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Christian ethics and moral hypocrisy: Translating values into moral actions

ABSTRACT

Moral hypocrisy refers to the phenomenon of people professing moral ideals and displaying an understanding of moral ideals but not translating them into moral actions. This serves as a reminder that moral understanding does not automatically translate into moral action, which begs the question: What conceptual and theological tools are at the disposal of Christian communities to help adherents translate values into concrete moral actions? This article argues that moral understanding alone does not evoke action. Actions require willpower, sound motives, and self-efficacy beliefs. This reality calls for a type of moral formation that ties morality to "who I am as a person". The article avers that moral identity functions as a self-regulatory mechanism that guides moral emotions and judgments. In presenting a methodological approach to Christian moral formation, the article argues for a line of thinking that addresses both the objective and subjectively experienced components of Christian moral identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral hypocrisy refers to when people appear moral without behaving morally (Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney & Strongman 1999). Moral hypocrites profess allegiance to certain moral ideals and exhibit a conceptual understanding of moral ideals but do not translate the ideals into moral action. Moral hypocrisy appears on both personal and intra-personal levels (Graham, Meindl, Koleva, Iyer & Johnson 2015:159). Social

psychologists generally distinguish between three types of moral hypocrisy. Moral duplicity involves interpersonal deception and the false outward show of morality and virtue for the sake of reaping the benefits associated with morality, while not bearing the costs of moral actions. Moral double standards entail judging the transgressions of others, while not applying the same standards to oneself. Moral weakness involves failing to live up to one's own moral standards (Graham *et al.* 2015). A wide variety of psychological motives drive moral hypocrisy. These include deliberate deception, self-enhancement, opportunism, a lack of willpower to act morally, ego-depletion, and the desire to manage impressions (Bartel 2019; Graham *et al.* 2015; Dong *et al.* 2019). Ultimately, the common denominator in the different types of moral hypocrisy is a lack of a strong moral identity (Graham *et al.* 2015). Studies show that moral hypocrisy poses a wide variety of harmful consequences. It is, by its nature, a form of inconsistent behaviour that produces distrust and suspicion between people and groups. It often coincides with blaming and condemning others, while not applying the same standards to the self. It reduces stocks of truth through deception and inauthentic behaviour (Rossi 2021).

As with most of the character-formation communities, Christian churches consistently face the challenge of moral hypocrisy and the difficulty of guiding adherents from moral understanding to concrete moral actions. It is important to address this challenge, because moral hypocrisy undermines the integrity and credibility of the Christian faith. The preaching of Jesus, as narrated in the gospels, was attuned to this danger. A striking feature of his preaching was his resistance to moral hypocrisy. He frequently attacked the Pharisees for not doing what they teach. One such example is Matthew 23:3:

> So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach.

How can Christian communities overcome the phenomenon of adherents not translating moral understanding into moral actions? This article argues that hypocrisy is best countered by tying morality to the core of personhood. I am what I do … Betraying my principles and values is a betrayal of who I am and, in the case of the Christian, also a betrayal of God in whose image I have been created. That said, connecting morality to the core of personhood is no easy task. It requires a type of moral formation that addresses both the objective and the subjectively experienced components of moral identity.

In what follows, I substantiate this argument, by first focusing on the psychological dynamics involved in moral agency. I then discuss the role that normative ethics theories can play in strengthening the objective[1] and

1 I use the term "objective" in the sense that Blasi used it. It refers to the cognitive contents of our moral self-definitions. I do not mean to imply that neutral rational thought without affective influences is possible.

the subjective experienced components of moral identity formation. Drawing on these theories and theological themes central to the Christian faith, the article concludes by indicating how Christian churches and communities may go about in framing Christian moral identities that act as buffers against moral hypocrisy.

