

Book reviews

Character psychology and character education, edited by D. L. Lapsley and F. C. Power, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, 2005, 352 pp., paperback (ISBN 0268033722).

Character develops itself in the stream of life
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

After a long period of hibernation, character, willpower, and integrity are back, in books, magazines, and television shows. People praise good character and mourn its absence. Common sense informs us that many of society's ills stem from antisocial values in action; however, when we begin to think like scientists about the dynamics of human action in the short term and the long term, many questions arise. Is character distinct from personality? Can good character be developed? How best can character be included in a science of psychology? The thinkers contributing to *Character psychology and character education* provide us with wholesome food for thought, but like all good character education, they force us to think while we eat.

Is character distinct from personality? Gordon Allport, one of the founding-fathers of modern personality theory, excluded character from personality psychology: character is personality evaluated, whereas personality is character devaluated, and therefore character is a term more relevant for ethics and philosophy than for psychology (Allport, 1937). But surely Allport was mistaken. Is not the skill of evaluating good action from bad action often beneficial and thus critical for personality development (Erikson, 1968, 1978)? Did not evolution design brains to evaluate personalities for a reason, and is not a culture of moral action part of the gel that supports effective group functioning in the long term (Richerson & Boyd, 2005)? Modern evolutionary theory would certainly support the view that moral character has developed itself into the stream of life, into our biology and our culture, but now that character psychology has awoken from its long hibernation, how will psychologists conceive of character in a culture of scrupulous psychological science?

Resonating throughout *Character psychology and character education* are echoes of Augusto Blasi's

thinking (chapter 3): moral character is embedded in self-identity, and an understanding of how self-identity is fashioned provides a fertile basis for thinking about moral motivation, commitment, and self-worth. In Blasi's view, willpower and integrity are two core components of character. Willpower allows for both self-control, which constrains action, and desire, which motivates action. Integrity is less generic: it refers to "a person's serious concern for the unity of his or her subjective sense of self, as manifested in consistency with one's chosen commitments" (p. 90). Consistent with the view developed by Darcia Narvaez and Daniel Lapsley (chapter 6), where moral character is described as a form of "expertise," Blasi notes that willpower is not a matter of strength, but rather a result of a set of interlocking skills: goal setting and planning ability, the ability to sustain and focus attention, self- and goal-monitoring skills, future time perspective, the ability to delay gratification, etc. Viewed as a generic set of skills, willpower is neutral; like intelligence, it can be used for moral purposes or to pursue immoral goals. As such, Blasi hypothesizes that willpower is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition, for translating good intentions into action, and he notes that quality research is needed to test this hypothesis.

So why might we choose to bend our will in one direction or another? In seeking to ground character in Nature, Christine McKinnon (chapter 2) argues that certain dispositions are endorsed because "Human welfare is enhanced by performing well the paradigmatic human activity of constructing for oneself a character with which one is justly well pleased" (p. 63). The argument presented, stating that "character possession pays," will appeal to some, but not all. Without first framing this argument in a scientific model of human action (Fischer & Bidell, 2006), the proposed relation between character and flourishing tends to float in an uncertain metaphysical stream. Elsewhere, we observe an analogous argument, which states that "happiness pays" (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

And although we might readily convince students that it is good to be happy, what counts as a sufficient argument to convince them that it is good

to be good? Robert Nash (chapter 10) warns us that today's students are constructivists by temperament: "They realize that if character is the sum total of a person's virtues—including behaviour, likes, dislikes, capacities, dispositions, potential, values, and even thought patterns—then, in their opinion, a far more complex theory of cognitive, moral, and personality development is required than the one that the classically oriented virtuecrats propose" (p. 253). As such, when "a character with which one is justly well pleased" is selected as a desirable outcome, attention must be directed to the broader field of action wherein character functions.

