

## MORAL COGNITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

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How do individuals grow in Christian virtue, and what can pastors do to help foster such growth? These questions are not new in Christian history. The correspondences of many Christian luminaries such as Augustine and Chrysostom contain expressions of frustration when dealing with immature congregations and the immense difficulties involved in helping such congregations make progress in virtue. While attention has been paid to the periods of time in which sustained growth has occurred on a large scale (for instance, in the Cluniac revivals), less attention has been paid to processes by which such growth occurs on a smaller scale. The field of psychology, in particular the area of moral cognition, has developed over the past century in part to help explain how such processes occur. While moral cognitive research is not specifically aimed at assessing Christian growth (it is more concerned with moral development in a broader sense, particularly as it pertains to children), it can nevertheless be utilized in order to help pastors better understand the process by which their congregants may grow in virtue and to point to some of the ways in which pastors might build structures and practices to bolster such growth.

This essay is written towards this end. It begins by first setting forth the limits of psychology for theological discourse, showing how psychology can aid in identifying the means, but not the ends, of Christian growth. From there it will examine the two primary paths to moral development identified by moral cognition theory, which Daniel Lapsley and Patrick Hill dub “system 1” and “system 2” theories of moral cognition. Each assessment is then coupled with examples of how specific Christian practices might be explained by such theories, enabling pastors to see direct correlations between the inculcation of such practices and their potential for fostering growth in Christian virtue. Lastly, I will highlight instances in which practices might combine both system 1 and system 2 theories of moral cognition, focusing particularly on the historic example of the Methodist class meetings and the drafting of John Wesley’s General Rules.

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## I. THE THEOLOGICAL LIMITS OF PSYCHOLOGY

An understanding of the process of growth in Christian virtue must begin by acknowledging the theological limits of psychology for aiding in such a task. Christian theological inquiry that desires to benefit from the wisdom of the social sciences must be aware of the pitfalls of adopting the specific goals (such as utility, efficiency, or well-being) of that discipline. The adoption of such goals risks the obfuscation or displacement of the specific Christian ends to which theological inquiry must point, with detrimental consequences for pastors who follow suit. For instance, the pastor who adopts the tools of psychology risks the replacement of the Christian end of union with Christ with the psychological ends of emotional happiness and self-fulfillment, with church services resembling less the communion of saints and more the self-help seminar.

For the Christian, growth in virtue is oriented instead towards its telos of the beatific vision of Christ upon the eschatological Mount Zion, and this end is known in the individual only through the reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit, which heals and reorients our natural capacities to know and love God, enabling knowledge of Christ as our end and an ability to move towards this end through the cultivation of faith, hope, and love. While the extent to which one might cultivate virtue without this infusion of the Holy Spirit varies in mainstream Christian thought,<sup>2</sup> orthodox Christianity is nearly unanimous in its affirmation that the attainment of our true and created end—the beatific vision—cannot be obtained apart from this grace.

For this reason, the social sciences, and psychology in particular, cannot contribute to our ends, but are instead given a limited role in aiding understanding our world so that we might better use our means towards our supernatural end. According to Oliver O'Donovan, what he terms the observational sciences, “can contribute to the forming of a moral imaginary. Taken on their own terms, they are modest and useful scouts, reporting on the terrain . . . An observational science can do nothing to help us evaluate our ends.”<sup>3</sup> It is best to view psychology as a useful tool in helping to better describe the mental processes by which persons are capable of moral advancement, and such datum can be incorporated by pastors as they attempt to develop practices that aid in the moral development of their parishioners.

This acknowledgement of the limits of psychology is acknowledged as well by some moral psychologists. Lapsley and Hill, for instance, summarize the core tenants of Kohlberg's social behavioral approach to moral cognition, which asserts that “moral development must begin with certain meta-ethical

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Thomas Aquinas believes in a limited capacity for non-Christians to grow in the cardinal virtues, while Augustine insists that any pagan virtue is instead a mere semblance, or splendid vice.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking. Ethics as Theology*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

assumptions that define moral judgement,"<sup>4</sup> and that psychological research should proceed after the acknowledgement of one's philosophical framework which impacts these meta-ethical assumptions.<sup>5</sup> This concords well with a Christian understanding of the place of psychology. For Christians, it is a belief in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is the meta-ethical assumption which is believed *a priori*, and such beliefs qualify and limit the contributions of psychological research.

## II. CHRISTIAN GROWTH AND MORAL COGNITION

The most vivid scriptural description of Christian growth comes from 2 Peter 1: 3–8 (NRSV):

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

We see in this passage a clear indication of the end of the Christian life, the participation in the divine nature, and an affirmation that human beings can only reach this end through the reception of God's divine power as gift. However, immediately after this affirmation is an exhortation to work diligently to add to one's faith and in so doing confirm this calling and election, putting forth effort to develop virtues such as self-control, endurance, and love. The question remains, however, as to how one makes such efforts and how such efforts result in the development of virtues. What is missing from Peter's statement is a description of the *process* of growth, and it is here that psychology, particularly the field of moral cognition, can be helpful in developing a greater understanding as to how such growth can occur.

