

Article

A Neurocognitive Approach Reveals Paul's Embodied Emotional Strategies

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Abstract: Joy is a central theme in Philippians. Joy is also a central emotional habit Paul deploys and encourages as a strategy for building community. In this paper, the examination of Philippians through recent developments in the neurocognitive study of emotions first illuminates how Paul cultivates emotional habits, like joy. Second, a neurocognitive approach to understanding emotions can explain how repeatedly choosing joy functions to alleviate suffering by restoring balance in the nervous system. Finally, shared emotional habits with the Philippian community, like shared somatic practices, build sustaining connections among the members. Intentional deployment of emotional practices, as Paul demonstrates and encourages in the Philippians, is a strategy for building the body of Christ. Such a neurocognitive understanding of emotional habits and bodily practices among community members in the Christ body points to a corporate experience of shared healing and neurocognitive resilience. Might we consider this somatic embodiment of shared emotions, what Paul calls “the same mind that is in Christ Jesus”, also a participation in Christ’s *soteria* (healing/salvation)?

Keywords: joy; suffering; Philippians; St. Paul; habits; emotions; neurocognition



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1. Introduction

Joy is a central theme in Philippians. Joy is also a central emotional habit Paul deploys and encourages as a strategy for building community. In this paper, the examination of Philippians through recent developments in the neurocognitive study of emotions first illuminates how Paul cultivates emotional habits, like joy. Second, a neurocognitive approach to understanding emotions can explain how repeatedly choosing joy functions to alleviate suffering by restoring balance in the nervous system. Finally, shared emotional habits within the Philippian community, like shared somatic practices, build sustaining connections among the members. Intentional deployment of emotional practices, as Paul demonstrates and encourages among the Philippians, is a strategy for building the body of Christ. Such a neurocognitive understanding of emotional habits and bodily practices among community members in the Christ body points to a corporate experience of shared healing and neurocognitive resilience. Might we consider this somatic embodiment of shared emotions, what Paul calls “the same mind that is in Christ Jesus”, also a participation in Christ’s *soteria* (healing/ salvation)?

“Most agree that there are four basic emotions—fear, anger, sadness, and joy...”.

(John J. Ratey, *A User's Guide to the Brain*, 226)

Scholars and pastors alike have recognized the joyful tone in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Still, or perhaps because of this recognition, scholars have regularly overlooked Philippians as a source for Paul's theological thought. When scholars expand the genre of “theology” to include “pastoral” or “practical theology”, Philippians has received much deserved theological attention beyond the Christ hymn.¹ Still, central emotions, like joy, rarely figured in to these theological analyses.² This lacunae raises the question: how can joy, just as central to Paul's letter and message to the Philippians as the Christ hymn, remain unconsidered in most analyses of Paul's theology and Christology? If Paul's joy is real,

and he really wants the Philippians to cultivate a habit of joy (“rejoice with me”), what is the role of this emotion in Paul’s theology? Can emotions even be considered in a Pauline theology? If emotions are central to Paul’s thinking in Philippians, how does joy contribute to Paul’s theological strategy for building the Christ body?

The first step is to demonstrate the centrality of joy as an emotion Paul and the Philippians experience beyond its appearance as a literary or rhetorical theme in Paul’s letter. Ryan Schellenberg seeks to connect the rhetorical function of a joyful theme to the real experience Paul’s epistolary language elicits in the recipients (Schellenberg 2022, pp. 79–98). Building on other analyses of the *philophronetic* role of emotions in ancient letters, Schellenberg examines the “affective impact” of Paul’s “epistolary practices” in Philippians that produce a unifying “collective emotion” in the community across geographical distances. Thus, collective joy results from Paul’s practice of “constantly praying” for the Philippians (Phil 1:4). In this way, Schellenberg moves beyond the two-dimensional level of rhetorical impact and “literary” practice to describe the emotional and somatic impact of shared joy, “the rewards of common feeling” in the bodily experience of both sender and receiver. He writes the following:

In Philippians and 1 Thessalonians, *philophronetic topoi* and the emotional norms they encode provide the basic cultural logic undergirding these prayers’ effective work. Compensating more or less successfully for the somatic signals otherwise constitutive of collective emotions, Paul’s explicit evocation of presumptively shared emotion nourishes the fantasy of presence and thus the rewards of common feeling, which include emotional sustenance for Paul himself and, if his letter is successful, a renewed feeling of solidarity among his addressees that reinforces their shared loyalty to Paul and his Lord. (Schellenberg, 79)

Schellenberg recognizes key elements of joy in Paul’s thinking and practice. First, Schellenberg sees that joy provides Paul with “emotional sustenance” over the time he is in prison. This is not a one-time emotion, but a sustaining emotional process. Second, joy is part of the “affective work” of Paul’s and the community’s prayers in Thessalonica and Philippi. Habits of praying with joy pervade across three geographical locations to hold these groups of Christ followers in “solidarity” and “loyalty”. Third, Schellenberg draws attention to the relationship between emotions and bodies.³ Paul and his communities share a “common feeling” that is usually indicated by “shared somatic signals constitutive of collective emotions”. Schellenberg’s work establishes the ways in which ancient epistolary rhetorical practices serve as a substitute for the author’s real bodily presence with the recipients and even across a distance, the letter still cultivates collective emotions among the Philippians and Thessalonians as if Paul were with them in person.⁴

While Schellenberg works to move beyond what happens in the letter, to describe what actually happens between Paul and the Philippians, he hedges on the “reality” of their collective emotions. Thus, Schellenberg describes Paul’s epistolary sharing of emotions as “presumptive”, nourishing a “fantasy of presence”. This hedging misses the very real intermediary, Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus carries the letter of practices and emotions to the Philippians and reads it aloud among them.⁵ Epaphroditus’ embodied, somatic practices, his very real rejoicing, his love of Philippians, his posture of humility as a servant-minister, and his in-person expression of Paul’s emotions convey directly and in real time the somatic and social impact of collective emotions. A letter is more than a “substitute” for the sender, a letter is actually read by real people who are members of the body of Christ with Paul.⁶ When Timothy follows Epaphroditus, bringing more news to the Philippians, his real presence, voice, and emotions further embody Paul’s presence in the community. This is not a “fantasy of presence”, but through Timothy, who has been with Paul, it is a touchable somatic intimacy shared by the collected Christ followers in Philippi. In other words, Paul’s epistolary performance of “presumptively shared emotions” read aloud together in Philippi is the strategic, emotional result of “renewed solidarity” that Paul seeks.

Paul’s co-workers and “ministers” convey Paul’s real presence and bring the practices, like prayer, and the emotions, like joy, to the Philippians. Their somatic presence is critical

for cultivating the shared “collective emotions” Schellenberg identifies. Recognizing the entanglement of shared practice and collectively experienced “affect”, the emotion of joy, is critical to understanding Paul’s strategies for building the Christ community.