And whenever we conceive of function, we must consider the efficiency and efficacy of actions in context. We can argue that different characters evolved for different niches (Odling-Smee, Laland, & Feldman, 2003). Prosocial and antisocial actions are more or less successful depending on the context. Although Machiavellianism is still accepted as "wisdom" in *realpolitik*, few would describe it as a good exemplar of ethical action. According to Augusto Blasi, for moral character, what one needs is a will that desires and tends toward the moral good. Drawing upon Frankfurt's philosophical conception of the will (Frankfurt, 1988), Blasi contends that we possess not only desires (first-order desires), but also desires about our desires (second-order desires). To have desires about our desires implies that we can distance ourselves from them. But the fashioning of our will into "good will" also requires concrete experiences: "Probably, as in all instances of the will, the essential ingredients have to do with the perception, based on concrete sensual experiences and on intelligence, of the good of moral actions, and eventually the intellectual grasp of their importance for other people and for the world as a whole. These perceptions...gain a hold in the person's imagination and will, if one is actually engaged and has real personal experiences with concrete goodness" (p. 89). Perhaps it is only after deep reflection (thinking about thinking, having desires about desires) that we will note the ethical flaws in Machiavelli's thesis, or perhaps it is only after deep reflection upon real personal experiences with concrete goodness that our logic will be transformed. As Joel Kupperman notes (chapter 8), "Coming to understand the point of morality, which includes sensitivity and care for others, will make someone a different person" (p. 216). In a traditional sense, this is what education does, it makes someone a different person, and character education is no different.

Can good character be developed? Joel Kupperman, Robert Nash, and others suggest that the development of understanding is a vital ingredient for character development. A central theme in the history of philosophical and religious thought has

been the call to "know thyself" and to "understand thy nature." Since the dawn of recorded culture, each new generation has heard echoes of this call. But what does it really mean to come to understand the point of morality? Can good character truly be developed by coming to "understand thy nature"? Kupperman argues that "a sense of what justifies (moral) rules" (p. 216) can greatly improve the odds that the developing person will construct a life plan that tends toward the moral good. Nash asks, "Is teaching morality mainly about finding truth 'out there' or constructing meaning from 'in here'? Or is it somehow a dialectic combination of both approaches that, in the end, might be complementary in some ways rather than contradictory?" (p. 249). He concludes that participation in the dialogical process "teaches the virtues of self-respect, hope, confidence, courage, honesty, and, above all, friendship and trust" (p. 266). Both understanding and character develop when students and teachers engage as equal partners in a democratic process.

More generally, the views advocated by McKinnon, Blasi, and others, that the self is "fashioned," is consistent with theories of development that highlight the active and selective nature of human beings (Baltes, 1987). By supporting the development of understanding, character education can help people to select actions that develop the self. Assuming we come to understand the point of morality, we can work to become a better person. However, developmental theory also posits that our primary motivation (or desire) is to control our environment (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). And although all of us may desire control over our environment, we each express that desire differently; we each possess a unique pattern of core traits that shape our "characteristic adaptations" (McAdams & Pals, 2006). As such, two big questions for future character psychology research are how we reconcile our desire to control our environment with our desire to fashion a moral self, and how we fashion our traits into a character (or into "characteristic adaptations") with which we are justly well pleased, particularly when some traits (e.g., low levels of agreeableness) confound our progress.

How best can character be included in a science of psychology? Ultimately, when we come to reflect upon how we "value" any given action and seek also to maintain a clear image of that action's structure, process and function, working memory is soon taxed to the limit. And we can justly ask: what level of complexity is necessary when thinking about character? What kind of truth value is needed to sway planners to desire and tend toward the moral good? Can't we simply be content to say something useful?