The field of moral cognition seeks to answer these questions: How does one develop their moral framework and grow in their moral development? Does such growth occur through intentional reflection and deliberation, or is one formed by their social environment so that moral decisions are immediate and intuitive? Clusters of theories divide roughly along these fault lines, what Lapsley and Hill call system 1 and system 2 approaches to moral cognition and development.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel K. Lapsley and Patrick L. Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," *Journal of Moral Education* 37, no. 3 (2008): 314.

<sup>5</sup> Lapsley and Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," 314.

System 1 theories emphasize “heuristic processing that is associative, implicit, intuitive, experiential, automatic, and tacit.”<sup>6</sup> Here, one’s moral decisions are in many ways the product of an individual’s environment and collected experiences which shape a worldview so that individual decisions are made automatically and intuitively. Intentional moral reasoning in these approaches is typically conceived of not as *a priori* moral discernment but as moral justification: moral reasoning is simply the rationale that an individual uses to justify decisions that are more or less automatic and intuitive.

System 2 theories emphasize processing that is “rule-based, explicit, analytical, ‘rational,’ conscious, and controlled. It is deliberative, effortful reasoning that is slower and demanding of attentional resources.”<sup>7</sup> Here, moral development comes through intentional and usually internal verbal deliberation regarding ethical decisions. An individual reflects upon the choice in question and the ways in which a decision does or does not accord with their conception of the good and acts accordingly.

What these theories help discern is the ways in which moral development can come through some combination of somatic/intuitive or semantic/deliberative means. One can be formed morally through their bodily experiences and their social environment, and one can grow through the intentional reflection on their decisions as they relate to their overall conception of the good life.

This examination of moral cognition aids in an understanding of a Christian conception of growth in virtue in a number of ways. Moral psychologists utilize these approaches to better understand moral development, particularly in regard to early childhood, and scripture often draws an analogy between the progression from childhood to adulthood and the progression of an individual into Christian maturity. Conversion is described by Christ as a new birth, and in Paul as the taking on of a new self. Christian growth in the letter to the Hebrews is likened to the progression from the milk of infants to the solid food of adulthood (Heb 5:13).

I will proceed through an extension of this analogy: just as a child develops morally through their social environment and bodily experiences, as well as their intentional moral reasoning, a Christian grows in theological virtue through both their social environment and somatic experiences (principally their church community and public worship) as well as their intentional acts of reflection and reasoning (principally through prayer and confession). The hope is that moral cognitive theories will help pastors understand *how* such practices contribute to the development of Christian virtue and in turn provide guidance for how pastors might foster such practices in their own congregations.

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<sup>6</sup> Lapsley and Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," 316.

<sup>7</sup> Lapsley and Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," 316.

## A. SYSTEM 1: SOMATIC/INTUITIVE GROWTH IN CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

System 1 approaches to moral development emphasize the ways in which individuals grow through socialization. Social environment and collective experiences (through interactions with parents, peers, and teachers) form a child in such a way that moral decisions are made with a high degree of automaticity. The learning of a language is perhaps the best example of this type of learning. A child does not begin to learn their native tongue through formal instruction. Instead, they are immersed into their linguistic world from the moment of conception. They witness conversations between parents, they are spoken to before they are capable of verbal response, and they are consistently surrounded with words and sentences in the backdrop of their existence. All of these somewhat passive experiences lead to a nearly automatic development of a child's linguistic capabilities. While formal language instruction may be added to this development at some point, in which case the child becomes consciously aware of abstract concepts that undergird language (such as grammar), such advanced development must be built upon these earlier pre-verbal experiences.

Moral psychology has helped to elucidate the ways in which moral development can take place along similar lines. Before children are able to articulate moral concepts such as sharing or forgiveness, or virtues such as temperance, they are born and immersed into a particular moral world. They witness their older siblings sharing a toy, or they see their parents forgive one another, or they see a parent refrain from overindulgence of food, even before such concepts as sharing, forgiveness, or temperance are understood. They implicitly notice the differences in their parental responses to their tantrums and to their smiles. In essence, they witness moral action and moral virtue—and are morally acted upon—before the language of morality is conscious. Explicit moral instruction, such as stories about sharing or parental chastisement, is built upon this subconscious foundation.

An understanding of the moral development of children sheds great insight into the ways in which those who are new creations in Christ might grow in Christian virtue. Those who profess faith in Jesus as Lord and God begin a process by which they are able to grow in their love and knowledge of God through the cultivation of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. While this process begins with immersion in baptism, it continues with an immersion into the life and worship of the church, an immersion that is both linguistic and moralistic.