2. Neurocognitive Approaches to Emotion: Making Joy a Habit

[Joy] is both the physiological experience of warmth and satisfaction and the cognitive assessment that this is the way things should be. Joy, happiness, and pleasure are their own incentives; they are what make the survival and propagation of the species worthwhile (Ratey, 242).⁷

Using the work of neurocognitive scientists moves the analysis of Paul’s emotions from a rhetorical construction to a mutually experienced affect. In other words, by utilizing a neurocognitive approach, we can move beyond Schellenberg’s “fantasy of presence” to reveal how emotional practices *actually* affect the cognitive, emotional, and somatic wellbeing of Paul and his friends in Philippi.⁸ New evidence in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuropsychiatry can illumine Paul’s emotional strategies in Philippians and help us understand, and perhaps even practice, the embodied ways of living “in Christ” that Paul shares with his friends.⁹

In (Solomon 2001), Philosopher Robert Solomon brings together his lifelong study of human emotions and Philosophy with contemporary neurocognitive studies of emotions in the field of psychology. Emotions, he writes, are “essentially neurological” and “in part, a physiological phenomenon” (Solomon 15–16). That is, emotions involve the mind—which oversees the nervous system anchored in the brain—and the body. This view of emotions mirrors Aristotle’s explication of human emotion, particularly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For both Aristotle and neurocognitive approaches, emotions are processes (not a single event, or flash of feeling) that shift and change over time. While emotions may arise in an instant, they become an ongoing experience. And, argues Solomon, people can choose their emotions, shape them, and even cultivate them.

Solomon uses anger as his first example.

Anger is much more than a basic emotion or a set of feelings. It is a way of interacting with another person (or with a situation or a task) and a way of situating oneself in the world. . . In other words, an emotion is a self-aware engagement in the world. . . (19)

When people choose their emotions in consistent, repeated ways, they form emotional habits. Solomon continues.

Emotions are often habits, to some extent learned but also the product of practice and repetition. It is very rare for a person to get angry *just once*. . . Anger tends to be recurring and habitual. And here is one of the many places where we can really learn something from the neurologists. Emotional habits are the products of pathways well worn and chemical dependencies well established. . . we become addicted to our emotions. (21)

For the human brain, “well worn pathways” are easier to choose. Thus, the stronger the chemical, or neurological, pathway we carve in the brain with our emotional habit, the easier it becomes for the brain to deploy the chosen emotion, the more deeply embedded the specific emotional habit becomes in the brain, and so on.

Solomon similarly describes the neurological process that moves joy from a unique and local experience in response to a situation to a repeatedly chosen habit and to a state of mind used to engage the world.

So too, on a happier note, the emotion of joy—joy about some particular event or the enjoyment of some particular activity—may well expand its scope to include other things and people associated with that event activity and may even become global, about everything. The joy becomes a mood—a really good mood—and with some luck and training it can come to define one’s life. (42)

“Training”, or reinforcing one’s choice and practice of joy, is the way one develops a single emotional response over time into a state of being or a state of mind. This state of mind, argues Solomon, governs how one engages and interprets the world. In fact, Solomon argues, emotions themselves are “strategies for getting along in the world. They are a means of motivating, guiding, influencing, and sometimes manipulating our own actions and attitudes as well as influencing and manipulating the actions and attitudes of others” (3).¹⁰

Solomon’s work that presents the ways in which philosophical and neurological approaches to the study of emotion mutually support one another can illumine the ways in which Paul’s emotional habit of joy in Philippians functions as a state of mind to aid his decisions about how to respond to others and to motivate his own behavior for others.

2.1. Joy Is a Process, Not a One-Time Feeling¹¹

In Philippians, Paul does not refer to joy as a one-time feeling. Rather, Paul presents his joy as a sustained and sustaining emotion that he experiences over time in his relationship with the Philippians from the “first day” of their shared ministry to the present. In Phil 1, Paul writes

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. . . . (Phil 1:11-13)

Paul’s practice of praying for the Philippians is constant, and the experience of joy accompanies the practice. This seems natural, as the Philippians are one of Paul’s least contentious communities and one of the most established and stable. Of course, he would regularly feel joy when thinking about them. But Paul’s constant joy is more than a reaction to positive circumstances. In 1:18, Paul also rejoices in response to a difficult situation. Other preachers wish him ill, “intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment” (1:17). To these antagonists, Paul intentionally responds with joy, rather than anger, fear, sadness, or any other possible emotion. “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice” (καί ἐν τούτῳ χαίρω· ἀλλὰ καὶ χαρήσομαι, 1:18). Paul’s experience of joy as an ongoing experience, rather than a one-time emotional flash, occurs in positive conditions and adverse situations.

The grammar of Philippians supports Paul’s narrative depiction of joy as an emotional state over time. Nine of the twelve verbal occurrences of “rejoice” in Philippians occur in the present continuous or present imperative tense (1:18, two in 2:17, two in 2:18, 3:1, and two in 4:4). Philippians 1:18 contains a present form and a future form. Here, Paul indicates that his present choice to rejoice; “I am rejoicing” continues progressively into the future, “and I will continue to rejoice”. Verse 2:28 occurs in the present subjunctive, indicating Paul’s desire that the Philippians “might rejoice” upon receiving Epaphroditus back into their community carrying this letter. Verse 4:10 is an imperfect (continuous action) verb, indicating that Paul began rejoicing when he received the Philippians’ thoughtful gifts in the recent past, and he now continues rejoicing in the present. Each use of the verb χαίρειν in Philippians specifies a continuous action, rather than defaulting to the simple description of an undefined action in the aorist form. The grammatical forms Paul repeatedly used in communicating his joy in this letter support the observation that Paul’s existential experience of joy is an ongoing, continuous emotion. And, just as an author chooses their grammatical forms, Paul’s personal reflection suggests further that Paul chooses his emotional responses.

2.2. Paul Chooses Joy as a Habit of Mind

Paul’s ongoing emotional state of joy is a deliberate choice that he characterizes as a state of mind. We see this choice in 1:4, where Paul chooses to pray for the Philippians constantly and “with joy.” In the next sentence, 1:7, Paul describes his joyful state of mind in prayer and his confidence about the Philippians before God as a right way of thinking (καθώς ἐστὶν δίκαιον ἡμεῖς τοῦτο φρονεῖν) about them.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Paul's "right way of thinking" in 1:7, or his "state of mind", refers back to 1:3–6; the sentence immediately prior that begins with Paul's emotions of gratitude (1:3) and joy (1:4). In this way, Paul characterizes his thinking, the state of mind he cultivates, as having emotional properties. These emotional properties (joy and gratitude) have an emotional cause and a behavioral cause. Emotionally, Paul and the Philippians love one another (indeed, they share a heart, 1:7).¹² In their behavior, the Philippians and Paul have cultivated an embodied "partnership," practicing ministry together over many years (1:7). Here, we see Paul's fundamental anthropology of emotions that characterize a state of mind and inform bodily action.

In what follows, Paul uses his mind, or thinking, to choose particular emotions and actions. First, as we saw above, Paul chooses joy in good times and in adversity. Of particular note, Paul even chooses joy in response to the extreme depredation and degradation he experiences in prison. An instantaneous or fleeting feeling would not address the existential needs one has in an ancient prison. Shaping an ongoing response or process through joy is more sustainable (1:4, 18).