2. THE OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE COMPONENTS OF MORAL IDENTITY

Moral formation research gained new impetus in the 1980s through the foundational work of the moral psychologist Augusto Blasi. Blasi (1980:1) questioned the idea held by Lawrence Kohlberg that moral actions are primarily the result of moral reasoning (Kohlberg & Hersh 1977:57). Kohlberg posted that a correct understanding of moral principles is decisive for moral action. When people understand moral principles and are equipped to engage in moral reasoning, they are also much more likely to act morally (Vorster 2025:145). For this reason, he emphasised the importance of cognitive development. However, Blasi claimed that Kohlberg's cognitive development theory overemphasised moral reasoning. He argued that, before cognition and moral reasoning are translated into moral actions, they must be filtered through moral identity judgments that seek self-consistency (Blasi 1980; Hardy & Carlo 2011:233; Damon & Gregory 1997:11; Vorster 2025:145). Moral identity thus forms a kind of bridge between cognition, emotion, and action. Blasi held that moral identity is more than simply one form of motivation in the human personality besides judgment and emotions. It is a self-regulatory mechanism that filters and directs emotions and judgments (Reynolds & Ceranic 2007:1611; Shao *et al.* 2008:514; Vorster 2025:145). According to Blasi (1980), the integration of cognitive and emotional learning is important for a mature moral personality to develop. He distinguished between the objective content of moral identity and the subjectively experienced component of moral identity. The objective component consists of moral ideals and values, whereas the subjectively experienced component ties morality to our sense of self and our willingness to act authentically according to "who we are" (Hardy & Carlo 2005:235). Building on the foundational insights of Blasi, but also moving beyond him, social-cognitive moral theorists such as Lapsley, Narvaez, Aquino, Reed, and Damon argue that moral identities provide people with "readily accessible" moral schemas (Hardy & Carlo 2011:2013). These schemas, consisting of moral ideals, values, and behavioural scripts, are nurtured through experience, moral coaching, and the witnessing of moral exemplars. People, whose moral identities function at the core of the personality, have these moral schemas readily available and accessible. When they are confronted by moral dilemmas, they can draw on these internalised moral ideals and previously rehearsed behavioural scripts.

In the case of people with weak moral identities, these moral schemas are not readily accessible and not well developed, making it difficult for them to deal with the complexities of a moral dilemma. Moreover, if people's moral identity operates at the periphery of the personality, ulterior motives and interests, or alternative facets of identity may override moral considerations and entice them into rationalising wrongdoing.[2]

Hypocrisy surfaces when moral understanding is not supported by the experience of moral emotions and the willpower and motivation to act morally. To counter hypocrisy, moral educators must attempt to bridge the disconnect that often exists between moral understanding and moral willpower, not only by conveying values and behavioural scripts (objective-cognitive component), but also by nurturing the experience of positive and negative moral emotions (subjectively experienced component). Positive moral emotions involve love, care, and empathy, while negative emotions include guilt, shame, and indignation at wrongdoing. These emotions motivate us to translate moral cognition into moral actions and to enact internalised behavioural scripts.

Moral motivation must coincide with self-efficacy beliefs. Bandura (1999) described self-efficacy as vitally important for moral agency. If people feel inept with respect to a specific situation, or do not possess a required set of skills, they will not invest energy in a particular action. Insecure people might know what the right thing is to do in a certain situation and might even experience moral emotions about those affected. Yet, they might be so overwhelmed by feelings of incompetence that their moral feelings do not translate into moral actions. It is thus important that moral education must focus on three key components of moral identity, namely moral understanding, the experience of moral emotions, and cultivating self-efficacy beliefs.

During the process of moral formation, it is highly important to transmit ethically valid contents. If one's moral identity does not contain valid moral contents, one might act immorally whilst believing that one is serving the good. First, the cognitive contents of one's moral outlook might be distorted. For example, the son who follows the macho behavioural scripts of his paternalist father may think that he is acting according to a divinely ordained set of hierarchical values. However, in practice, his actions may amount to oppression. The liberal free-market advocate might think that he is promoting the value of freedom, by resisting all forms of affirmative action. However, in practice, he could be perpetuating existing inequalities. The same types of anomalies appear with respect to the subjectively experienced side of moral formation. One's moral feelings might become misguided or one-sided when not grounded in sound moral reasoning, or it may happen that one understands

2 For a lengthy discussion, see Vorster (2025:141-159).

the ethical principles at stake in a situation, and experiences authentic moral emotions, but lacks the skills to address the ethical dilemma appropriately.

Three questions can be raised: How do we fill the objective-cognitive component of moral formation with valid content? How do we relate moral feelings to moral principles? How do we supplement the subjectively experienced side of moral self-understanding with the willpower and self-efficacy beliefs needed to translate moral reasoning and moral emotions into moral action?

In what follows, I argue that the first step in answering these questions lies in asking how ethics discourse could assist in cultivating the objective and subjective components of moral identity.

3. MORAL FORMATION AND ETHICS DISCOURSE

Moral psychology tells one how ethical decision-making works, and under which conditions it functions at its best, but it does not tell one anything about the contents of norms. This is where ethics theories comes into focus.

