Self-Regulation and Christian Formation

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According to a recent poll, dominant opinions about Christians among 16-29 year old Americans include characteristics such as anti-homosexual, judgmental, hypocritical, too political, sheltered, and proselytizing (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 28). Why is it that Christians are at times no better than others at living out the moral virtues of Christianity? Why is it that Christians can be so unlike the one they seek to imitate? Warren Brown and Brad Strawn, in their book *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life* (2012), argue that the modern church has been more concerned with individual, private, spiritual experiences, rather than being concerned with “reshaping the whole-embodied-person—as in new habits, a different character, new virtues, and a greater capacity for hospitality, love, and care for others” (p. 9). How is it that Christians put on new habits and a transformed character? How is it that Christians come to act morally? This paper attempts to provide answers to these questions. In the following, I will discuss prerequisites for morally responsible action and propose that self-regulation serves as an important mechanism in the process of moral action. Further I argue that a focus on self-regulation provides a hopeful and practical avenue by which the moral goods of the Church can become embodied more faithfully.

**Morally Responsible Action**

Nancey Murphy and Warren Brown have written extensively about moral action and the neural systems that make such action possible. In *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?* (2007) Murphy and Brown argue that all organisms are constantly acting towards a goal, in a sequence of action, feedback, evaluation, and modified action (2007, p. 129). Even the most basic single-cell organisms follow this sequence—for example, protozoa whose singular goal is to swim away from higher levels of toxins and towards higher levels of nutrients (i.e., chemotaxis) (p.
What sets humans apart is the ability to consciously reflect on goals and behavioral actions, which greatly increases the potential for behavioral elasticity: “Within consciousness, behavioral alternatives are explicitly available to awareness...agency, flexibility, adaptability, and purposiveness are maximally expanded within conscious awareness” (p. 145). Consequently, humans have the unique capacity to choose from behavioral options based on evaluation of moral norms.

Drawing from moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, Murphy and Brown (2007) assert that “morally responsible action is action based on the evaluation of that which moves one to act in light of a concept of the good.” More specifically, they propose that “one is morally responsible when one has the ability to evaluate, in light of some concept of the good, the factors that serve to shape and modify one’s action” (p. 240). In order for such evaluations to take place, Murphy and Brown identify six necessary cognitive capacities for MacIntyre’s conception of moral reasoning and action:

1. “A symbolic sense of self”
2. “A sense of the narrative unity of life”
3. “The ability to run behavioral scenarios…and predict the outcome”
4. “The ability to evaluate predicted outcomes in light of goals”
5. “The ability to evaluate the goals themselves…in light of abstract concepts”
6. “The ability to act in light of 1-5” (p. 244)

These factors, and their neural correlates, combine to make the process of moral reflection and action possible. However, while humans have the unique propensity for all of the above, one is left to wonder about the precise interplay between moral reasoning and moral action.
Consider the following example: Frank is struggling with an addiction to pornography. He goes on the internet to check his email and a window pops up with a picture of a woman in a provocative pose and a link that offers further pictures. Immediately, he has a strong inclination towards looking at the photo and clicking on the link. However, he also experiences a corresponding reaction of guilt and shame at the possibility of doing so. In addition to those initial desires, a number of moral desires and goals become apparent to him. He believes pornography to be morally wrong; he has told his wife that he will no longer look at pornography; and he attends and serves in his church, which actively fights against the denigration of women. How is it that Frank will choose to act morally, in line with his beliefs, his commitment to his wife, and his participation in his church?

The Role of Self-Regulation

In answering these questions, it is first helpful to define and distinguish between two important concepts: self-control and self-regulation. *Self-control* refers to situations in which people engage in behaviors designed to counteract or override a prepotent response (e.g., a behavioral tendency, an emotion, or a motivation), such as assaulting someone who has angered them, resting after a hard day at work instead of painting the kitchen, or playing hooky instead of going to school. In other words, when people exert self-control, they modify their response tendencies in a fashion that involves suppressing one goal so as to pursue another one that is judged to have greater long-term utility. (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009, p. 72)

Frank would certainly need well-functioning inhibitory capacities to be able to resist the immediate temptations that are before him. He would need to be able to do so long enough to be
able to consider his goals, especially those longer-term, morally sanctioned goals that are the most important to him (see Emmons, 1999, for more information on sanctified goals).

In order to act morally, rather than simply freezing long enough to withstand his bodily urges, Frank would need to engage in moral behavior by actively choosing a behavioral alternative (e.g., closing the provocative pop-up or getting up and leaving the room). This requires some amount of self-regulation, which involves both inhibitory self-control and motivation for alternative behaviors in contrast to those towards which one is initially inclined. In this way, self-regulation can be defined as “the process by which a system uses information about its present state to change that state” (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009, p. 71). In order to understand how Frank can avoid his impending moral pitfall, the following questions remain: Which human systems allow self-regulation to occur? And how is it that one is able to exercise these capacities when confronted with powerful temptations?