Paul's deliberate choosing of joy occurs as Paul acknowledges the Philippians' worst fears. He is still in prison and is suffering in chains, and does not know when, or if, he will be released (1:19–26). He cannot give them concrete news to bolster their hope or optimism that his situation will turn out well.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the progress of the gospel (Kim 2015), so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ, and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. (Phil 1:16–18)

Paul does not obsess about the negative connotations of his imprisonment or the possibility that this imprisonment is the end for him. He does not succumb to negative emotions like fear, depression, exhaustion, fatigue, or physical pain. Instead, he reasons with his mind and seeks a positive outcome. "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice" (1:18). Paul's joy in response to suffering in prison becomes a habit over time, and the habit serves him well. He does not indulge reactionary flashes of emotions. His brain circuitry defaults to joy, his logical mind examines the situation through the lens of joy and finds a cause for rejoicing. Paul looks at the world and sees a reason to rejoice.

Likewise, Paul encourages the Philippians to share his practice of joy as an emotional habit that embodies a state of mind in imitation of Christ (2:5; 4:2). To practice this habit of joy, Paul gives the Philippians concrete reasons to rejoice in the letter itself. First, Paul describes the spread of the gospel message as an opportunity to rejoice (1:18–26). Next, the Philippians can rejoice at the promise that Timothy will soon come with more news of Paul's circumstances (2:22–23). Then, Paul will follow and visit them himself (2:24). In addition, Paul notes Epaphroditus' arrival in Philippi with this letter as cause for rejoicing (2:25–3:1). In Philippians 3, Paul even interprets his loss, suffering, and humiliation in prison as part of sharing the suffering and humiliation of Christ (3:7–11). By interpreting "the loss of all things" as an opportunity to "know Christ" through bodily experience, Paul presents the Philippians with one more opportunity to shift their emotional habit from sorrow, fear, and pain to joy. This ultimate cause for joy, Paul writes, is the promise that Christ will "transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory" (3:21). Thus, the Philippians can "join in imitating me and the examples you have in us" (3:17) because they too will experience transformation from loss to gain.

Paul demonstrates his own emotional habit of joy in the letter. He also provides the Philippians with circumstances he interprets as opportunities for them to join him

in rejoicing. In this way, the letter functions as a concrete, real-time experience for the Philippians to practice Paul's emotional habit of joy together and repeatedly. When the Philippians "join in imitating Paul" (3:17), Paul calls them "my joy and my crown" (4:1); their emotional practice complete Paul's joy (2:2). Furthermore, when they share their resources with Paul, Paul tells them that they have provided him with opportunities to "rejoice in the Lord greatly" because of their "revived concern for me" (4:10). In this context of offering each other reciprocal opportunities to feel joy and respond with joy to one another, Paul and the Philippians are already embodying Paul's final exhortation to "rejoice in the Lord always" and "again" to "rejoice" (4:3), even as they share Paul's "distress" (4:14). Across the letter, then, Paul reminds the Philippians they are already practicing joy with him, and they should continue this emotional practice even, and perhaps especially, as they open themselves to suffering members.

Consistently choosing joy in the face of hardship as Paul does creates an emotional habit that neurologically changes the brain. When Paul repeatedly rejoices in prison, rejoices at the spread of the gospel, rejoices at the Philippians' gift, rejoices that Epaphroditus is well, and seeks to share that joy with the Philippians by sending Epaphroditus to them, he is demonstrating an emotional habit of the mind. This habit—the culmination of consistent choices—influences how Paul sees the world. His emotional habits inform how he sees and interprets the world. This is the state of mind he seeks to share with the Philippians as they cultivate the practice of choosing joy.

2.3. Emotional Habits of Mind Influence Paul's Decision Making

Paul's decision making and interpreting the world through a mental habit of joy allow him to weigh his responses to others. In 1:15–18, Paul considers the different public players around him, the "brothers and sisters emboldened by my imprisonment," and weighs their motivations.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice. (Phil 1:15–18)

Paul displays no emotional anger at recognizing the "false motives or pure" (1:18). Paul does not choose to rage or lament the "envy and rivalry" (1:15) of others—the emotional habits they have chosen in seeking to bring Paul down. Those who operate from emotions of "envy and rivalry" see Paul as an obstacle to their own ambitions. Their emotional habit of mind motivates them, in Paul's opinion, "to increase my suffering in my imprisonment" (1:17). Paul has effectively wired his brain to choose differently.

Paul goes a step further. He carefully leads the Philippians through his process of mental discernment. He names the emotional habit that guides him. He names the opposite emotional habits that lead his "opponents" to desire and create more suffering for Paul. Rather than try to stir up the Philippians' emotions or increase their sympathy for himself by bad mouthing his rivals, Paul frames the passage in terms of benefit to the gospel. This is critical. He shows the Philippians that choosing a habit of joy actually keeps them focused on Christ's gospel, their "heavenly citizenship" (3), not earthly rivalries. The gospel is spreading, Paul writes, exercise your joy and do not succumb to the suffering others aim to cause you; choose joy.

In Philippians 2, Paul again demonstrates choosing joy to guide his mind's decisions and his actions. Learning that Paul was in prison, his Philippian supporters sent Epaphroditus to "minister to [Paul's] need" (2:25). Epaphroditus fell ill on the journey, increasing Paul's sorrow in prison (2:27), and the Philippians' concerns. Paul writes that he chooses to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippians because Epaphroditus has "been longing for all of you" (2:26) and "in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again" (2:27). Paul seeks the Philippians' joy and acts accordingly. He urges the Philippians a second time to

“welcome [Epaphroditus bearing this letter] then in the Lord with all joy” (2:28). And, in Philippians 4, Paul rejoices again, offering his gratitude for the resources the Philippians have sent with Epaphroditus (4:10). Indeed, their sharing of resources with Paul has been a regular practice when they consider his work in the gospel. Paul’s response to their gifts is to continue to rejoice (1:3–5) and raise the gifts in offering to God, as a priest raises the community’s sacrifice at the altar (4:18–19). (Fogg 2006). Even in prison, Paul rejoices because the Philippians’ gifts and support demonstrate their solidarity with him and their ministry at his side in the gospel.

Cultivating joy in this letter, even more than hope, is a critical choice. The cultivation of joy in the midst of suffering is so critical that Paul encourages the Philippians to “imitate” him (3:17) by also choosing joy (2:17–18). They are not in prison, but Paul recognizes they are worried and anxious and sending their last resources with Epaphroditus to try to help Paul. Their state of mind is compromised. When even that gesture of help seems to fall short, other emotions may arise in Philippi—anger, frustration, and impotence. Paul heads off these other emotions by encouraging them to rejoice. Then, he assures them that their “ministry” has not fallen short, that Epaphroditus is faithful on their behalf, and that Christ will be magnified in Paul’s chains. He urges the Philippians to share his joy just as they have chosen to share his suffering (1:7). Choosing joy will sustain their solidarity with Paul’s suffering and strengthen them in their own anxious suffering and pain.

2.4. Shared Emotional Habits Build Community in Real Space and Time

Paul’s careful reflection on his own emotions of suffering and joy are part of his community-building strategy with the Philippians. The strategy itself is existential. Strengthening the hearts, minds, and actions of each member of the body of Christ. Paul aims to sustain himself in prison and to sustain the community of Philippian Christians who are so worried about him in this difficult time. Paul argues that he is surviving the suffering of imprisonment because of the Philippians’ partnership with him in the gospel (1:5). When they rejoice like Paul, they too will flourish and survive their hardships.