Linguistically, the new Christian is immersed in the language of the faith—they hear conversations about Christ and are spoken to in the recitation of scripture even before the contents of this language are fully understood. Of particular note is the regular liturgical recitation of the creeds, the Paternoster, and the Decalogue. Throughout the church's history, the development of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love have been tied directly to the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, and the Decalogue/Beatitudes. To learn the creed was to learn the content of faith, to learn the Our Father was to learn how to pray in hope, and to learn the

10 Commandments and Jesus's summary of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount was to learn the language of Christian love. While explicit teaching on these texts has been a hallmark of Christian pedagogy—Augustine and Aquinas both wrote *enchiridions* (handbooks) intended for that very purpose<sup>8</sup>—so has their simple repetition in congregational worship. Such repetition in and of itself serves to bolster virtue in the life of the congregant.<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, for instance, asserts that the confession of the contents of faith is simultaneously a performance of faith and a cultivation of the virtue of faith.<sup>10</sup> The hearing and recitation of the creeds, the Paternoster, and the Decalogue serve as a kind of linguistic moral formation for the Christian. As a child learns their native language first by hearing words, then by speaking words, and later coming to a fuller understanding of the words that they utter, so the Christian begins by being immersed in the language of Christian virtue by hearing the creed, the Our Father, and the Decalogue in public worship. Then, as they begin to add their voices to these professions, they slowly begin a process of formal and informal education so as to develop a greater understanding of the words they recite.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this linguistic immersion, new Christians are morally formed through their immersion into the bodily actions of the life of the church, first as witnesses of these actions, and then as participants. The church gathering is the place in which new converts see the contents of the Christian faith embodied and displayed through the social interactions of the people of God. J.-M. R. Tillard asserts that the mark of the church as the body of Christ implies a calling to be the physical embodiment of Christ and His teachings through their social interactions and practices, which culminate in the weekly celebration of the unity of Christ in the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> As Christians proclaim Christ's forgiveness, the church embodies forgiveness in its social interactions. As Christians speak of the virtue of the love, the church embodies the love of God within the relationships of its members. The relationship between the church's teaching and its sociality is in this way mutually reinforcing: the church embodies the Christian witness, and the church's embodiment functions itself as a witness.

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, both Augustine and Aquinas focus the overwhelming bulk of their *enchiridions* on the Apostles' Creed. We can only speculate, but perhaps one reason could be the assumption that the Our Father and the Decalogue were best learnt through their performance in corporate worship and the practice within the social interactions of the local congregation.

<sup>9</sup> This is an important point for understanding the difference between system 1 and system 2 approaches to moral cognition. Both can involve language, but system 1 approaches emphasize the implicit ways that language forms an individual's morality, whereas system 2 approaches emphasize the explicit ways that words are used to make moral judgments.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 2-2, Q3, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Liturgical recitation is not the only example of this kind of implicit linguistic immersion. Childhood scripture memorization, popular amongst evangelical churches and organizations such as Awana, is another instance of a practice through which one receives the words of faith before the meaning of those words is fully known.

<sup>12</sup> J.-M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 24.

The church's very life as the embodiment of Christ in its social interactions thus serves a pedagogical function in the lives of its constituents even before its explicit doctrinal teaching. The theological virtues are instilled and reinforced through both linguistic inculcation and through their social embodiment within the local congregation. This explains the importance not just of rote recitation, but recitation that takes places within communal worship, for it is there that the words recited are implicitly linked with their embodiment in the actions of the church: A new member recites the Paternoster and sees the virtue of hope modeled in a dying parishioner. They recite the Decalogue and witness the virtue of love modeled in the church's acts of charity towards the poor. They recite the Apostles' Creed and see the virtue of faith modeled in the evangelistic efforts of their peers. They continue their moral development by becoming active participants in the various bodily practices of the corporate Christian life. Just as a child is morally formed through somatic experiences such as playing and eating, Christians are formed in theological virtue through their participation in the somatic and social experiences of corporate worship and consumption of the eucharistic elements.

What are the implications of these discoveries for pastors? These insights should challenge views of discipleship that are predicated solely upon formal education. A lack of Christian maturity within the local congregation can be due in part to a lack of substantial ongoing relationships between parishioners, which prevents the embodiment of Christ's teaching from being modeled to and for new Christians. One whose only experience of Christian friendship lies with polite greetings from strangers for an hour each Sunday will lack sufficient models of faith, hope, and love. Such deficits cannot be overcome by a sermon on discipleship or through a Christian education course.

Furthermore, the impact of certain Christian experiences on the development of growth in virtue indicates a need for pastors to promulgate shared, bodily experiences that hold the potential for instilling virtue. The recitation of the Creeds, the reception of the Eucharist, and regular church-wide fasting all have implicit pedagogical functions. They require a conformity of the various bodily senses (hearing, sight, taste, touch, smell) to the common life of the body of Christ. These embodied experiences hold a high potential for shaping Christian moral development.

