experience even religion as divisive rather than unifying. Wherever one turns, there seems to be increasing antagonism and division. Against this cultural backdrop, one can describe the Franciscan moral vision as a middle or mediating tradition, incorporating within itself both sides of various polarities. By living within the tension created by these polarities, it can provide a fitting alternative to many contemporary points of view.

The previous chapters analyzed the Franciscan moral tradition and, in doing so, used contemporary ethical issues and situations to illustrate elements of the tradition. This chapter and the one that follows will move a step further by trying to bring the Franciscan vision into dialogue with contemporary culture and ethics. This chapter will begin by investigating some of the contours of contemporary culture, especially contemporary Western culture — a fascination for freedom and autonomy, an acknowledgment of relativity, and an appreciation of the growing complexity of contemporary life — and explaining how the Franciscan moral vision can be seen as a counterpoint to some dominant philosophies of today. It will then articulate constituents of the contemporary Franciscan moral stance. It will conclude by describing aspects of the theological anthropology that serve as a basis for a contemporary Franciscan vision.

I. Contemporary Culture

This book began by explaining the spiritual and theological vision that was embodied in the example and writings of Francis and Clare of Assisi and later developed by the great medieval Franciscan theologians, especially St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus. However, we do not see the world in the same way as did Francis or Clare or Bonaventure or Scotus. Even if we are not Westerners, many of us have been influenced for good or for ill by the history of Western culture, especially that of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Many of us have been formed by the culture of the United States with its democracy, self-reliance, individualism, and a command to evaluate the Franciscan moral vision in terms of today’s Western culture — an acknowledgement of relativism and an appreciation of the complexity of contemporary life. If our own cultural framework analysis may help us become aware of our view and the frameworks out of which that awareness will help us become readers of the core elements of that vision and contemporary culture.

A. Freedom

1. Freedom as Autonomy

One of the hallmarks of culture has been its emphasis on freedom. In the Enlightenment desire for religious domination, this emphasis extended to other areas of life, for example, government. More recently, freedom has stood simply and exclusively as many competing options. In the understanding of freedom as choice — further evolved into the possibility of a choice that one made — it should not be questioned by others. That one made one’s choice as criterion by which any choice was evaluated.

This mindset led to an individual. Freedom came to serve as a mechanism for discovery and self-identification. If I want, my choices become the criterion.

1 See, for example, Christian Smith, of Emerging Adulthood (New York: Owl.
of the United States with its Enlightenment values of democracy, self-reliance, individualism, and autonomy. As we evaluate the Franciscan moral vision and its relation to contemporary culture, we need to analyze some dominant elements of today’s Western culture: a fascination for freedom, an acknowledgement of relativity and relationality, and an appreciation of the complexity of the modern world. Even if our own cultural framework is not that of the West, this analysis may help us become more aware of our own points of view and the frameworks out of which we view reality. Such awareness will help us become more attentive and critical readers of the core elements in the Franciscan moral vision and open a dialogue between the great historical framers of that vision and contemporary ethics.

A. Freedom

1. Freedom as Autonomy and Choice

One of the hallmarks of contemporary Western culture has been its emphasis on freedom of choice. Rooted originally in the Enlightenment desire of seeking freedom from religious domination, this emphasis upon choice soon expanded to other areas of life, for example, the freedom to choose one’s government. More recently, freedom has come to be understood simply and exclusively as the ability to choose among many competing options. In the last fifty years, this understanding of freedom as choice – aided by post-modernism – further evolved into the position that a person’s choices should not be questioned by others, let alone judged by them. That one made one’s choice authentically became the sole criterion by which any choice was to be evaluated.¹

This mindset led in turn to a strong emphasis on the individual. Freedom came to serve as the social context for self-discovery and self-identification. Since I can choose what I want, my choices become the core expression of who I am

and further define who I wish to be. While not implying that individuality is simply the sum of one's choices, one can say that such freedom of choice provides the grounding for the current emphasis on the importance of self-determination. Who I am and become is not determined by my family, my social or economic class, or my education. Rather I believe that I have the freedom to become who I choose to be – even to continuously choose to be someone different. American culture especially has come to be seen as a culture of second chances, as this continuing freedom to choose re-creates individual identity. The strong social corollary of freedom of choice is the opening up of the social landscape for constantly creating new opportunities.

Democracy became the social expression of personal freedom of choice. Social contract theorists of the modern period developed the idea of government by the consent of the governed. Although it took generations for its extension to all races and genders, the reality of “one person one vote” triumphed. Each person was to examine the issues, participate in discussion, evaluate the candidates, but ultimately, in the privacy of the voting booth cast his or her vote expressing a personal verdict on the issues at hand. Government and social policy were truly to be with the consent of the governed.