The most prominent ethics theories are deontological theory, utilitarianism, consequentialism, and virtue theory. The common denominator in deontological theory, utilitarianism, and consequentialism is that they are rules-based and agent-neutral theories. They rely on cognitive reasoning and rational principles to make ethical judgments. Virtue-ethical theory, on the other hand, is an agent-centred theory concerned with the inner motives and identity of the ethical agent. In virtue-ethical theory, attitudes, affections, intentions, efficacy beliefs, and motivational drives come into view.

Deontological theory deduces rights, duties, norms, and rules from logically coherent rational arguments. It is concerned with universally valid moral maxims, prescripts, and proscripts. Citing Rachels and Rachels (2003), Benlahcene *et al.* (2018:35) define deontological ethical theory as follows:

> Deontological theories can be depicted as duty-based ethical theories. The word Deon originates from the Greek word Duty. They focus on the nature of an action itself and also on its motive to figure out if it is right or wrong. In contrast to the situation with utilitarianism, consequences do not matter in deciding which action is morally right, it is the rules that determine what motive to act on and what action you should make, i.e what your ethical duty is.

Whereas deontological theory is concerned with principles rather than outcomes, consequentialism and utilitarianism are teleologically driven theories focused on results. Consequentialism focuses on the good or evil

outcome of actions, while utilitarianism is oriented at maximising the greatest level of happiness for the greatest number of people. Benlahcene *et al.* (2018:33) define consequentialism as follows:

> The theory of morality that draws moral obligations or duties from what is desirable or good as an end to be attained … (It) holds that an act is morally right if it produces a greater level of good over evil than any alternative act, and it is morally wrong if it does the opposite.

Utilitarianism is focused on the pleasure or pain that an action causes. It considers happiness as inherently good and as the ultimate end in life. Utility means that one seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest quantity of people. Thus, when deciding upon a course of action, one must ask what action will bring about the greatest amount of happiness in comparison with unhappiness (Benlahcene *et al.* 2018:34; Vorster 2025:147).

Each of these theories have strengths and weaknesses. The strength of deontological theory lies in the way in which it ties morality to sound moral reasoning and universally applicable duties. It is particularly adept at formulating the prescripts and proscripts a society needs, in order to regulate social behaviour and to ensure social cohesion. The strength of utilitarianism and consequentialism lies in bringing a pragmatic and contextual component to ethics discourse. These theories aver that ethics is about real-life situations, and that it is important to consider the possible outcomes of actions and their implications for the greater good. The pleasure and pain, well-being and harm, caused by actions, are important considerations in making ethical judgments.

The weakness of the mentioned theories lies in the fact that they do not adequately address the inner motives of the ethical agent. Rational calculus and moral understanding do not automatically translate into the willpower to engage in positive moral actions or the drive to refrain from wrongdoing. In fact, moral reasoning divorced from sound inner motives could easily be weaponised against morality itself. Bandura (1991) identified distorted moral justification as one of the eight most common forms of moral disengagement. People engaging in this type of moral disengagement use well-sounding arguments to cognitively reconstruct that which is wrong as being right. This serves as a warning that moral principles devoid of sound inner motives could lead to perverted forms of morality.

A rational calculus based on envisaged outcomes but devoid of sound inner motives carry similar risks. When outcome-based moral decision-making is not driven by good intentions, the ends could be viewed as justifying the means. In these instances, as long as the ends are achieved and the interests of the greatest number of people are served, any kind of action is considered to be justifiable.

In sum, deontological theory, utilitarianism, and consequentialism serve as valuable tools in informing the objective component of moral identity that consists of moral ideals and values. Ethics cannot escape the importance of rational deliberation. Sound cognitive reasoning assists in defining moral ideals and understanding one's values, and aids in persuading others to do the right thing.

However, the mentioned theories fall short in addressing the subjectively experienced side of moral identity. This is where virtue ethics comes into view. Virtue-ethical theory is concerned with the "why and how of good identity" (Peterson & Seligman 2004:449). It ties right action to specific virtues and moves beyond rule formulation to an analysis of the affective and motivational states that drive ethical decision-making. It considers morality as an art, a skill that must be learned through moral coaching and the imitation of moral exemplars. This being the case, virtue-ethical theory emphasises the importance of social formation. People learn by doing, and this requires being part of a community where ethics skills can be honed on a rational, emotional, and linguistic level and where sound habits can be formed (Hauerwas 1981:115).

By tying morality to self-consistency and to who I am as a virtuous person, rather than where I am, the rules I am faced with, or the person to whom I must report, virtue-ethical theory provides an internalised and cross-sectional ethical code to which I must adhere, irrespective of the variety of ethical climates, organisational contexts, and social environments to which I am exposed (Vorster 2025:141-159). By emphasising self-consistency and inner moral conviction rather than compliance to externally based rules, virtue ethics provides a buffer against moral hypocrisy. Moreover, since virtue-ethical theory is concerned with learning by doing, the moral agent is empowered with the necessary self-efficacy beliefs and moral skills to translate moral convictions into moral action.