## B. SYSTEM 2: SEMANTIC/DISCURSIVE GROWTH

Lapsley and Hill describe system 2 theories of moral cognition as those that involve intentional, discursive, reflective, and (usually) internal moral reasoning. It involves the internal dialogue that occurs within the mind as it weighs the values of a decision at hand, or the internal reflection on the goodness of a completed action. The necessity of developing intentional moral reflection has been a hallmark of ethical theories for at least several millennia. Aristotle sees the ability to articulate rational justifications for one's actions as a vital step (though not the only step) in

moral education. Immanuel Kant takes this further, in seeming to posit internal and intentional moral deliberation as the entirety of morality. Lapsley and Hill call this type of moral cognition the “Standard Model,” since so many, in following Kant, have assumed that intentional discursive reflection is the very definition of moral cognition. Cognitive psychology had up until very recently followed suit in its insistence on the necessity of intentional, verbalized reasoning as a sign of maturity as one progressed from childhood to adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

Why is such discursive reflection considered necessary for moral development? I would like to focus on the linguistic aspect of moral reflection to highlight its significance. Human beings share with other higher order animals (such as monkeys and dogs) the ability to receive information through the senses that in turn provide reasons for engaging in certain actions. We can think here of pain or hunger. A fox can learn that fire is harmful and thus have a reason not to jump into a furnace. A dog experiences hunger and can learn the reasons for eating pet food so as to satiate this desire. While human beings share with these animals this reasoning capability, they have the capacity to advance through the *ordering* of these reasons and to pass *judgment* upon these reasons with greater specificity.<sup>14</sup> Human beings not only experience satiation; they can also prefer Mexican food to Italian food, or they can decide whether to become ascetics or foodies. Human beings not only experience the harmful effects of fire on their bodies; they can also discern the times in which the use of fire is morally repugnant (say in cases of arson).

A key to understanding the development of this ability in human beings is that it is both linguistic and capable of advancement. Human beings are born into and immersed into a linguistic environment, later becoming individuals capable of using this language to articulate their moral worldview and order their desires. This occurs within their inner speech and is necessary in order to communicate these desires to others. Furthermore, the development of these capabilities is open ended. One can become more and more sophisticated in both their ordering of desires and their ability to judge these desires. The child can learn to taste the difference between broccoli and carrots, and the foodie can develop a sophisticated palate to discern fine wine. Similarly, the child can learn how to judge their desire to hit their sibling as harmful and wrong, while the morally advanced adult can articulate the limits of violence in war.

What is required for the development of this moral palate is space for intentional discursive reflection, what Charles Taylor calls strong evaluation. The strong evaluator is able to go beyond the mere calculation of consequences, developing ‘a vocabulary of worth:’<sup>15</sup> a rich language by which to

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Maxwell and Darcia Narvaez, “Moral Foundations Theory and Moral Development and Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 42, no. 3 (2013): 277.

<sup>14</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2011), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, vol. 1, Philosophical Papers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24.



better describe and order their evaluations and motives. System 2 theories adopt similar conclusions for those who have become strong evaluators. Persons who develop their evaluative faculties demonstrate 'exemplary moral commitment,' and are in turn capable of making complex moral judgments with greater speed, accuracy, and efficiency.<sup>16</sup> Those cognitive psychologists that insist on the necessity of system 2 processes for moral development are in many ways re-articulating in psychological terms the development of Aristotelian virtue: conscious reflection develops the virtue of phronesis, which enables its exercise for complex moral decision making, as well as enabling its exercise with greater automaticity.

The Christian tradition is replete with practices that enable deep moral reflection as described by system 2 theories of moral cognition, chief amongst them prayer and confession. An important component of time spent with God involves personal examination, a probing of one's actions and motives before God: "rend your hearts, and not your garments (Joel 2:13)." Reflection brings about an awareness of sin so that the individual may appropriately acknowledge both their need for and the endurance of God's mercy. Furthermore, such reflection is meant to enable better future moral performance: fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and those that meditate on God's law day and night are those that delight in following God's will. The Anglican confessional of the 1979 Prayer Book is an exquisite example of an invitation to system 2 type reflection: it contains a thorough examination of the individual's thought, word, and deed, and a humble confession of sin is followed with a supplication that one might "delight in your will and walk in your ways."<sup>17</sup>

One of the criticisms of those who assert the value of system 2 forms of intentional reflection on moral development is the problem of confirmation bias. This criticism asserts that intentional moral reasoning is used not to correct or assess moral behavior, but instead to promulgate post hoc justifications for one's actions. Here, moral deliberation "is overwhelmingly employed in the service of social ends where it is used to promote, defend and justify a person's, naive or otherwise, spontaneous emotional reactions to social events."<sup>18</sup> Others have countered this assumption of post hoc justification, positing instead that individuals can vacillate between reflection done for the purpose of justification and reflection that redirects future courses of action.<sup>19</sup>

While one cannot discount the possibility that intentional reflection might become a theater for the self-justified, a system 2 type of moral

<sup>16</sup> Lapsley and Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," 323.