The strategy is also communal. Paul and the Philippians are not alone; they stand together. They belong to one community, one body of Christ. As members, they share each other’s emotions (painful or pleasurable) and resources so that the whole Christ body flourishes. This existential and communal strategy operates as a form of circulatory or, perhaps better, respiratory system, energized by the one spirit to nourish and cultivate a shared, common Christ mind and body (Phil 2:1–5).¹³ The Christ body thrives when members conform themselves to Christ’s mind, and that mind shapes their emotional habits in the world.

3. Cultivating a Capacity for Joy: The Pain–Pleasure Principle

The term “emotion” is derived from the Latin term *movere*—to move. . . Emotion is movement outward, a way of communicating our most important internal states and needs. (Ratey, 227)

While Paul clearly chooses to cultivate a habit of joy in prison, others, scholars included, might view Paul’s joy as a strange or even discordant choice given the reality of pain, suffering, and death experienced in ancient prisons.¹⁴ Robert Solomon discusses the social disapprobation arising when “displaying one’s joy in inappropriate circumstances, say at a funeral” (184), or in prison. Solomon continues with the following:

There are people, however, who feel joy in most joyless circumstances. Extreme examples were those rare prisoners in German concentration camps who managed to remain joyful despite their ultimate degradation and the constant threat of death. . . their joyfulness may well seem inappropriate to most people. (185)

Recent scholarly work by Elsa Tamez in the Wisdom Commentary series on “Philippians” addresses the problem of discordant, or seemingly “inappropriate”, joy by interviewing Christian prisoners incarcerated for their faith (Tamez 2002, pp. 1–122). Like Paul, the prisoners Tamez highlights all experience “feeling an increase in their inner strength due to

their faith in Christ as well as in what they do. They also express a very particular joy that helps them to endure their vulnerability” (Tamez 35). For this handful of people, joy is a stabilizing emotion in times of physical and psychic suffering. Thus, at least anecdotally, a habit of joy helps cultivate resilience and existential resources that people draw on in times of pain and suffering.¹⁵

Viewing joy in neurocognitive terms moves us beyond anecdotal evidence to understand how Paul’s practice of joy in prison functions to balance the pain and suffering he experiences.¹⁶ Cognitive studies, like Anna Lembke’s *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, show that the more intense the (negative) experience of pain, the deeper one’s capacity for a (positive) pleasurable feeling, in Paul’s case, joy. Cognitive neurologists call this the pain–pleasure principle. Lembke explains that in the human brain, pain and pleasure are co-located and, therefore, fundamentally interrelated. “Pleasure and pain work like opposite sides of a balance” (2). While complex chemical processes are involved, the principle is simple.¹⁷ The brain constantly seeks to establish equilibrium in the nervous system. Neurologists call this equilibrium “homeostasis”. Homeostasis is the state of neurological balance where the brain perceives neither pain nor pleasure. In other words, human brains seek a neutral state—no suffering (pain) to avoid, and no reward (pleasure) to acquire. In this understanding of the brain, pain refers to a constellation of “negative” sensations that range from discomfort, hunger, craving, and desire, to unbearable physical, psychic, or emotional pain. For our purposes, the brain registers any discomfort as “pain”—whether one perceives that discomfort as physical, emotional, or psychic. Pleasure, then, is the opposite constellation of “positive” emotions one experiences as feeling good, such as satisfaction, wellbeing, comfort, joy, and even ecstasy. Because pain and pleasure are co-located and mutually affecting, as pleasure increases, an equal and opposite feeling of pain will follow. If the balance does not occur from external stimulus (satisfaction of a hunger craving by eating), then the brain will manufacture the chemicals to restore the balance. Likewise, when there is pain, the brain seeks (externally) or creates (internally) equal and opposite feelings of pleasure until reaching homeostasis in the system again.¹⁸

In her book *Dopamine Nation*, psychiatrist and addiction expert Anna Lembke describes the pain–pleasure principle as a seesaw that seeks to rest in a horizontal plane but is constantly nudged or pushed out of balance by circumstances (50–58). The brain autonomously seeks to return to horizontal, or homeostasis. It is self-adapting, and, independent of our conscious awareness, the brain adjusts its own chemical production of neurotransmitters in relation to our physical and emotional habits—our regular patterns of behavior. This autonomous adjustment is called neurological adaptation. The brain learns and adjusts the pathways of its own operations. For all brains then, homeostasis is an adaptive, shifting set point.

We have all experienced this. For example, the caffeine in the first cup of coffee we drink has a greater effect on our system than the 30th or the 130th. The first dose of caffeine swings the seesaw widely. The brain adjusts to the habitual pleasure shot of caffeine and after three weeks of one cup a day, we no longer feel the “pleasure”. The brain has adapted to a new set point in homeostasis. We discover that new set point when we stop the daily habit and suffer the “pain” of withdrawing from caffeine pleasure that the brain had incorporated into its configuration of homeostasis.

This is true for athletes as well. Athletes who practice regularly stretch and strain their system capacity to increase muscle, speed, and performance. Pushing one’s physical limits to increase capacity is painful. But, at the end of a workout, the brain responds to the pain and releases endorphins to repair the athlete’s body. The endorphins feel great, giving rise to the slogan “no pain, no gain.” Endorphins are a pleasure-producing neurotransmitter that the brain releases to counter the pain registered in the neurological system. This pleasure can motivate athletes to train again, perhaps harder, the next day in anticipation of (eventually) feeling good. Training through the pain, receiving the reward at the end, and repeating the procedure ensures increased athleticism and also changes an athlete’s set point for enduring pain. As the athlete builds muscle (a longer-term response to habitual

demands on the system), the pain lessens. The pain–pleasure principle helps explain how increased pain (discomfort, hunger, desire, need, want, loss, disappointment) forces the brain to increase pleasurable neurotransmitters to adjust to a new pain set point or to animate the body to seek relief in a counter form of pleasure in order to restore homeostasis.

3.1. Pain and Pleasure in Paul's Imprisonment

Richard Cassidy has documented the brutality of prisons in the first-century Roman world (Cassidy 2001). Torture was expected. Survival rates were low. Chronic illness often followed those who did escape prison. For most today, this kind of regular physical suffering is unimaginable.

Paul describes his experience of pain and suffering in multiple letters.¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:23–24, 27–28 offers Paul's most comprehensive list of hardships. His description of prison is consistent with Cassidy's historical reconstructions. Paul describes

imprisonments with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. . . . [I experienced] toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

In Philippians, Paul is less graphic but still refers to his increased “suffering” (1:7) in prison. He recognizes the Philippians share “the same” suffering “that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (1:29–30). He highlights his experience of wearing shackles (ὥστε τοὺς δεσμούς μου 1:13), “going hungry. . . and of being in need” (4:11). Unlike 2 Corinthians, in Philippians, Paul underplays any physical pain he may be experiencing in prison, saying only that he would prefer leaving his “flesh” to die and rise with Christ, “for that is far better” than remaining in his current circumstances (1:23–24).²⁰ Clearly, Paul knows pain and suffering over a prolonged period or even prolonged intermittent periods of his life.