In sum, all four approaches to ethics are salient. However, the deontological, utilitarian, and consequentialist approaches must be supplemented with some version of virtue theory if the subjectively experienced component of morality and self-efficacy is to be adequately addressed.

4. CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MORAL FORMATION

The question posed at the start was specifically directed at Christian churches and Christian communities. How can Christian communities create buffers against moral hypocrisy and enable adherents to translate moral understanding into moral actions? In response, I have stated that a supplementary use of

normative-ethical theories provides the best methodological framework to address these matters. But if so, what would be the role of Christian ethics?

At this point, it is important to define Christian ethics. Christian ethics is grounded in the story and moral example of Jesus Christ. It is specifically concerned with right and wrong from a Christian perspective, the contents of Christian moral action, and the dispositions and virtues that a person of Christian character must display.[3] Its main sources are the biblical and theological traditions that developed after the early-church period. Besides its Christian resources, the vast majority of Christian ethical discourses also engage with normative theories and ethical systems articulated in the fields of philosophy and social science. The influences of Aristotelianism and human rights discourse on Christian thinking are clear examples.

Christian ethics has a unique grammar, but it must also operate within a morally plural environment. Diverging histories, cultural backgrounds, world views, and religious beliefs inevitably lead into moral pluralism. Moral pluralism is an inescapable reality of modern life that poses a severe challenge to social cohesion. This begs the question: How should Christians navigate the plethora of moral discourses that exist? Should Christians not strive after universally shared values, rather than world view specific norms?

Seeking universally shared values is indeed important, especially in the public domain. But realism is also required. The moral identity one assumes is inescapably rooted in a particular world view and a moral discourse that provide ideological frames of reference, moral ideals, values, norms, and behavioural scripts. There is no such thing as a universal moral identity devoid of any specific frame of reference (Hauerwas 1981:112). I am someone specific; I have a specific upbringing, cultural background, and history; I operate in specific social contexts and work environments; I follow a particular behavioural script, and I entertain views about ultimate questions such as the meaning of life, the existence of God, faith, the nature of evil, beauty, etc.

Imposing moral sameness on everyone is neither a realistic nor ethically appropriate response. It amounts to a form of coercion that suppresses the human conscience and violates one's sense of taking responsibility for one's own actions. Instead, one must acknowledge the diversity of moral discourses that exist in modern societies, and the possibility that different kinds of moral identity can co-exist peacefully in society without causing harm. Communities should be allowed to develop their own unique moral grammars with the unique resources at their disposal, and to socialise members and adherents accordingly.

3 For an extensive discussion, see Long (2010).

Having said this, two qualifications apply. First, members or adherents must have the freedom to exit a moral community if they so choose. People cannot be forced to believe in ideas or values in which they do not believe. Legitimate moral discourse relies on persuasion, not coercion. Secondly, for a discourse to be accepted as a legitimate moral discourse, it must be morally authentic. The mere fact that a specific type of discourse calls itself a moral discourse does not make it authentically moral. With authentic morality I mean that a moral discourse must serve the internal *telos* of morality, namely to resist evil, to prevent cruelty and harm, to uphold justice and fairness, and to safeguard peaceful coexistence. These are the basic foundations upon which personal well-being and civil social relations are built. To qualify as moral, a discourse must accept basic cross-sectional moral principles that are universally applicable. One's particularities do not suspend one's universal belonging to the human family and one's universal duties and responsibilities towards others.

As one's choice of identity is embedded in a certain kind of moral discourse, and it is possible for a variety of moral discourses to coexist in the public domain, the question arises: How should Christian ethics go about in forging Christian moral identities that translate moral understanding into moral actions?

The following basic directives from the preceding discussion on moral psychology and moral theory are, in my view, helpful to the discipline of Christian ethics and could steer Christian ethics in a promising direction:

- People are less inclined to engage in moral hypocrisy and more inclined to translate moral understanding into moral action when moral decision-making is tied to who I am as a person.
- Both the objective and the subjectively experienced components of moral identity ought to be addressed in Christian-ethical reflection. On the one hand, Christian ethics has the task of formulating moral ideals, values, and duties that direct the cognitive reasoning of Christians. Conversely, it must encourage the experience of moral emotions such as care and empathy and cultivate skills of moral conduct.
- The centrality of one's moral self-understanding within the broader constellation of one's identity structures is of fundamental importance. Christian ethics must guide adherents in a direction where their moral identities are so intertwined with their self-definitions that they are not tempted to deactivate their moral identity for the sake of other interests or commitments. This requires addressing the intentions, affections, motivational states, and identity dispositions of a Christian mindset.