<sup>17</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 79.

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell and Narvaez, "Moral Foundations Theory and Moral Development and Education," 272.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Winchester and Kyle D. Green, "Talking Your Self into It: How and When Accounts Shape Motivation for Action," *Sociological Theory* 37, no. 3 (2019): 257.

reflection that is explicitly Christian offers checks upon the possibility of confirmation bias. First, such moral reflection, in the context of Christian prayer, has been paired with the act of confession throughout Christian tradition. Before engaging in internal prayer and reflection, the Christian undergoes a thorough sin diagnostic, which includes time to assess not only actions and thoughts, but motivations as well. The 1662 Prayer Book confession, for instance, includes the exhortation to “not dissemble nor cloak”<sup>20</sup> one’s manifold sins and wickedness. The daily examination of conscience, performed regularly by individuals as part of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, demands a similarly thorough assessment of motive.

Second, Christian moral reflection is not simply internal deliberation, but instead a dialogical act done in the presence of God. Prayer and confession are not the monological exercise of individual conscience, but dialogue with the living God and an opportunity to hear correction and encouragement from God within this dialogical encounter. Such an encounter forms the basis of Christian conversion itself. One obtains a new birth in Christ, and this new life is constituted not by a purely internal and individual mental act, but instead is a response to an external calling from God: “It is not an act of self-constitution through an internally generated and self-directed decision, but a response to an external address.”<sup>21</sup> The Christian embarks on internal reflection in dialogue with this holy, righteous, and merciful God, and assumes that further growth into their new self will result from these encounters. Just as external dialogue with a friend holds the possibility of both confirmation and critique, internal dialogue with God offers a similar opportunity for both affirmation and criticism.

These insights from the field of moral psychology serve both to verify the various practices of intentional reflection imbedded in the Christian tradition and help to explain the process by which these practices contribute to the moral development of individual Christians. Such insights should prompt pastors to reevaluate the practices within their congregations and assess the ways in which such discursive reflection might be encouraged. If those congregations that ignore system 1 approaches to moral development might become overly reliant on sermons and Bible studies to inculcate growth, there are also congregations that can emphasize only system 1 approaches. Here we can think of highly structured liturgical congregations that emphasize participation in ritual practices while leaving little space for personal reflection. In such cases, the inner motives by which parishioners partake in such practices are rarely examined. Here, one can recite the Nicene Creed each Sunday for decades while simultaneously knowing little about its contents, nor how the profession of such beliefs on a Sunday might elicit changes in their behavior on Monday.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer from the Original Manuscript: Attached to the Act of Uniformity of 1662* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1892), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 49.

How might pastors go about encouraging space for intentional reflection? A reimplementing of a more thorough confession could be encouraged for parishioners as part of their personal prayer life. Prayer guides grounded in the Ten Commandments could include questions encouraging individuals to reflect more deeply on the ways they are, or are not, delighting in God's will and walking in His ways. Another possibility is the fostering of intentional moral reflection within the context of small groups. A bible study of young professionals could be encouraged to include intentional discussion surrounding the moral dilemmas and difficulties of the business world, prompting participants to greater reflect on the ways they are (or are not) honoring God in their vocations.

### C. COMBINING SYSTEM 1 AND SYSTEM 2 PROCESSES

Some moral psychologists draw hard lines between system 1 and system 2 theories. This can be seen above in the assumption by some system 1 theorists that intentional moral reflection is primarily used to confirm one's actions, rather than to question one's moral motivations. While some are firmly in either system 1 or 2 camps, most contemporary moral psychologists acknowledge a kind of interdependency between these approaches: "The ascription of automaticity to behaviour (e.g. walking, driving, reading) does not imply necessarily that the behaviour is not intentional or that it cannot be controlled or halted; nor does it rule out the possibility that controlled processing can be mediated by unconscious automatic processes."<sup>22</sup> Maxwell and Narvaez posit a kind of progression and mutual interdependence of system 1 and system 2 processes: moral progress is grounded in socialization and environmental factors that help to establish moral character (system 1). While this provides a certain baseline of character, individuals can grow to become 'experts' in moral cognition, capable of thinking in abstractions and seeing the "underlying grammar or causal pattern" between differing events (system 2).<sup>23</sup> Thus somatic experiences help shape a moral framework that can be advanced and developed through semantic reflection, which in turn can impact the individual's approach to further somatic experiences.