Unfortunately, as Craig Cunningham (chapter 7) makes clear, the history of character education

illustrates the recurring weaknesses in our thinking as we struggle to be useful. The lack of certainty and agreement about the nature of conscience, the nonsense of authoritative positions that consistently fail to inspire, the laziness of our brash attempts at broaching the subject of human conscience and virtue prior to nurturing an understanding of developmental psychology, and so on. “Unless psychology can provide a better model of human development...character will continue to receive sporadic and faddish treatments, and the public common school will continue to be undermined” (p. 197). At the same time, we have good reason to be hopeful. Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier (chapter 11) point to evidence which suggests that initiatives fostering prosocial values, adult modelling of academic motivation, participation in extracurricular activities, etc., can benefit students personally and interpersonally. They direct our attention to the value of developmental psychology and argue that a process of student’s bonding to school is elemental to the success of any character education program. Matthew Davidson (chapter 9) draws upon Vygotsky’s theory and asks us to consider how best to develop “a zone of optimal moral development.” He argues that “the core of morality is respect...character education that is done *with* students, not *to* them...” (p. 227). Drawing upon Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, Davidson argues that, by being empowered, students can come to appreciate the rewards of being intrinsically motivated to engage this world with a beneficial power of purpose.

Now that character psychology stands at the crossroads, now “that we move *from* a moralized psychology *to* a psychologized morality” (Lapsley & Narvaez, *ibid*), we should recognize a distinction between notions of character as a conglomeration of “strengths,” not all of which pertain to an ethical self per se, but each of which may support a “good life” or be interpreted as “good to have” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and notions of character as a set of component skills that support the sensitivity, judgement, focus, and skilled action of ethical experts. The character strengths view is a structural view; in categorizing strengths, these thinkers also point to weaknesses and their Aristotelian approach suggests the study of structural inter-relationships (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2006). Ultimately, moral action and skilled action are some function of both our strengths and our weaknesses: ultimate reality is a unity of opposites *coincidentia oppositorum* (Bertalanffy, 1968).

As a compliment to the structural view, we can direct our attention to the *process* whereby ethical actions (or character strengths) become manifest. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel Lapsley (chapter 6)

inform this process view by drawing upon the literatures of social-cognitive science. Narvaez and Lapsley remind us, for example, that expert ethical judgements are rarely slow, strained, and excessively deliberate, but more often fast, efficient, and automatic. The great challenge, they argue, is cultivating a path to integrity and expertise, where cognitive-affective schemas flexibly bind action to the right and the good, and retain resilience in the face of life’s complex and variable contingencies.

Theoretically, both structural and process views of human action are reconcilable, but this thinking is difficult (Labouvie-Vief & Márquez González, 2004), and is further complicated when the structure and process of actions are understood in relation to their deep and manifest function (Pinker, 1997). For example, a theoretical model of human compassion must explain how, in a brain where both aggression and love evolved together, sympathy, empathy, and kindness can emerge as the defining features of a functional action process. Using the language of dynamic systems theory (Lewis, 2005) we are asking how, over time, compassion comes to be the dominant “attractor” infusing action. Drawing upon Matthew Davidson’s definition of character as “values in action” (p. 224), and heeding Craig Cunningham’s warning above, what is now needed is a developmental theory of human action that considers the structure, process, and function of “values in action”. The time is ripe for such a development.

Character psychology and character education is a thoroughly good read. It is a book that can be read again and again. It is packed full with insightful arguments, useful research references, and rich theoretical frames that are suggestive of future avenues of investigation. It is a book that inspires dialectic balance between discussion and dialogue. It is unlikely that we will ever achieve full consensus on the nature of human action, personality, and character, but we can, nonetheless, begin to apply our understanding and work for a better world. And ultimately, in order to master the science of flourishing, we must master the neglected art of dialogue. As David Bohm (Bohm, 1980, 1994; Bohm & Nichol, 1996) came to envisage the thinking process, when we become acquainted with the details of fact and creatively work to reduce the facts to system, discussion and dialogue are functionally distinct. Discussion is a critical evaluative process, where assumptions, reasoning, and conclusions are marshalled, one against the other. Dialogue is a constructive evaluative process, where assumptions, reasoning and conclusions are understood, each adding power and coherence to the other. The more complete our collective understanding, the greater our power to bolster change for the better.

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