- Self-efficacy is vitally important for translating moral understanding into positive moral actions. Adherents must be exposed to learning by doing. This involves being involved in communities of social formation and imitating moral exemplars. It is, therefore, important for Christian ethics to reflect on ecclesiology and whether churches are sufficiently geared towards shaping moral identities.

4.1 Christian moral identity

Next, a brief example is presented of a framework for the construction of a Christian moral self-definition. The *imago Dei* is offered as the ideal overarching anthropological framework for Christian identity formation. It contains a universalist, ontological, theocentric, and Christological dimension well suited for moral identity formation. Responsibility is proposed as the guiding rule in clarifying Christian values and formulating principles. It relies on obeying God, who is the ultimate source of responsibility, identifying the internal *telos* of practices, and applying self-criticism through cycles of repentance and renewal. Love is presented as the central disposition of subjectively experienced Christian moral identity. It is the key motive that guides Christian moral action. Lastly, Christian educational communities and churches are identified as the main institutional vehicles for honing moral skills. They assist in transmitting values, providing moral exemplars, cultivating self-efficacy beliefs, and engaging adherents in positive moral actions.

4.1.1 The *imago Dei* as theological-anthropological frame of reference

The theme of the *imago Dei* has traditionally formed the centrepiece of Christian theological anthropology (Estep 2010:17). Although the expression is used sparingly in Scripture, a great many biblical passages echo the theology behind the term (see, for instance, Ps. 8). Its endurance over centuries bears testimony to its theological and ethical utility and explains why it has become an indispensable frame of reference in Christian anthropology.

The exact meaning of the original expressions *tselem* and *demūth* in Genesis 1:26 has been a topic of much theological debate. *Tselem* refers to a physical representation, while *demūth* denotes a similarity that is not necessarily physical (Estep 2010:12). It is indeed unclear whether the words are used interchangeably or as parallels in Genesis 1:26. Several interpretations of the *imago Dei* were developed over the course of the history of theology, each trying to connect the image to a specific component of human existence. Substantive interpretations tied the *imago Dei* to specific human attributes such as rationality, spirituality, and ethical capacity. Functionalist interpretations related the image to human functions such as procreation,

work, and dominion over creation, while the relational view grounded it in the relational capacities of human beings, both with respect to God and other human beings. Still others viewed the *imago Dei* in relation to human destiny (Estep 2010:18). Although each of these interpretations have merits, there is reasonable consensus nowadays that the *imago Dei* cannot be tied to a specific component of human existence but rather refers to the whole human being in relation to God (Kärkkäinen 2019:166). It articulates the idea that human beings are representatives of God on earth and that they must, therefore, be treated with dignity (Gn. 9:6). The human being is created by God, is dependent on God for its existence, has the competency to relate to God and each other, and finds its purpose and eschatological destiny in serving God by imaging him.

Despite its ambiguities, the theme of *the imago Dei* is ideally suited to provide an overarching framework for a Christian self-definition, because it ties what we do to who we are as divinely created beings. The concept contains several features important for Christian identity formation. First, it is a theocentric concept that relates identity to the ultimate reality of God. A self-definition rooted in a relationship with God and a moral identity centred on obeying God cannot be easily deactivated without experiencing dissonance. By tying identity to the ultimate source of human existence, and to the one who has created moral order, a theocentric identity is well placed to occupy the central role within the constellation of identities in the Christian's personality, as it penetrates to the very depths of being. Secondly, the term has universal dimensions, which is an important prerequisite for authentic moral discourse (Kärkkäinen 2019:167). The creation narrative in Genesis 1 relates the *imago Dei* to all people, irrespective of gender or race. Sin does not eradicate the image of God. In various passages, human beings are called the image of God, despite the reality of sin (Gn. 9:6; Ja. 3:9; Kärkkäinen 2019:167). Createdness in the image of God is thus an ontological reality that cannot be revoked. Thirdly, besides its theocentric and universalist dimensions, the *imago Dei* also has the Christological credentials to inform the specifics of a Christian self-definition. Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:260) point out that the image of God mostly has a Christological connotation in the New Testament. Various passages in the New Testament approach the theme of *imago Dei* from the perspective of the coming of Christ (Rm. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 5:17, 3:18; Col. 1:15; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:9-10; Phlp. 2:6; Ja. 3:9). Christ is presented as the perfect image of the "invisible" God (Col. 1:15) and as the true reflection of God's glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Barth regarded these passages as an important premise for theological anthropology. Rather than following the Enlightenment in grounding human existence in nature, Barth contended that theologians must approach anthropological issues from the perspective of Jesus Christ who is the authentic and perfect human being