We see this dynamic as well at play in the process of Christian moral development, particularly in regard to the engagement in certain spiritual disciplines. In a study of new converts to the Orthodox Church, Daniel Winchester describes the process by which the physiological changes brought upon by the embodied practice of fasting led these converts to associate the pains of hunger and the emotional turmoil brought upon by fasting with broader and more abstract concepts such as sin and an undue reliance on the passions. Winchester calls this process "embodied metaphor," in which somatic experiences constitute associations between practical

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<sup>22</sup> Maxwell and Narvaez, "Moral Foundations Theory and Moral Development and Education," 316.

<sup>23</sup> Lapsley and Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," 324.

experience and abstract concepts.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the development of the bodily habit of fasting creates an association between a somatic experience (the undue reliance of the body on food) with an abstract semantic concept (the sinful reliance of the soul on the passions): “This kind of metaphorical coupling of the body’s habitual dispositions toward food and the soul’s habitual dispositions toward sin served, in turn, as an impetus to be more attentive to the power of habit in converts’ moral—not just dietary—lives.”<sup>25</sup>

The profound effects of the somatic practice of fasting were here enhanced by its pairing with semantic moral reflection. Participants in weekly fasts were encouraged to couple their fasts with practices such as personal prayer and were given space to verbally share their challenges with fasting in weekly Bible studies. Winchester describes how this space for reflection on newly acquired ascetical habits was crucial for participants to both identify their experience of hunger with their own sin while also helping to extend this sinful dependence on the passions to areas beyond hunger: “An embodied experience of habitual compulsion helped initiate and interpretively structure more abstract and reflexive forms of moral self-scrutiny. What began with reflecting on the compulsive habits of the gut was analogically extended to the close monitoring of one’s moral habits.”<sup>26</sup> This research helps to better understand the psychological process through which Christians grow in virtue.<sup>27</sup> Here, the virtue of temperance is undertaken through the somatic experience of fasting, yet it is the semantic experience

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Winchester, “A Hunger for God: Embodied Metaphor as Cultural Cognition in Action,” *Social Forces* 95, no. 2 (2016): 590.

<sup>25</sup> Winchester, “A Hunger for God,” 596.

<sup>26</sup> Winchester, “A Hunger for God,” 596.

<sup>27</sup> Winchester’s study is also a vivid psychological and sociological example of progress in virtue according to recent recoveries of Aristotelian moral philosophy. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Alasdair MacIntyre describes how, for Aristotle, the development of virtue is not possible apart from the *polis*, the local community: “Separated from the *polis*, what could have become a human being becomes a wild animal (98).” A social, embodied communal context, with all of its concomitant embodied practices, is necessary for virtue, but not sufficient. What is needed in addition is the sustained reflection on activity, as the novice learns the reasons for given actions, and learns to extend these reasonings to other variegated and complex activities. However, the limits of moral formation are not pre-determined by the *polis* since the development of virtue within the *polis* exemplifies “the metaphysical and theological character of the universe (101).” The *polis* provides the context for growth, but the ends to which human life strives are metaphysical. Hence an individual is capable of advancing in specific virtues, such as justice, in a way that can push and challenge the very understanding of justice within their own local community. MacIntyre posits that these last points are key for understanding the adoption of Aristotelian concepts of virtue by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians alike. For Christians, one can say that the local church is the *polis* which is essential for the development of Christian virtue. It is necessary, but not sufficient, since the ends of human life are ultimately theological, discovered through the divine revelation of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, individuals are capable of advancing in virtue in ways that challenge and expand the understandings of virtue within the local church, since the source of virtue is not the church, but Christ. Therefore, the church’s understanding of fortitude is strengthened and advanced through the witness of the martyrs. The church’s understanding of justice is deepened through the judgments of faithful Christian rulers. Its understanding of love is advanced through the acts of service of individuals towards the

of verbal reflection that helps the participant discover the theological basis for this virtue—the taming of sinful passions. In addition, such reflection enables the participant to expand their conception of temperance, applying it not only to the cessation of food, but also to the excessive consumption of alcohol or to an addiction to online shopping. The practice of fasting helped to cultivate the virtue of temperance, and verbal reflection enabled participants to engage in ‘strong evaluation’ in order to see how the cultivation of this virtue helped to order the entirety of their souls around the preeminent goal of following Christ.<sup>28</sup> The semantic experience of intentional reflection helped foster a Christocentric interpretation of the somatic experience of fasting, while also enabling the virtue which was developed in this practice to extend to other areas of life.

### III. PASTORING FOR GROWTH IN CHRISTIAN VIRTUE: JOHN WESLEY’S GENERAL RULES

These recent descriptions of the process of moral formation gleaned from modern psychology demonstrate that moral growth is not an either/or proposition. The character of individuals is shaped by their environment but not wholly determined by it. While sustained moral reflection aids in the capability of individuals to assess complex moral questions with greater clarity, such acts of reflection will always be partially constrained by the unique histories of the individual engaging in such reflection.