In addition to his physical pain, Paul describes his emotional “anxiety for all the churches” in 2 Cor 11:28. This emotional anxiety also arises in Philippians, where Paul expresses concern for the Philippians as they worry about Epaphroditus and for Epaphroditus himself when he falls ill on the way to help Paul (Phil 2:19–25). The Philippian community learns that Epaphroditus has had a setback on his journey to see Paul and to deliver much-needed resources to him in prison. Paul is anxious and “eager to send him” back to the Philippians so they may receive Epaphroditus and know he is well (2:28). Likewise, Paul knows Epaphroditus “has been distressed because you [Philippians] heard that he was ill” (2:26). The community members are experiencing dysregulated nervous systems. Their emotions are out of balance, or homeostasis. The painful emotions (“longing” v. 26, “sorrow” v. 27, “eager” anticipation and “anxious[ness]” v. 28) Paul experiences for Epaphroditus, for the Philippians, and even for himself create a disequilibrium in Paul's neurological state as well. From a neurocognitive perspective, we know that as the painful emotions increase, Paul's capacity or potential for feeling pleasure and joy (the positive feelings that will restore his neurological balance to equilibrium) also grows! Thus, when Epaphroditus recovers, continues his journey to Paul, and finally arrives at the prison in good health with the resources the Philippians have collected for Paul's aid, Paul seems ecstatic to see him and showers Epaphroditus with praise (2:25, 30). Paul would have been very grateful if Epaphroditus had arrived directly, with no setbacks. The resources and company of a friend in ministry from Philippi would have raised Paul's spirits (positive emotion). But, with increased suffering while waiting for Epaphroditus, Paul's positive emotional capacity, and that of the members he worries about, has also increased.

Above, we have also seen how Paul describes his increased suffering in prison when outsiders preach against him (1:8–9). Whether they aim to damage his reputation, increase Roman pressure on him, or undermine his gospel to the Gentiles is irrelevant. As Paul experiences greater suffering, his neurocognitive capacity increases for positive emotions

that would bring his nervous system back to homeostasis. With an increased capacity for pleasure, Paul rejoices and finds increasingly more reasons through the letter to rejoice. He rejoices in the Philippians' fellowship with him, in his own circumstances, in Epaphroditus' recovery, and especially in the Philippians' sharing of resources with him. Neurologically, when Paul practices a habit of rejoicing, he lays down new neurological pathways in his brain. By choosing to practice joy, that is, by training his mind to search for sources of joy, he elevates rejoicing as a first "automatic" choice when he is in pain and suffering. Furthermore, the greater his suffering in prison, the greater his need and even capacity to feel joy when he chooses that pathway; that is, the greater the neurological reward for joy.

When Paul writes of cultivating joy in the letter, we may first see a rhetorical trope that elicits a particular effect on his readers/ audience. That Paul expresses an emotional practice in written form does not negate his emotional experience of joy, or, for that matter, his practice of cultivating joy. There is no reason to doubt that Paul feels joy or that Paul practices rejoicing and invites the Philippians to also experience joy with him. His insistence on joy as a practice in the past, present, and future, and Paul's invitation that the Philippians practice joy with him all seem to indicate that the rhetorical and the existential are both at work here. And, if Paul's experience of joy is real, it seems Paul has successfully trained his mind to respond to suffering with a particular kind of pleasure—a habit of joy cultivated over time and in the community.

Bloomquist and others have written that Paul's joy and suffering (pleasure and pain) must be understood as a package in Philippians—these two emotions are interrelated thematically in the letter.²¹ Once again, we must not confine this literary observation about thematic development to the realm of rhetorical devices alone. Paul's thematic interweaving of joy and suffering is more than rhetorical. Neurocognitive studies help us see the existential nature and the embodied experience, of Paul's interwoven joy as a practiced response to suffering.

Neurological systems seek homeostasis—neither pain nor pleasure, but balance. The brain's preferred path to homeostasis, or balance, is via the most trafficked neural pathways built up through the most practiced mental habits, or default modes. Thus, as Paul experiences physical suffering and emotional angst in prison, his brain seeks the quickest pathway to return his neurological system to homeostasis. Because Paul practices joy regularly, he has developed the mental habit of feeling joy. Paul's brain supports the mental habit of joy by laying down the infrastructure, or neural pathways, to quickly conduct the system to experience the pleasure of joy and offset suffering. When suffering tips Paul's neurological system out of balance, the brain defaults to the most trafficked pleasure to restore balance, his cultivation of joy. In this way, Paul's practiced joy offers a direct counterbalance to Paul's suffering. In this scenario, joy does not cease to be a choice. It is because Paul has so often chosen joy that the neuropathway exists. Paul has habituated choosing joy to such a degree that his brain accesses those chemical pathways to reassert equilibrium as a default response to suffering.

Reading through a neurocognitive approach helps us to see that Paul's descriptions of choosing joy in Philippians, as well as his directives to the Philippians to choose joy, are not purely, or even only partially, rhetorical or literary moves. These habitual emotional practices are existential strategies that Paul embodies with his beloved community in Philippi and urges them to embody together with him. Such emotional habits set the interpretive frame for the entire community. For example, when Epaphroditus appears after a long road of service, illness, and return, the community's emotional "default" is to welcome Epaphroditus with joy, rather than suspicion or worry. This practice of rejoicing together as a community can further temper the Philippians' anxiety about Paul's imprisonment and provide respite for their neurological systems. Rejoicing together, rejoicing with Paul across a distance of space and time regulates their nervous systems, and additionally joins their bodies in Philippi to the emotional rhythms of Paul's body.

3.2. Shared Suffering

Paul describes finding solace for his “sorrow” regarding Epaphroditus by sending him back to the Philippians (2:27). Epaphroditus risked his life to minister to Paul on behalf of the Philippians (2:25) and in falling ill, he “came close to death,” sharing Christ’s own suffering (2:30; 2:8). In fact, Paul anticipates the “sharing of [Christ’s] sufferings” as Epaphroditus did, and so “becoming like [Christ] in his death” (3:10). For Paul, anxiety for the church or worry for Epaphroditus (his and the Philippians) and suffering illness (Epaphroditus and Paul), crucifixion (Christ), or imprisonment (Paul) are all shared sufferings that the whole Christ community experiences with one another.

Paul acknowledges the Philippians’ anxieties and pain when he counsels them, stating “Do not be anxious about anything” (4:6). They worried about Epaphroditus’ illness and tried to address Paul’s suffering in prison by sending Epaphroditus to Paul with supplies and assistance (2:25–27). Paul is well aware of Epaphroditus’ distress as well (2:26). With each written acknowledgment of pain and disequilibrium in the pain–pleasure balance or dysregulation of the community’s neurological system, Paul demonstrates and encourages the practice of joy, to counter the suffering. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4). In the Christ body, suffering and joy are shared.

Neurocognitive studies anchor the pain-pleasure principle in a model of the individual brain’s equilibrium. Paul’s insistence on shared suffering and joy goes farther. Paul seems to hold a model of a collective mind-body equilibrium. For example, we have seen Paul encourage members of the Christ body to share his emotional habit of joy. Paul also argues that he and the Philippians, Epaphroditus, and even Timothy share Christ’s suffering (2:19–30). This sharing of emotions across a collective body goes beyond Philippians. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the way personal experiences of suffering and joy can be shared within and across a community, stating that “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26).²² For Paul, individual emotions, when shared collectively, balance each other and bring the whole body of Christ into equilibrium.