(Barth 1960 CD III/2:222-231). Ridderbos (1975:73-77) also pointed out that the Christological references to the *imago Dei* in Pauline literature are meant to relate Christ to the first Adam. Christ is the second Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed. The pre-existent son of God is predestined to become a human, and to make others share in this image. The imaging of Christ consists in him radiating the glory of God (Ridderbos 1975:70). In Pauline literature, imaging Christ is consistently portrayed as a process of renewal after the image of Christ through the transformative work of the Holy Spirit (Maqoma 2020:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). In Paul's thought, the transformation of believers is a transformation into the glory of God (Dunn 1998:288). Of special importance to Christian moral identity formation is the moral contents given to imaging Christ. Reflecting the glory of Christ requires bearing the fruits of the Spirit, which involves displaying virtues. Various concrete lists of virtues are presented in New Testament literature, most notably in Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Peter 1:5-7, and Colossians 3:12-14.

4.1.2 Responsibility

Moral agency requires assuming and exercising responsibility, the exercise of which is intimately tied to one's sense of self. When one speaks about a person, one does not merely speak about someone who has a physical bodily presence and who is self-aware. One also refers to an actor who is involved in relationships and who performs certain roles in life (Schweiker 1995:162). Performing roles confers duties upon one. It requires making decisions, choosing courses of action, taking care of others, and accepting the consequences of the actions one has taken. When one assumes responsibility and accepts accountability, one is engaged in constructing moral self-definitions. In essence, moral identity is about designating oneself as responsible agent, taking responsibility for one's actions and endorsing the values that orient one's life (Schweiker 1995:167).

One's choices and actions are based on the values one endorses. One cannot assume responsibility without having clarity about the values and principles that ought to guide one's actions and protect one's self-constancy. Value clarification and principle formulation are exceedingly important in moral discourse. This is where world views, faith, and sound cognitive reasoning come into play. De Villiers (2020) pointed out that this process requires a sensitivity for contextual appropriateness, social obligations, and duties towards the natural world.

For the Christian, forging a specifically Christian moral identity entails clarifying values and formulating principles in response to the question of what God demands, who Jesus is, and what a life following Christ entails.

From a theological point of view, responsibility rests on three pillars, namely recognising God as the source of responsibility, searching as stewards of God for the internal goods of practices, and applying self-criticism.

Being created in the image of God means that one recognises "God as the source of responsibility" (Schweiker 1995:178). As a representative of God, one has a responsibility to care for God's creation, by affirming its goodness and promoting the integrity and flourishing of life in God's creation. The "scope of this moral obligation" has increased significantly with the increasing ability of human beings to transform reality through science and technology (De Villiers 2020:170). Affirming goodness and revering life means avoiding evil. It also requires that one be guided in one's choices and actions by the values ascribed to God's identity in Scripture. These include goodness, mercy, justice, love, faithfulness, and truthfulness (Ex. 34:5-6; Dt. 7:9; Ps. 11:7).

The second pillar of responsibility concerns identifying the internal goods of practices. This requires wisdom and discernment. If one affirms the goodness of God's creation, one must inquire about the internal goods of practices. According to MacIntyre's (1981:191) definition, internal goods refer to the core *telos* of a practice, and external goods to the benefits that flow from a practice. For instance, the internal *telos* of academic research is to develop new insights and knowledge that may enhance the flourishing of life in God's creation. The external benefits tied to research would be monetary compensation and recognition for innovative work. One acts morally when one is focused on serving the internal *telos* of the activity, but one loses sight of morality when the external benefits flowing from the activity become the main motivational force. In determining the *telos* of practices, one must use wisdom as means to discern whether a practice has a legitimate moral *telos* that serves the goodness of God's creation, or whether it is intrinsically evil or immoral.

Self-criticism is the third vital feature of responsibility. By assuming responsibility, one accepts accountability. Accountability demands that one critically assesses one's choices and actions, both as people and communities. Moral identity cannot be sustained without continuous self-assessment and a willingness to return to self-constancy. Moral growth is highly unlikely in cases where people or groups lack the capacity of self-critique. The theme of continuous repentance and renewal after the image of Christ is a pervasive theme in the New Testament and particularly helpful in nurturing self-criticism (2 Cor. 3:18). It consists of acknowledging one's sins before God, acknowledging mistakes to those affected, and rectifying them.