Given such realities, pastors who wish to advance the moral development of their parishioners should take a multi-pronged approach by establishing practices and structures that foster both implicit and explicit growth. One of the best examples of an historical approach to moral formation that combined somatic and semantic aspects was the development of the General Rules and the formation of class meetings by John Wesley.

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destitute. See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> This pathway of moral advancement by way of embodied metaphor bears a resemblance to the Christian notion of the development of the spiritual senses. By spiritual senses I am drawing on an understanding of the senses as developed through an elaboration of Hebrews 5:14 throughout Christian tradition, from Origen to Macarius through Augustine and Aquinas: “But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” The created senses of human beings (hearing, sight, taste, touch, smell) are originally oriented towards the glorification of God, a reality seen in the various sights, smells, and tastes in Eden. However, sin creates a split in the senses, by which the senses lose their doxological telos and instead become purely oriented towards created things. Through Christ’s redemption of the body, Christians can begin to recapture this spiritual aspect of the senses. The physical senses become the medium by which human beings can grow close to Christ. The hearing of God’s word, the tasting of the Eucharistic bread, and the touch of embrace during the passing of the peace are all physical encounters that point to spiritual realities. Furthermore, these somatic experiences hold the potential to inculcate Christian virtue by the experience itself, as well as from discursive reflection which may come about from these experiences. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. J.E. Riches and J. Fessio, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis, 2 ed., Vol. 1: Seeing the Form (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982), 371-93.

Wesley's moral theology and the pastoral application of his moral theology is perhaps the best example in Christian history of a clearly defined and articulated program of moral development, one that exemplifies many of the aforementioned insights gleaned from moral cognition theory. I will focus here on the development of the class meeting as the primary program of moral and spiritual growth. Such class meetings, which were inspired by Wesley's encounter with German Pietists, were some of the first instances of what are commonly called small groups: gatherings of around a dozen persons that met in order to supplement (but not replace) attendance of weekly Sunday worship services. These meetings were comprised of "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."<sup>29</sup> As the arrangement of such class meetings grew, Wesley articulated a list of "General Rules" to guide such meetings, partially in response to a perceived laxity emerging within some of these gatherings.<sup>30</sup>

When assessing Wesley's moral theology and its practical development, we see a program that exemplifies many of the traits observed in contemporary theories of moral cognition. First, Wesley's moral theology is grounded in meta-ethical assumptions that predate and qualify moral action. Popular misconceptions of Wesley lie in an overemphasis on the more pragmatic and intentional aspects of his movement, an overemphasis that neglects the ways in which his views regarding grace are very much in accordance with the bulk of the Christian tradition. For Wesley, it is only through the grace of God that one can sincerely pursue the life of Christian virtue, and it was the acknowledgement of one's sin and total depravity that form the starting point of moral development. As the preface to the General Rules states, individuals who wished to join class meetings had to demonstrate "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.' But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits."<sup>31</sup> This fixed desire in the soul can only come through the infusion of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and it is through this infusion that one comes to understand, in humility, their total depravity. Such an acknowledgement is a precondition for Christian moral growth: "Wesley begins with total depravity because he believes that the Christian moral life begins in repentance. Humility is the doorway to the virtues; it is never itself virtuous. Yet it always accompanies the virtues, for it reminds us that our natural powers themselves are insufficient."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016. <<https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>> [last accessed July 26th, 2021]

<sup>30</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, "The Practical Theology of the General Rules," *The Asbury Journal* 68, no. 2 (2013): 8.

<sup>31</sup> *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016. <<https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>> [last accessed July 26th, 2021]

<sup>32</sup> D. Stephen Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005), 146.

Wesley insists, however, that such an infusion of grace does not displace human nature but rather enables its perfection. Grace animates our natural senses, enabling us to attune them to the glory of God. Thus, the spiritual life is not only or merely one of internal, mystical detachment, but is instead lived out through the senses and experienced in bodily practices. For Wesley the fostering of system 1 type somatic experiences was crucial for moral and spiritual growth. This is seen vividly in the third grouping of General Rules, which require of the members of the United Societies to “attend upon the ordinances of God,” which include the receiving of the eucharist regularly, attending public prayers, the reading of scripture, prayer, and fasting. Wesley would later call such practices the “instituted means of grace,” those practices that are practiced by Christ or exhorted by Christ in the Gospels.<sup>33</sup> Class meetings required the participation in the traditional, somatic experiences of the Christian life, such as attendance at worship and the reception of the eucharist. Class meetings also provided the space through which individuals could verbally reflect upon these and other experiences. This is perhaps one of the geniuses of Wesley’s approach: class meetings involved semantic discourse that fostered accountability for the participation in somatic experiences. The class meetings composed a system 2 structure meant to encourage and reflect upon system 1 practices.