The single word that best captures this understanding of freedom is autonomy. Implicit in this concept are the expectations that people will make their own choices and live by them. Each person is responsible for his or her choices, and so becomes the master of his or her life and destiny. Autonomy has been the foundation for much of Western culture and a powerful motivator for individuals to seek out their personal destiny. In the United States, the legal community began to define autonomy as the “right to be let alone.” The cultural assumption continues to be that, whatever the life event, I alone will decide – an assumption that has had immense implications for several forms of contemporary morality.

2 This definition, first found in Thomas M. Cooley, The Elements of Torts (1888), 29, was quoted by Justice Louis Brandeis, in “The Right to Privacy,” Harvard Law Review 4, 5 (December 15, 1890).
2. The Isolated Individual

One result of identifying freedom of choice with the multiplicity of personal options has been expanding the social and economic frameworks that supply these options. In many stores today, one can find brand after brand of the same product. The number of choices offered does not make consumers freer but can in actuality cheapen choice by virtue of the sheer number of options that are offered. This multiplicity of choices can lead to indifference: In light of the vast number of options we have, we choose randomly because we have no real basis on which to make the decision. Every option is simply that — an option, no better or worse than other options. Since we can always choose again, we do not need to ask whether this particular choice is good, bad, or indifferent. Our choices become simply preferences that we can reorder at any time, each individual choice having little or no meaning.

Ironically, the number of options can actually lead to a lack of freedom and a general dissatisfaction with our ability to choose. Seemingly unlimited options result in no choice at all because we cannot sufficiently examine the alternatives. This can result in indecision rather than choice. Rather than exercising freedom, I experience frustration. Although I think I am free, I do not act with personal freedom.

The notion of autonomy can also lead us to assume that we are self-made persons, the products of our choices, our work, our efforts, our ambitions. We believe that we alone are responsible for who we have become. But this affirmation of self-reliance is often illusory. Our choices are never simply autonomous. Indeed, they are often tethered to forces that direct both the range of our choices and even our identities. The range of options from which we choose is often determined by factors beyond our control. Rather than autonomous individuals, we become the victims of the marketers of “new and improved” products and of consumer culture.

Thomas A. Shannon
A final consequence of understanding freedom exclusively as choice and a desire to be a self-made person can be isolation and abandonment. Having made our choices, we are left with them. Having relied upon oneself, the individual has no one else to turn to for assistance. Since I have made myself I do not need anyone else, I stand alone. I have no reason to want or expect help, for I must make all decisions by myself. Having chosen, I now live with my choices, at least until the next time I choose, it is my choice after all. I have no one to whom to turn in case of need or crisis. Culture recognizes an element of truth here in the expression: “You’ve made your bed, now lie in it.”

3. The Franciscan Perspective: Individuality as Gift from God and Freedom as Commitment to the Good

As we explored the Franciscan moral vision, we encountered an understanding of freedom that is quite different from that discussed above. The Franciscan moral tradition, especially in the writings of Blessed John Duns Scotus, has demonstrated a profound respect for the individual. Scotus’s principle of haecceitas, for example, explains that individualization “must be intrinsic, unique, and proper to the being itself…. It must be incapable of reproduction … the undivided individual of each being. It can only be known by direct acquaintance, not from any consideration of common nature.”

The tradition thus emphasizes the irreplaceable value of each individual created by God.

The Franciscan moral vision also emphasizes the possibility of a dynamic realization of creative and loving freedom of each individual in response to God’s love (Characteristic Two). The Franciscan tradition does not explain freedom in terms of the number of options from which we make (often indifferent) choices but rather as the commitment to the good. This sort of freedom is not simply doing what one wants but grows out of a profound self-mastery. It is not an attribute of the isolated individual but rather with and for others.

In the Franciscan tradition journey of ongoing conversion to respond freely and generally for example, maintains that for a multiplicity of choices but rather and how we choose. In his unity is more important than as that guide moral decision make preference. Similarly, Scotus did life in terms of a balance of the affectio commodi, our desire for fulfillment and the affectio justi that inspires us to search for.

Scotus calls the seat of our understandings, freedom grows from others but by searching for in community by being grasp.

Morality and aesthetics are rel.

B. Relativity

An important distinction the twentieth century was that between society. As developed by philosophers and Karl Popper, this notion of non-authoritarian and responsive ones, which, they contend, conflict changing natural laws. Within society, the notions of history and important. Applying this broad:

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4 See Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure: Thought, and Writings* (New York: New

5 See *Ordinatio II, d. 6*, in Allan B. V. *Morality* (Washington: CUA Press, 1997)

6 Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1904)