4.1.3 Love as the central disposition of subjectively experienced Christian moral identity

Love is the most vital element of the subjectively experienced component of moral identity. Love underlies the moral emotions of sympathy, care, and empathy. The vast majority of modern psychologies affirm that the satisfaction of love needs is vital for human well-being. When the love needs of people are met, they tend to flourish, whereas loveless environments create isolation, estrangement, and pathologies (Maslow 1987:63).

In Christian ethics, the love ethic has traditionally served as fundamental point of departure for Christian ethical reflection. The New Testament uses the words ἀγάπη and φιλιά for love. Although the two terms often overlap and are even sometimes used interchangeably, there are distinct differences between the two expressions in specific semantic contexts. Ágáπη refers to showing respect and regard. In the words of Schweiker, ἀγάπη "acknowledges that others are worthy of care and respect independent of the self's wants". φιλιά is concerned with love based on interpersonal associations (Louw & Nida 1989, vol. 2:294).

The gospels contain rich perspectives on love, ranging from the universalist perspectives found in Matthew and Luke on loving the enemy (Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:27-28, 32-36), to the community-focused perspectives found in John on the inner relationships in the family of God (Van der Watt 2006:129). In Pauline literature, love is mainly portrayed as an inner attitude towards God and fellow human beings that is manifested in a "specific style of living and doing" (Du Toit 2006:176). Most of the virtues identified in New Testament virtue lists have a strong connection with the central love command (Gl. 5:22-23; 2 Pt. 1:5-7; Ja. 3:17-18). Virtues such as peace, joy, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, perseverance, godliness, compassion, humility, forgiveness, grace, sacrifice, fairness, and temperance are grounded in the "cardinal" virtue of love, and reflect the intentions, affections, motivational states, and identity dispositions that ought to govern a Christian mindset. Some of the virtues refer to moral traits (self-control, temperance, perseverance, forbearance, humility, faithfulness), others to moral affections (love, joy, hope, kindness, goodness, compassion, forgiveness), and others to intentions and motives (faith, fairness, graciousness, peace, and sacrifice).

Building on the love ethics of Jesus and the Aristotelian perspectives on virtue, the Augustinian theological tradition, most notably Thomas Aquinas, described love as the cardinal virtue that directs all other virtues. Sin is the misdirection of the will away from love (*caritas*) to a disordered desire (*cupiditas*) (Mathewes 2001:167). The danger of moral hypocrisy looms the moment when acts are disconnected from the self, and the instant *caritas* makes way for wrongful desire.

4.1.4 Moral formation and the Christian community

Having identified the key values and dispositions that guide Christian identity, the question is: How can Christian institutions guide Christians in translating values into moral actions? For a start, it is important to note that the relationship between cognitive ethical reasoning and ethical action is bi-directional in nature. People learn by doing, and people do while learning. Webster (2010:42) rightly notes that Christian moral knowledge is not a complete package prior to engaging in actions. Rather, it is framed in "active obedience" to God.

Parenting is undoubtedly the most important form of value transmission in society. But society also needs institutions that are capable of transmitting values. In Christian communities, the church and Christian schools are the most prominent institutions involved in facilitating broad-scale Christian moral formation. The moral responsibility of these communities stretches beyond teaching Christian doctrine and good morals. To be truly effective, they must also facilitate good actions, by exposing adherents to moral exemplars and groups that stimulate moral understanding, moral willpower, and self-efficacy beliefs. Adherents must be guided in self-regulation and ethical ownership, and must be encouraged to participate in reconciliatory pro-social activities that extend beyond the "in-group". In doing so, "circles of moral regard" are expanded, and barriers between in- and out-groups are overcome (Reed & Aquino 2003:1284). Other-regarding actions such as peace-making and reconciliation are not only important for social cohesion but are fundamental to the Christian love ethic.

As noted earlier, a Christian ethic would be based on following Christ as moral exemplar. The important theological question that Christian communities must answer is: Who is Christ for us at present? There are two dominant approaches in Christian ethics: Christian ethicists who work with a Christology from "below" start with the historical human Jesus and his ethical example and move from there to the significance of his relationship with God. Exponents of this kind of approach are Edward Schillebeex (1914-2009), Jürgen Moltmann (1926-2024), and Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014). The high Christology approach begins with the incarnation of the pre-existent son of God in the person of Jesus Christ. From this vantage point, it moves to the historical work of Jesus and its implications for the ethical life of the Christian. Well-known exponents of this approach are Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Emile Brünner (1889-1966) (Wildman 2007:285-304). Some ethicists, most notably Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), prefer to focus solely on Jesus as an historic ethical example whose teachings on morality should be embraced, rather than resorting to ethical dictums grounded in the metaphysical reality of the "exalted" Christ. In this instance, no Christology is at play. However, one could ask whether this type of ethics is truly Christian?