How does this work? Is this collective sharing of joy and suffering even possible? Does the practice of choosing, practicing, and sharing joy help a community settle their nervous systems and find their emotional (neurocognitive) balance together in the face of some (or many) members suffering? Does an increase in a community’s collective and/or shared suffering also increase the capacity for the members’ shared joy?

4. From One Body and Mind to the Collective Body and Mind

We are learning that emotions are the result of multiple brain and body systems that are distributed over the whole person. We cannot separate emotion from cognition or cognition from the body. It has always been our need as humans to divide and conquer, to separate out our two kingdoms as heaven and hell, but separating the body and the brain is rapidly coming to be seen as ridiculous. (Ratey, 223)

Recent studies and discoveries increasingly point out that we heal primarily in and through the body, not just through the rational brain.

In addition, trauma and healing are not just private experiences. Sometimes, trauma is a collective experience, in which case our approaches to healing must be collective and communal as well. (Resmaa Menakem, 13)

In his 2017 book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Resmaa Menakem, a “long time therapist and licensed clinical social worker” (Menakem, 22), specializes in healing relational conflicts and racialized trauma through the body, where, he argues, emotional trauma resides (Menakem 2017).

Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. Often this knowledge is stored in our

bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively fight, flee, or freeze. (5)

Menakem also specializes in working with groups of people. Somatic group practices link people's bodies and experiences together so that in a particular bodily practice, the whole group can find a release of shared emotions in their bodies.

When one *settled* body encounters another, this can create a deeper settling of both bodies. But when one *unsettled* body encounters another, the unsettledness tends to compound in both bodies. In large groups, this compounding effect can turn a peaceful crowd into an angry mob. The same thing happens in families, especially when multiple family members face painful or stressful situations together. It can also occur more subtly over time, when one person repeatedly passes on their unsettledness to another. . . . (Menakem, 39)

Menakem acknowledges the ways in which traumas, deep-seated emotional wounds embedded in our bodies, pass from one generation to the next.²³ Thus, suffering and pain in one person's body can spread to other bodies and, in a similar fashion, release, relief, and healing can also leave people's bodies when they share coordinated practices together. He concludes, that "all of this suggests that one of the best things each of us can do—not only for ourselves, but also for our children and grandchildren—is to metabolize our pain and heal our trauma" (Menakem, 42). It is this kind of embodied—somatic—group work that aims at healing people through group practices that is often missing from analyses of Paul's ministry and theology.

Menakem, like Robert Solomon, recognizes the physiological character of emotions and begins with this relationship between the physical body and the emotions we experience in our bodies. Activating the body also engages the nervous system connected to the brain center.

New advances in psychobiology reveal that our deepest emotions—love, fear, anger, dread, grief, sorrow, disgust, and hope—involve the activation of our body structures. These structures—a complex system of nerves—connect the brainstem, pharynx, heart, lungs, stomach, gut, and spine. (Menakem, 5)

When Menakem invites his groups to activate and move their bodies together in therapy, perhaps while using the rhythms of a drum, he is simultaneously inviting the participants to experience the emotions that arise from the collective activation of their bodies.²⁴ This somatic group work helps the dysregulated nervous systems of each individual find grounding through their collective physical practices. In other words, moving together in our bodies can help heal and bind together disrupted nervous systems.²⁵

Menakem further argues that healing is not "something binary: either we're broken or we're healed from that brokenness" (12). Instead, healing, like emotions themselves, is a process. Healing happens when people engage their physical bodies and their somatically embedded emotions in order to reset their nervous systems. Bodies are central to healing.

Recent studies and discoveries point out that we heal primarily in and through the body, not just through the rational brain. We can all create more room, and more opportunities for growth, in our nervous systems. But we do this primarily through what our *bodies* experience and do—not through what we think or realize or cognitively figure out. (13)

Thus, for Menakem, healing is a process involving the three parts of the nervous system: the cognitive part (brain), the limbic system (emotions), and the body, (the sensory input). Healing trauma is brain *and* body work, emotional *and* somatic work. One cannot rationally think oneself into healing. That is not how our brains work.

Equally key to the healing that Menakem seeks is communal participation. Menakem argues that "trauma and healing aren't just private experiences. Sometimes trauma is a collective experience, in which case our approaches for mending and healing must be collective and communal as well" (Menakem 13). This participatory communal aspect of

Menakem's work utilizes neuro-cognitive science and offers a more complete framework for understanding the shared somatic practices and emotional habits that makeup Paul's strategies for building community.

From the Individual to the Collective Body

For Paul, cultivating a habit of joy that he invites the Philippians to share is more than a personal strategy to survive imprisonment and return to his beloved community. Paul seeks to spread his joy, his sense of wellbeing in the midst of suffering, to the Philippians. This "contagion", to use Menakem's term, comes through shared bodily practices that convey joy. In Paul's letter, the embodied practices he shares with the Philippians include prayer and giving thanks to God (Phil 1), exchanging letters and news (Phil 2:19–23), exchanging "ministers" in the sending, receiving and welcoming Timothy and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:19–30), sharing resources (Phil 4), and worship (Phil 4:10 ff). When Paul and the Philippians practice these reciprocal actions together, and they also cultivate a shared habit of joy *in their bodies*, according to Menakem's model, they are metabolizing the suffering and pain they are all experiencing from witnessing Epaphroditus' illness "even unto death" and his being ill, as well as witnessing Paul's imprisonment and his being imprisoned. The shared physical, somatic practices and the shared emotional habits of mind will strengthen Paul and the Philippians' relationship with one another, no doubt. Furthermore, the shared somatic and emotional work increases their collective resilience as a social body. In other words, shared somatic practices and emotional habits ground the separated members of Christ's one body; these practices and habits allow healing to arise in the members' individual bodies as in their collective body.

In 2:1-5, Paul's exhortation regards the final triad of neurological systems as we understand them today: "share the same mind".

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:1-5)

The state of mind Paul invites the Philippians is the mind of Christ. Christ's mind is not a rational, logical one. Christ's mind is better understood in the neurocognitive frame developed here. The mind of Christ does not "think", but feels. The mind of Christ chooses emotional responses and directs individual members toward a collective relationship that will stabilize their experience in an unpredictable world. In Christ, Paul writes, is comfort, consolation, affection, sympathy, love, and full accord—agreement in communal outlook and engagement with the world. Practicing the emotions of "affection", "love", and "humility" toward others fills up Paul's joy, which he shares with the other members of the body. As we have seen elsewhere, the Philippian members of Christ give Paul reason to "rejoice, and . . . rejoice together with all of you" (2:17), even while he suffers in prison. The emotions that Paul encourages the Philippians to practice, in addition to joy, will bind the community in Philippi to one another because they are pro-social habits. Additionally, according to Menakem, practicing these habits of emotion that, for Paul, constitute the mind of Christ, will also "ground" and "settle" their individual and collective experiences of suffering.²⁶

Thus choosing love, affection, compassion, and joy in the midst of suffering is more than an individual habit of mind and emotion in Paul's letter. Paul's strategy for cultivating his own joy may help him survive in prison, but the impact is far greater. Cultivating an emotional habit of joy influences how Paul interacts with antagonists, friends, and co-workers. His practice influences the somatic practices and nervous systems of those who are in the community with him, even if they are miles and towns away. When the

Philippians imitate Paul and shape their emotional habit of joy, they are simultaneously shaping joy in the collective body of Christ.

