone into an enemy. In all three of these ways, then, charity indicts the divisive narrative of absolute autonomy and exclusive self-concern that turned sloth into America's ironic structural vice

while simultaneously creating the dispositions for a renewed sense of shared commitment and mutual concern in civic life.

Beyond the restoration of charity, another promising project is recovering the virtue of solidarity and the ethos of the common good. John Paul II affirms that solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes” of others but “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.”<sup>69</sup> Solidarity, then, is a virtuous disposition that recognizes human interdependence and seeks the well-being of each person and society as a whole. Churches and social groups that promote solidarity and the common good will provide additional correctives to the selfish and isolationist tendencies of sloth and liberal individualism by advocating for justice and peace.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, liberal individualism arose in part as a response to the common good tradition, which came to be seen as a tyrannical imposition of a single vision of the good life on a pluralistic society.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, there are ways to promote the common good that are pluralistic and integrationist, not monolithic and authoritarian. For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues against cultural paternalism, where all must assimilate to the dominant culture, and liberal multiculturalism, where there is dignity in difference but everyone ought to be left alone, and instead affirms the goal of establishing the common good through collaborative service projects.<sup>72</sup> By working together, Sacks contends that individuals and social groups can retain their distinct identities while forging common bonds and nurturing relationships. Such collaboration also develops dispositions of civil deliberation and charitable interpretation, which can sustain dialogue that reveals common ground.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the ethos of the common good fosters just dealings between persons, inspires institutions and communities of social action that promote shared benefits, and strives for the just distribution of these benefits so that everyone in society enjoys them.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, a society ordered to the common good is characterized by friendship and the virtue of solidarity rather than suspicion, conflict, and the desire to be free from responsibilities.

By renewing charity and solidarity and by nurturing a commitment to the common good, religious communities and other structures can counteract the various harms associated with sloth and liberal individualism. It follows that the structural defense of love and service of God and others—not hard work ordered to individual gain—are the true remedies of the structural vice of sloth.

## Notes

1. This individualist/collectivist dyad is commonly used in social scientific research. Daphna Oyserman, Heather M. Coon, and Markus Kemmelmeier, “Rethinking Individualism and Collectivism: Evaluation of Theoretical Assumptions and Meta-Analyses,” *Psychological Bulletin* 128, no. 1 (2002): 3–72, at 3, 4–5.

2. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind; Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 95.
3. Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 19, see also 21–22, 26.
4. *Ibid.*, 19–21, 35–36; cf. Edward Grabb, Douglas Baer, and James Curtis, “The Origins of American Individualism: Reconsidering the Historical Evidence,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 4 (1999): 511–33, at 515–19, 522.
5. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). For a brief summary of this component of his overall argument, see 4–6.
6. *Ibid.*, 6.
7. A fine example is Thomas Jefferson’s defense of individual rights, which admitted an exception of sorts on the basis of the claim that “every man is under the natural duty of contributing to the necessities of the society; and this is all the laws should enforce on him.” Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Francis W. Gilmer” (June 7, 1816), in *Jefferson: Political Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143.
8. Jordon B. Barkalow, “Changing Patterns of Obligation and the Emergence of Individualism in American Political Thought,” *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (September 2004): 491–500, at 496–98.
9. Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13–15.
10. Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 73.
11. Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), v–viii; Charles Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187–210, at 187–89; and Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 116–17.
12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 882.
13. Grabb, Baer, and Curtis, “Origins of American Individualism,” 524–25.
14. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 890.
15. *Ibid.*, 889.
16. *Ibid.*, 884.
17. Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3–13. Ironically, this narrative required a misreading of Alger’s work, but it persisted nonetheless. See Ralph A. Carey, “The Horatio Alger Myth,” *Fides et Historia* 5, no. 1–2 (Fall/Spring 1972–73): 1–9, at 1–5.
18. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 250–73.
19. *Ibid.*, 280–84.
20. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 20, 27, 44, 163.
21. *Ibid.*, 23; see also Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 4–5, 25–54.

22. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 31–64, 96–97.
23. For example, see John Rawls’s “political conception of the person,” which defends the existence of more permanent nonpolitical commitments that are constitutive of the person and also insists on the role of responsibility in the exercise of a person’s political liberty. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 29–35.
24. Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 174–91; Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 3–4; and Glendon, *Rights Talk*.
25. For instance, the Mormon Church in Utah has fostered a sense of communal commitment that has allowed the state to combat poverty quite successfully. Megan McArdle, “How Utah Keeps the American Dream Alive,” *Bloomberg*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-03-28/how-utah-keeps-the-american-dream-alive>.
26. See Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 11–12.
27. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), §12, 18–19; and St. John Cassian, *The Monastic Institutes: On the Training of a Monk and the Eight Deadly Sins*, trans. Jerome Bertram (London: St Austin Press, 1999), 10.I-III, 219–21.
28. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1948), qq. 23–33. Hereafter *ST*.
29. *ST* I-II, q. 31; II-II qq. 28, 35 a.2.
30. *ST* II-II q. 26.
31. *ST* II-II q. 23, aa. 1–2.
32. *ST* II-II qq. 28–33.
33. *ST* II-II q. 35 a.1.
34. *ST* I-II qq. 1–5, II-II q. 35, a.4, ad. 3.
35. *ST* II-II q. 35, a.1.
36. *ST* II-II q. 35, a.4.
37. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 86.
38. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 64. For Calvin’s discussion of work, see John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, ed. and trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1981), chap. 1–2.
39. Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 104.
40. *Ibid.*, 109, 182–83n34.
41. *Ibid.*, 64–68.
42. *Ibid.*, 69.
43. *Ibid.*, 119.
44. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 403. Hereafter *CD*.
45. *CD* IV.2, 405–6. These relationships are the heart of Barth’s special ethics in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 47–685.

46. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 23.
47. *CD IV.2*, 458.
48. *Ibid.*, 405.
49. *Ibid.*, 456–60, 473–75.
50. *Ibid.*, 473–74. Barth explains the theological significance of rest in his treatment of the Sabbath. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 213–28.
51. *CD IV.2*, 474–76.
52. *Ibid.*, 420–21, 436–37, 441–43, 468–69, 476–78.
53. Barth does not develop an explicit virtue ethic, but he is concerned with the impact of sin and grace on human character and dispositions. See Gerald P. McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 275–79.
54. *ST II-II* q. 58 aa.5–7, 9, 12.
55. Daniel J. Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (May 2011): 341–57, at 355.
56. *Ibid.*, 354. His other examples are institutions, practices, and “paradigmatic figure[s].”
57. See Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), §24, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).
58. Ted V. McAllister, “Cars, Individualism, and the Paradox of Freedom in a Mass Society,” *Front Porch Republic*, October 14, 2011, <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2011/10/cars-individualism-and-the-paradox-of-freedom-in-a-mass-society/>; and James McIntosh, Roman Trubka, Jeff Kenworthy, and Peter Newman, “The Role of Urban Form and Transit in City Car Dependence: Analysis of 26 Global Cities from 1960 to 2000,” *Transportation Research Part D* 33 (2014): 95–110, at 108–9.
59. Luigino Bruni and Luca Stanca, “Watching Alone: Relational Goods, Television and Happiness,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 65, nos. 3–4 (March 2008): 506–28, at 507 (emphasis added). See also Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, “Very Happy People,” *Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 81–84; and Leonard Becchetti, Alessandra Pelloni, and Fiammetta Rossetti, “Relational Goods, Sociability, and Happiness,” *Kyklos: International Review for Social Sciences* 61, no. 3 (August 2008): 343–63.
60. See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 148–49.
61. See again Daly, “Structures of Virtue,” 355.
62. See Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 170–80; and Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, “How We Gather,” last modified April 2015, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/581d0228d482e9a9a7e8609b/t/5820b498e6f2e1714cf831bb/1478538399796/How\\_We\\_Gather\\_Digital\\_Update.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/581d0228d482e9a9a7e8609b/t/5820b498e6f2e1714cf831bb/1478538399796/How_We_Gather_Digital_Update.pdf).
63. There are important parallels between this project for churches and Kevin Ahern’s description of Catholic nongovernmental organizations as “structures of grace,” especially insofar as he similarly aligns these structures with the two virtues we emphasize here. Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Common Good* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 130–38.
64. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), §34, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (original emphasis).
65. See again Aquinas, *ST II-II*, qq. 23–26. Significantly, Aquinas does not reject self-concern altogether; he merely places it within a larger ordering of love.

66. Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
67. Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 5–9, at 8–9. While talk of *agape* in this context might trigger concerns about the prioritization of other-regard over legitimate self-concern, King’s vision places more emphasis on mutuality through its orientation to a shared community, thereby embracing the commitments that feminist critics of an *agape*-focused ethic offer as correctives. See, for example, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “*Agape* in Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 69–83.
68. Martin Luther King Jr., “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 43–53, at 47.
69. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (December 30, 1987), §38. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html).
70. Aquinas holds that God is the common good, so we can see sloth’s sorrow at God as sorrow at goods shared with others. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence Part I*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), III.17.
71. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9–17. Liberal political theorists argue that the imposition of a vision of the common good led to the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which are a case in point for a political order characterized by freedom from coercion and forced responsibilities to others. See, for example, Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxiii–xvi, xxxix, 303.
72. Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
73. Hollenbach, *Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 138–46.
74. *Ibid.*, 190–200.