The General Rules provide a structure that promotes the continual observance of Christian religious practices under the assumption that they are necessary to grow in Christ. But the General Rules go beyond mere accountability, offering in addition space to reflect on one’s moral conduct. This is the purpose of the first two categories of rules, the first of which, avoiding harm, is centered upon the Ten Commandments, and the second, doing good, is centered around the Sermon on the Mount. These lists were not meant by Wesley to be mere moral checklists, but instead were meant to train individuals to become wise and discerning moral agents. These activities are for Wesley “prudential means of grace,” which “assist in the formation of oneself in holiness either by facilitating the avoidance of things detrimental or the pursuance of things beneficial.”<sup>34</sup> The point of such reflection was to build character so that one might be better trained to make more prudent decisions in the future. Many of the rules, such as the prohibition against owning slaves and against usury, are themselves Wesley’s prudent applications of the Ten Commandments to contemporary British life.

Thus, the General Rules and their facilitation in class meetings were also prime examples of the promotion of system 2 moral cognitive development. Members were granted space for sustained verbal reflection on their actions and in turn were taught the “underlying grammar” of moral decision making.<sup>35</sup> Such acts of reflection served both to shape Christian virtue

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<sup>33</sup> Thompson, “The Practical Theology of the General Rules,” 16.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, “The Practical Theology of the General Rules,” 19.

<sup>35</sup> Lapsley and Hill, “On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition,” 324.

and aid in prudential thinking with regard to future actions. As Andrew Thompson puts it, their purpose “was a pastoral one, whereby a theology of the means of grace was communicated to men and women in Methodist societies in an intimately practical manner so that their Christian practice might itself be formed and informed.”<sup>36</sup>

Undergirding this approach is Wesley’s insistence on the necessary interrelatedness of the physical, routine practices of the faith and the inward, mental actions involved in moral reasoning.<sup>37</sup> For Wesley, the engagement in physical practices is necessary, but not sufficient for growth in virtue. One could attend the Eucharist out of routine, having never encountered Christ, in which case the reception of Eucharist was ineffective. However, one could not claim to have received the grace of God without such grace being made manifest in the physical practice of the reception of the eucharist. To claim a kind of inward, detached faith was a sign that one had not truly received the grace of God, since such grace will necessarily animate the senses and thus prompt physical and social action. D. Stephen Long summarizes Wesley’s insistence on the necessity of such outward observances:

While the observance of the law cannot guarantee its fulfillment, its neglect guarantees that it remains unfulfilled. This helps us understand the important role of the General Rules... There was no private space where “love” permitted disobedience. Nor could one plead the merits of Christ and neglect the rules. Observance of the rules bore an intentionality within them, which functioned at least negatively. While the observance itself did not guarantee one was tending toward the proper end of charity, neglect of the rules proved the agent lacked the proper intention.<sup>38</sup>

We see thus an interrelation between system 1 and system 2 practices in Wesley’s moral theology. Moral reflection cannot lead to an abrogation of the routine, bodily activities of the Christian life, nor does the engagement in bodily activities guarantee a sincere faith in Christ. The General Rules and class meetings are practical, pastoral structures meant to foster the development of Christian virtue in ways that acknowledge this essential interdependence.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, “The Practical Theology of the General Rules,” 21.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Wesley’s approach predates modern psychology by at least a century. The goal of the General Rules is not maximal psychological wellbeing, but sanctification. Here is an instance of both the benefits and limits of the social sciences. Moral growth is not dependent on practices grounded in the datum of psychology; however, psychology provides a helpful tool for describing the underlying processes by which such growth might take place.

<sup>38</sup> Long, *John Wesley’s Moral Theology*, 128.



## IV. CONCLUSION

The examples from both Wesley's General Rules and Daniel Winchester's research on fasting indicate the potential for significant Christian growth in virtue when system 1 and system 2 forms of moral cognition are paired together within a Christian framework that assumes the beatific vision as its goal. This should prompt pastors to reassess the various practices within their own congregations to ensure that their parishioners have ample opportunities to grow both in their physical and intellectual habits. Pastors should seek to bolster underdeveloped congregational habits, whether such habits are primarily somatic (liturgical actions, fasting, etc.), or whether they are primarily semantic (prayer, confession, small groups, etc.). But pastors should go further in seeking to create practices that wed the somatic with the semantic. For instance, Bible studies could engage in corporate ascetical disciplines, using part of their Bible study time to reflect on their experiences. In addition, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer on Sunday could be paired with time after service for instruction and times of sustained reflection where individuals can reflect on the ways they have or have not lived out their corporate supplication.

The inculcating of both somatic and semantic experiences acknowledges the necessary interrelatedness of body, mind, and soul of human beings as creatures made in the image of God and assumes as a goal of the Christian life the reorienting of the entirety of body, mind, and soul towards Jesus Christ in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.