Paul's strategy aims at shaping *collective* cognition and *shared* emotional habits in order to build a single, balanced Christ body. Paul does not seek individual wellbeing per se, but the wellbeing of all the members that exists when their shared emotions and bodily practices provide communal equilibrium (a balance of joy and suffering—when one suffers, all suffer, and when one rejoices, all rejoice). Corporate emotional equilibrium, together with a shared mind of long-term emotional perspectives that inform community discernment and actions, are part of Paul's strategy for uniting and shaping a body of believers that can survive in the world.

5. Conclusions

Applying a neurocognitive framework to Paul's strategies for community building raises questions. Does the collective Christ body have a nervous system? Can we understand the mind of Christ as a collective mind shared across the cognitive awareness of individual members? It would seem that the individual members—Philippians, Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Syntyche, and Euodia—of the Christ body are all contributing to one another's healing, grounding, settling, and surviving through their emotional habits and shared practices. Is this participation in the Christ body the "now" of Paul's "now and not yet" salvation in Christ? Is this somatic, cognitive, and emotional participation with the "one spirit" the present experience of Christ's resurrection body that Paul writes?

It may seem too great a leap from examining Paul's mind, emotions, and actions in neurocognitive terms to examining the shared "mind", emotions, and behaviors of the Christ body in similar terms. The difficulty is that an individual has a brain center where electrical currents and neurotransmitters produce and deploy the chemical processes to shape the human mind's emotions into actions, behaviors, and habits. But, a social "body" of humans is not a biological organism. Social bodies lack an actual brain center, nervous system, and chemical receptors and producers. Given this fundamental difference between an individual and a group, we must ask if the same neurocognitive relationships and processes are in effect for a social body of human beings as they are for individual humans.

Still, Menachem's success in healing groups of people with shared trauma through somatic therapy work invites further conversation with Paul's strategies for building community through shared suffering, joy and somatic practices. Neurocognitive systems are complex. This science is only beginning to understand the evolution of the human brain, systems connections, community and generational effects. We do know individual humans cannot survive alone. This is one reason why COVID-19 was hard on communities—across the globe, human societies had difficulty with long-term enforced separation from their social networks. As further evidence, the CDC has declared an epidemic of "loneliness". In other words, more and more people who have been isolated from their social networks, especially the elderly, are suffering mental and physical declines. Although human beings have individuated bodies, we also require social bodies and social-somatic dynamics for our health and wellbeing.

The fields of neurocognition and psychology, or psychobiology, have substantial evidence of this social need. While social bodies do not have a separate brain or a physical system for conducting chemicals between individuals, brain scans of individuals register the impact of a child's emotions on their mother and a mother or parent's emotions on their children. Spouses experience increased wellbeing when their partner is healthy and safe, and spikes of adrenaline when their partner is in danger or upset. Social bodies are highly attuned to the synaptic effects unfolding in each individual member's brain. How does this neurocognitive understanding illumine Paul's strategy for community building given the body metaphor for interdependence that he develops in 1 Cor 12–13?

Understanding the potential psychological, neurological, and cognitive effects of Paul's community-building strategies on human members of the Christ body raises the stakes for Christians today. On the one hand, shared practices and emotional habits may

be the work we must perform together if we seek to address chronic divisions in our local social, national, perhaps even global landscapes. Choosing to respond to suffering by sharing joy balances and settles the whole community's nervous systems. On the other hand, speaking theologically, practicing the emotional habits that embody Christ to one another may also ground our experience of salvation in our actions and bodies right now. Might the following not be the saving work God enables in us and calls us to, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:12–13: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”?

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Notes

- ¹ Biblical scholars such as (Bassler 1994) redefined theology as “practiced” or pastoral reflection on God. This allowed Bassler’s edited series to headline Philippians and Thessalonians, and letters that scholars rarely drew on when constructing a more systematized Pauline theology. See similar work to reframe “theology” by theologians (Bass and Volf 2001) volumes. I build on this work and discuss Paul’s theology grounded in daily shared practices and emotions that cultivate a community ethos of embodying the mind of Christ. (Fogg 2014, pp. 543–56).
- ² While some studies focus on joy, the incorporation of the emotion as a theological subject is less than robust. For example, (Cornelius 1994) examines joy as an epistolary practice that creates/shapes *ethos* and *pathos*. (<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5530/efae923d546a10a16e7a39a999e4db4abb6.pdf> accessed on 1 January 2024) Cornelius concludes, “one can perhaps catch a glimpse of what the relationship between Paul and the Philippians might have been” (72). Analysis of the emotions in the letter are rhetorical and cannot even be affirmed as real enough to be considered in theological reflection, although they do indicate the creation of ethos.
- ³ Recognition of this relationship between emotions and the body is a recent neurological admission. In *A User’s Guide to the Brain: Perception, Attention, and the Four Theaters of the Brain*, John J. Ratey, M.D. acknowledges, “For years psychologists have maintained that emotions are purely mental activities, some of which, such as fear, elicit a physical response by the body. But while a few unique emotions, such as altruism, are dominated by mental processes, the rest are equally due to the body” (Ratey 2002, p. 223). In other words, Ratey writes, “emotions well up from the brain and the body acting together” (223).
- ⁴ For example, Pieter J J Botha. “Rhetoric and the New Testament: essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference,” Sheffield, Eng: JSOT Pr, 1993, pp. 409–28.
- ⁵ I follow Bill Kurz’s observation that Paul structures Philippians 2–3 as a series of positive and negative examples to “look at” (translating βλέπετε as an instruction to consider, rather than an alert to “beware” in Phil 3:2) and then avoid or “imitate” (Phil 3:17). (Kurz 1985, pp. 103–26) Kurz’s work solves the question of integrity in Philippians by showing the shift in 3:1b–2 functions rhetorically together to extend the examples Paul presents for consideration. In my dissertation I take Kurz’s work further and show that the whole letter presents a series of examples for embodying the mind of Christ in bodily and emotional practices. (Fogg 2006) Epaphroditus, for Kurz and for me, is key to seeing the literary (Kurz) and theological-ethical (Fogg) integrity of the letter. See also (Fogg 2014, pp. 550–51).
- ⁶ For discussions of epistolary practices in the sending and receiving of letters and letter carriers, see, for example: (Stowers 1986; Mitchell 1992; White 1990).
- ⁷ For a brief summary of the pain and pleasure principle, as well as the effects of neurotransmitters on pain and pleasure, see John Ratey, *A User’s Guide to the Brain*. Ratey uses “joy” and “pleasure” as synonyms in the neurocognitive activity of balancing pain and pleasure. Thus, joy is the opposite or “pain” and equivalent to “pleasure.” (242–47)
- ⁸ Elsewhere I argue that practicing these habits of mind and body as members of Christ is how Paul and the Philippians “work out” their salvation (Phil 2:12). To these habits of working out one’s salvation in community, we can add emotional habits. For example, when members of the Christ community practice joy together as they are sharing in Christ’s suffering (Phil 1:28) they are participating in an unfolding salvation that culminates in Christ. See my discussion of salvation in Chapter 5 (258–97) (Fogg 2006).
- ⁹ Thanks to Isaac Blois for pointing to Shantz’s work in neurocognition related to Paul’s ecstasy: *Paul in Ecstasy* book? She doesn’t treat Philippians, but she does read Paul while attending to “the neurological and cerebral basis for ecstatic experience” (pp. 79–81, etc.). (Shantz 2009).