For answers to these questions, we turn to the most distinctive feature of the human brain: the prefrontal cortex. Its relative size and complexity allows for a kind of inhibitory control that is unmatched in the animal kingdom (Murphy & Brown, 2007, p. 132-133). The prefrontal cortex incorporates both “a retrospective aspect (memory) and a prospective aspect (preparedness for action and events, and anticipation of outcomes) into the control of behavior” and it “sits atop the nested hierarchy of behavioral evaluation and modulation” (p. 133). In short, it allows for moral reasoning to be incorporated into the execution of behavior. When faced with temptation, the self-regulatory capacities of Frank’s prefrontal cortex allows him to: (1) inhibit his immediate bodily inclinations; (2) activate from memory a number of desired goals (e.g., being faithful to his wife by refraining from viewing pornography); (3) compare and contrast his potential goal states and their outcomes (e.g., what the longer-term consequences are and how
they fit into his goals); (4) evaluate those goal states in light of abstract concepts (e.g., what is “good”); and (5) choose and act out morally responsible action specific to this circumstance. Frank’s prefrontal cortex plays a critical role in determining whether he will be able to exercise self-control, thus avoiding the impending moral pitfall.

Unfortunately, self-control seems to be in short supply these days. Countless examples of common self-regulatory failures have been offered by a number of researchers (see Ainslie, 2001; Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), providing evidence that other more immediate desires and emotional impulses often influence behavior more strongly than moral reflections. Others argue that many socially problematic behaviors (e.g., various crimes) and even the Seven Deadly Sins (the central vices proposed by Christian theologians in the middle ages) are a result of failures in self-control (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Further, Murphy and Brown offer evidence that the capacity for conscious behavioral control is a very limited resource (2007, p. 119). Other research has corroborated these findings, showing that self-regulatory reserve diminishes after the exertion of self-regulatory efforts (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). For example, following continued efforts to self-regulate, research participants have exhibited increased aggressive behavior (Stucke & Baumeister, 2006), increases in impulsive money spending (Vohs & Faber, 2004), and more prejudiced reactions towards others (Gordijn, Hindriks, Koomen, Dijksterhuis, & Van Knippenberg, 2004). Thus far, the outlook for Frank looks grim.

However, recent research has provided promising support for the theory that one’s self-regulatory abilities can be increased. Many studies have found that practicing small acts of self-control—such as monitoring and improving posture, regulating mood, monitoring and recording eating, avoiding sweets, using one’s nondominant hand, suppressing the tendency to curse or say
verbal fillers such as ‘um’ or ‘uh,’ using a handgrip for as long as possible, etc.—can lead to an increase in one’s general self-control capacity beyond the particular realm of the practiced task (see Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999; Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006; Oaten & Cheng, 2006a; Oaten & Cheng, 2006b; Gailliot, Plant, Butz, & Baumeister, 2007). In addition, such practices have been shown to aid in the suppression of desires for even highly addictive behaviors such as smoking (Muraven, 2010). It seems there may be hope for Frank after all.

Furthermore, Roy Baumeister and Julie Exline (1999), drawing from these empirical findings regarding self-regulation, offer the analogy of a moral muscle as an appropriate way to conceptualize the capacity for self-regulation. In this regard, self-inhibitory tasks can be practiced, exercised, and strengthened in such a way to increase one’s capacity for engaging in morally responsible action in the face of inclinations to the contrary. While there are certainly a number of factors that may influence whether Frank will be able to avoid succumbing to his temptations (e.g., whether he has a supportive community that he is accountable to, whether others are praying for Frank, whether he has the sufficient moral education to understand the results of his actions and to imagine other possible choices, etc.), the extent to which Frank has had the opportunity to exercise his moral muscle will weigh heavily into the eventual outcome. In other words, in his efforts to successfully navigate the moral waters of his life, Frank would benefit from finding ways to engage in self-regulatory exercises to increase his self-regulatory strength.

**Self-Regulation and Church**

Assuming Frank is not up to speed with the latest research on self-regulation, and that Frank has not implemented a steady regimen of self-regulatory exercise, does Frank have a
legitimate hope of successful moral action? Fortunately, there is evidence that the circumstances
that surround religious faith and participation already involve tasks that increase one’s ability for
self-regulation. For example, the three main components of Baumeister and Exline’s (1999)
moral muscle—standards, monitoring, and operations that alter the self—can all be found in
most traditional congregational gatherings (p. 1176). These three elements each function
importantly in Frank’s situation.