Classical Christianity as expressed in the ecumenical creeds, entertains a high Christology and gives a biblical and metaphysical grounding to Christian morality. In this type of Christian ethics, themes such as the trinitarian existence of God, union with Christ, justification, sanctification, and glorification come into view. The letter to the Colossians presents a good example of an ethics grounded in high Christology. In this letter, Christ is presented as the visible image of God (Col. 1:15) in whom the fullness of God dwells (Col. 1:19-20). The following of Christ is portrayed as extending beyond the following or imitation of a historical role model. It finds expression in a life in fellowship with the living Christ through the vivifying work of the Holy Spirit. Christians exist and act on the basis that they have died in Christ and have been raised with Christ (Col. 3:1; Webster 2010:50). They seek the things that are "above" (Col. 3:1), meaning that their moral existence is entrenched in the "domain of Christ and his Word" (Webster 2010:51). The life of the Christian is depicted in Colossians 2:20-3:4 as a life with Christ (συν) that "reduplicate(s) the entire alteration that has taken place in Christ" (Webster 2010:51). The Christian has died with Christ (2:20), has been resurrected with Christ (3:1), is hidden with Christ in God (3:3), and will be glorified with Christ (3:4). The moral life of the Christian thus does not take place in some time and place far removed from the historical Jesus, but it is in fact a life "in and with" the living Christ who has changed the course of history (Webster 2010:54).

The subjective identification with the living Christ must be followed with actions that imitate the attitude of Christ in real life. Vorster (2017:160) points out that the ethics of the New Testament is, to a large degree, informed by the notion of imitating Christ. This imitation is both learned and galvanised by doing. Fighting moral hypocrisy demands that churches and Christian educational institutions move beyond the cognitive identification of values and the teaching of Christian morals towards building mechanisms where imitation, learning by doing, and pro-social outreach can take place. A wide variety of mechanisms are available, ranging from mentorship programmes, youth development programmes to outreach campaigns. The important factor is to engage in activities that hone emotional, rational, and social moral skills. Studies indicate that, when people engage in pro-social activities, the strength of their moral identity also increases (Weaver 2006:348). Those who engage in such activities experience a sense of satisfaction and worth, while those who benefit are inspired to also participate in pro-social outreach.

5. CONCLUSION

This article reflected on the phenomenon of moral hypocrisy, which manifests itself as people trying to appear moral without behaving morally. It asked: How can churches and Christian communities guide adherents in translating Christian moral ideals and values into action? It argued that moral identity, which contains both an objective and subjective component, is an important self-regulation mechanism in human life. It filters decision-making, by tying values and moral emotions to who I am as a person. Ethical formation must address both the objective component (moral ideals and values) and the subjectively experienced component (moral emotions and self-efficacy beliefs) of moral identity. Deontological, consequential, and utilitarian theorising help address the objective component of moral identity formation but is less efficient in addressing the inner motives of the moral agent. Taking intentions into consideration is important, because knowledge about moral ideals and values does not automatically translate into positive moral actions. Sound motives and willpower are required. Virtue-ethical theory serves as a good supplement to the a-forementioned ethics theories, because it moves beyond rule formulation and outcome-based decision-making to the intention of the moral agent. Virtue ethics is particularly apt in addressing the moral soundness of the inner motives and emotions of the moral agent.

The last section provided a framework for constructing a Christian moral identity. In doing so, it relied on the theme of the *imago Dei* as overarching anthropological framework, responsibility as the key guide in clarifying Christian values and formulating Christian principles, and love as the central disposition of the subjectively experienced component of moral identity. Moral formation requires effective mechanisms of value transmission. In Christian moral formation, the church and Christian educational institutions are the most important institutional mechanisms for nurturing moral identity and enhancing the self-efficacy beliefs required to translate moral ideals into moral actions. To be efficient vehicles of moral formation, they must organise moral formation activities in ways that are fit for purpose. Using Christ as moral exemplar, learning moral skills by doing, and engaging in pro-social activities are some of the means that can be used to promote a lifestyle that translates moral ideals into moral action.

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