- 10 For Solomon, this important “intelligent” quality of emotions means we must contend with the ethics of emotions—something neurocognitive studies do not address. This is the reason for bringing a philosophy of emotions into conversation with neurocognitive evidence. Neurocognitive evidence establishes the chemically real pathways of brain habits, while philosophy offers the moral and ethical reasons for training one’s mind, or brain, to develop certain pathways and not others.
- 11 Joy occurs as a noun in Philippians 1:4, 1:25, 2:2, 2:29, 4:1. In 1:18, 2:17, 2:18, 2:28, 3:1, 4:4, 4:10, Paul uses “rejoice” as a verb, often doubling the occurrence, as in “I am rejoicing and I will continue to rejoice” in 1:18.
- 12 In my dissertation, I make the argument that the “heart” Paul holds in Philippians 1:7 is grammatically a shared heart: the Philippians have Paul’s heart and he has their heart in this *koinonia* or partnership of ministerial practice for the gospel. (Fogg 2006). Also mentioned in (Fogg 2014, p. 545).
- 13 Compare also Rom 12 and 1 Corinthians. See Gordon Fee’s comprehensive work on the role of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s understanding of the body of Christ. (Fee 1994).
- 14 One of the most comprehensive discussions of circumstances in ancient prisons comes from (Cassidy 2001). Cassidy reviews primary sources such as literature, legal and court documents, epistolary references and other resources to construct 3 types of imprisonment as punishment, and further discusses where Paul’s first hand epistolary evidence would place him in the ancient Roman systems. Rather than the Acts portrayal of Paul under house arrest or in a building, Paul was most likely chained to a guard underground or in a cave and dependent on supplies from supporters outside the prison that would first be used or consumed by his guard.
- 15 DETERR describes the difference between “happiness” and joy in an on-line reflection on carla bergman and (Bergman and Montgomery 2017). In contrast to happiness, joy “entails refusing to avoid pain, and instead struggling *amidst and through it*. For instance, making space for collective feelings of rage, grief, or loneliness can be deeply transformative, but not happy. Undoing our own subjection might be subtle and tender, or it might be a violent act of refusal. Sometimes these shifts are barely perceptible and take place over decades, and sometimes they are dramatic and world-shaking. One name for this process is *joy*. This is not the conventional meaning of joy, as a pseudo-religious synonym for bliss, but a concept cribbed from the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and contemporary affect theory. From this perspective, joy isn’t an emotion at all, but a process that moves us away from conditioned habits, reactions, and emotions. It is the thinking-feeling that arises from becoming capable of *more*, and often this entails feeling many emotions at once. Joy can be devastating, painful, and dangerous. Whereas happiness is used as a stifling anesthetic, joy is the growth of a sense that things are different, that *we* are different, that a more capable “*we*” is forming that didn’t exist before. (DETERR 2017)
- 16 For an overview on the workings of the brain, see (Van Der Kolk 2014, pp. 55–60).
- 17 Lembke acknowledges that “in real life, pleasure and pain are more complex than the workings of a balance.” For example, “what is pleasurable for one person may not be for another” and “pleasure and pain can occur simultaneously” and even that “not everyone starts out with a level balance” (65). (Lembke 2021).
- 18 Neuroscientific studies show that pain and pleasure work together in the same location in the brain to maintain equilibrium, or homeostasis. Feelings of pain (suffering or discomfort) and pleasure (well-being, enjoyment) disrupt homeostasis. For every disruption, the brain releases chemicals, creates emotions or seeks actions that will restore equilibrium. Additionally, the brain always chooses the most efficient emotional and behavioral actions that will reset homeostasis. Another way to say this is that our brains choose the emotions and behaviors we practice the most, because what we already do costs the least amount of energy. The more practiced the habit, the deeper the neurological pathway, the faster we can activate that emotional or actionable solution and return to homeostasis.
- 19 Relate this to the real degradation, pain, suffering of the cross. This makes identification with Christ so much more real in everyday practice. I develop this in my current book project, Pauline strategies for community building.
- 20 For the ways in which Paul re-interprets his physical and emotional suffering as an empowered choice and in service to his ministry, see Luis Cruz-Villalobos’ fascinating discussion using a neuropsychological lens to read 2 Corinthians. (Cruz-Villalobos 2024). Villalobos sees Paul’s example of establishing a coherent story about his own suffering on behalf of others (“altruistic coping,” 116), as participation in Christ (“identifying with Jesus as a model of coping,” 119), and as furthering the glory of God (“eschatological coping,” 117). Thus by articulating his suffering, and metabolizing his suffering publicly, Paul develops a healthy, resilient nervous system and not only models this for the Philippians, claims Villalobos, but offers a clinical theological model for Christians today. Likewise, Matt O’Reilly argues that “the way Paul’s account of his ministry frames his suffering as a benefit to the recipients” is Paul’s strategy of apostolic leadership (80, (O’Reilly 2022)).
- 21 “Woven together, suffering and joy create not just a theme but also a tapestry that serves as a backdrop for the entire letter” (270). (Bloomquist 2007).
- 22 Just as Paul addresses shared mind, body and emotions in 1 Corinthians 12 and Philippians 2:1–5, so too in Romans 12. In all three passages, when Paul discusses the collective body of many members, he exhorts a practice of emotional solidarity across the body of Christ. “For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. . . . Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. . . . Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers. Bless those who

persecute you; bless and do not curse them. *Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.* Live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:4–5, 9–10, 12–16). Here, Paul exhorts the whole community to practice reciprocal emotional habits AND reciprocal habits of sharing resources. Care for the body(ies) and care for the neurological stability (emotions) of the Christ body is paramount.

- 23 “Most of us think of trauma as something that occurs in an individual body, like a toothache or a broken arm. But trauma also routinely spreads between *bodies*, like a contagious disease. . . . Its not hard to see how trauma can spread like a contagion within couples, families, and other close relationships. What we don’t often consider is how trauma can spread from body to body in *any* relationship” (Menakem, 32).
- 24 One way to “metabolize” emotional trauma is to cultivate what Menakem calls “resilience.” Resilience, like trauma, can be shared between bodies. He writes, It manifests both individually and collectively. Sometimes it does take the form of a personal, individual act. Often, however, resilience is expressed communally to a group, family, an organization, or a culture. . . . it moves *through* the body, and between multiple bodies when they are harmonized. It is neither built nor developed; it is taken in and expressed as a part of a larger relationship with a family, a group, a community, or the world at large. . . .
- 25 In his book, *The Body Keeps The Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes, “Being able to move and do something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars” (e.g., trauma in the body)” (55). See also, (Zaraska 2020) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/moving-in-sync-creates-surprising-social-bonds-among-people/> (accessed on 5 May 2024) and (McNeil 1997).
- 26 Here the practice of welcoming home their “messenger and minister to [Paul’s] need” (Phil 2:25) Epaphroditus, creates an opportunity for the Philippians to somatically experience joy upon delivery of the letter. As they welcome Epaphroditus, the Philippians rejoice at news from Paul and at receiving Epaphroditus whole and healthy back among them. Thus they share in Paul’s practice of joy. “In the same way also you should rejoice and rejoice together with me” (2:18).

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