First, it is important to mention that having infinite self-regulatory strength does not
guarantee that one will act in a morally redeeming manner. Without adequate moral insight,
one’s self-regulatory capacities can be used to choose from any number of selfish or malicious
actions. Therefore, a crucial aspect of moral muscle involves having appropriate moral
standards, or what John Paul Lederach (2005) calls “moral imagination.” One must first have
reasoning faculties, creative imagination, and moral education to envision appropriate moral
outcomes in light of conceptions of the good within the particularities of different scenarios and
communities. This is certainly a difficult task in its own right. Conceiving of appropriate moral
standards requires continual investigation of the relevant information from each situation,
including using that information to calculate appropriate moral outcomes and goals. However, it
is likely that involvement in religious institutions serves to broaden one’s moral horizons via
various avenues of moral education (sermons, stories from sacred texts, parables from sacred
figures, interactions with others in the religious community, etc.). Members of religious
institutions are exposed to moral teachings in ways that increase their ability to imagine
outcomes beyond natural predispositions, allowing a reconsideration of valued goals (see
McCullough & Willoughby, 2009, for a review). In addition, religious involvement may both
sanctify these goals and integrate them in more meaningful ways, resulting in greater
commitment and effort (Emmons, 1999). Participating in Frank’s church already gives him a leg up in this regard.

In addition to moral standards, self-regulation involves monitoring. In order for Frank to self-regulate, adjusting his present state to align with a preferred state, Frank must be adequately self-aware, able to accurately judge both his present state and its relation to his preferred state. Religious participation involves a number of elements that increase one’s self-monitoring (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). One naturally becomes more self-aware when perceiving oneself to be interacting with supernatural agents who are aware of one’s thoughts and behaviors and who are capable of rewarding or punishing based on those thoughts and behaviors (Bering & Johnson, 2005). Similarly, involvement in a morally concerned community of human agents who are capable of comparable evaluation (including one’s parents, religious elders, and other religious authority figures) also encourages self-monitoring. In addition, some religious rituals—such as prayer, meditation, and the Christian practice of Lent—specifically intend to promote self-monitoring. Therefore, Frank’s religious participation would naturally allow him to be better suited to more quickly and accurately reflect on his current state (temptation towards an undesired goal) in relation to his preferred state (faithfulness to wife, church, and God).

Finally, the third aspect of moral muscle—operations that alter the self—involves self-regulatory effort. Specific religious rituals, such as “fasting; postural control (e.g., during meditation); sleep deprivation; alms giving; long periods of prayer or meditation; and generosity with one’s time, energy, and resources, may require self-regulatory strength” (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009, p. 83). Engaging in these rituals may serve as built-in self-regulatory exercise. In other words, constituent elements of involvement in a religious community—such as
sitting quietly, avoiding distractions, paying attention, and following the liturgical order—seem to naturally reinforce the exercise of self-regulation (see Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007).

Taken together, these three aspects of self-regulation, natural components of Frank’s religiosity, make him much more capable of morally responsible action.

**Automaticity and Christian Character**

A final noteworthy implication for Frank lies in the ability for conscious, temporary self-regulation to be habituated into automatic behavior. Without at least some degree of automaticity, no number of moral workouts will be sufficient to account for the depletion in self-regulation strength caused by continual conscious self-inhibition. As with learning to ride a bike or drive a car, much conscious effort is needed at first. However, after the initial effort, one does not forget how to execute these tasks, even after many years. In the same way, an abstract moral concept (in interaction with one’s environment) can “exercise downward causal efficacy on an individual's behavior” and “the change in behavior will have a downward effect in reshaping neural connections in such a way that the new behavior becomes habitual” (Murphy & Brown 2007, p. 258). In other words, exercising these capacities allows them to be more efficiently used and automatically processed. The good news for Frank is that even a small increase in self-regulation could allow him to exert enough temporary conscious effort for his moral actions to be perpetuated into enduring moral habits, dispositions, and character (Stanley Hauerwas, 1989, writes extensively on the role of habit in forming Christian character, such that there comes to be no habitual difference between what one does and what one hopes to do).

**Conclusion**

The foregoing research provides promising theoretical and practical directions for translating moral reasoning into embodied moral action. For those like Frank who, despite
adequate moral education and moral desire, are struggling to overcome their natural inclinations towards goals that do not meet their long-term moral visions of their life, this research lays the foundation for a greater understanding of a number of hopeful theories, mechanisms, and interventions that can enable greater participation in (and embodiment of) the moral goods of religious communities.
References


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