Theories of character development

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them .... It makes no small difference, then whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

Aristotle, Ethics

There is a wide variety of theories concerning the acquisition of character provided by cognitive developmentalists, behaviour modificationists, theologians and philosophers. Understood from a general psychological perspective, human character often means a pattern of thinking which leads to acts that persist through time and that characterize or define a person. It indicates the persistent traits or habits of an individual. In turn, these traits relate to moral conduct, moral judgement and ultimately to attitudes and actions which identify or mark one’s character. Psychology as a discipline attempts to specify the conditions that promote or impede human development. The discipline presents itself as a neutral/objective science of human nature that may be universally applied to pedagogical problems. Psychologists approach character education from a number of perspectives; moral psychologists examine questions of human responsibility whilst social psychologists attempt to explain the conduct and motivation of human beings in various types of societies. For some psychologists, moral development is not a process of imprinting rules and virtues but a process of developing and transforming cognitive structures in the child’s mind. Character development, for them, is dependent on cognitive development and the stimulation of an individual by the environment. Currently, cognitive developmentalists hugely influence education and schooling, but it is an influence that is being challenged. They generally believe that moral education, like its intellectual counterpart, has its basis in applying one’s intellect to moral issues. They are also developmentalists because they see the aims of moral education as being a movement through moral stages.
Each theory of human development often has its stages of maturation and its implied norms for what it is to be a full human being. In the 1900s psychologists began to realize that learning in relation to building one's character was a complicated process involving the emotions as well as cognitive elements. There was a movement to understand the content of a child's mind at various stages of growth. Whilst developmental psychology exercises an enormous influence on education, there has been little attention given to ideas of human character in the mainstream of the discipline. The main reason for this is that psychologists have often disliked working with the ethical nature of the subject matter in character and have felt more comfortable with the concept of personality. Moreover, stage theories are part of our understanding of education in general – we can see this in the way schooling and education are organized. In England there are four key stages identified in a child's education between the years of five and sixteen. At each stage we identify what a child is expected to attain in terms of understanding, skills and knowledge for each subject area in the curriculum. By the use of these stages we judge progression in a child's development. It seems that scientific theories of human development are also a means we employ for understanding moral education. It is through such theories that educators seek to make informed curricular judgements on the basis of their knowledge of a pupil's stage of development.

Some developmental theories

A distinguishing feature of those who have attempted to employ educational psychology has been to adopt approaches to character education that begin with a theory of human development which provides, it is claimed, a scientific understanding of differences among pupils. There has been widespread, and often uncritical, acceptance of many of these theories in teacher education programs. The main issue, often overlooked, is that much of the work in psychology is not directed at teaching and learning. Many in teacher education fail to examine the original purpose of any psychological theory. They also fail to consider fully whether or not the methodologies used in psychology, together with the kinds of data collected, can be easily transferred and applied to educational questions. This chapter does not seek to address questions of psychoanalysis or behavioural psychology but focuses on some cognitive theories.

It is useful to look at six influential individuals in the fields of philosophy and psychology who have made a major contribution to how we understand the development of character education today. They are Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Peters. Each has produced a theory of individual development that has helped shape our understanding of how children develop character. They view the role of psychology as identifying the changes and explaining why they occur. Each built upon the work of his predecessors and offered theoretical frameworks that are still referred to in the literature today. Gordon Vessells (1998: 208ff.) provides a more comprehensive account of their ideas, together with a summary of those of a number of lesser-known developmental theorists.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) is best known for his work in political philosophy, but one of the central concerns in his writing was education. He believed that man is born good and is corrupted by society. Education must accommodate itself to the various stages of a child's development. In *Emile* (1762), his influential treatise on education, he outlined three developmental stages. Up to the age of twelve is the ‘Negative Period’ in which there should be no verbal teaching – the teacher simply providing opportunities for the child to discover things for himself, with the emphasis clearly on sensory experience. The second stage begins at twelve and is called the ‘Age of Intelligence’, in which the child continues to find things out for himself but with a more practical orientation. Academic subjects are considered to be of use at this stage. The third stage is termed the ‘Education of the Sensibilities’, and it is in this stage, upon reaching the age of fifteen, that the child learns his duties towards his neighbour. In the final stage the child must eschew evil and do good and this must become part of his socialization. Education is now explicitly moral in intention, although Rousseau does not recommend introducing the idea of the existence of God until the age of eighteen.

Rousseau’s position on education was extreme for his day: he dispensed with the notion of original sin, believing in the inherent goodness of the child. The practical recommendations he made for each of the stages were largely unrealistic, exaggerated, contradictory and often shocking: he recommends that children are left barefoot to allow freedom of movement and condemns swaddling clothes for babies for the same reason. His attitude to women was not in the least enlightened. In book five of *Emile* he produces Sophie who is designed entirely for the use of *Emile*. His view was that women should be educated in the home with their mothers. Despite this, and the fact that Rousseau abandoned his own children, the spirit of *Emile* was accepted by many liberal thinkers of his day. These included Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Frederick Froebel (1782–1852), who developed his ideas in programmes of education to promote a socially uninhibited way of life. Rousseau’s ideas also influenced Robert Owen’s experiment in character formation (see chapter 2).

John Dewey

John Dewey (1859–1952) was an American philosopher/psychologist who was deeply involved in the social issues of his day, including educational reform. He was concerned with the question of how life should be lived and advanced a philosophy that sought to bridge the gap between morals and science. He also discerned a continuity between philosophy and social biological psychology. His emphasis was on the application of the intellect in matters of morals by means of testing, where appropriate, hypotheses created and refined from previous experience. Dewey promulgated the practical improvement of education in schools. He viewed children as active agents who are shaped by, but also shape
their environment. Since children acquire habits from their environment what is required is an educational structure in schools that helps the pursuit of intellectual enquiry.

Dewey was the first to state explicitly the cognitive development approach (1909, 1960). He saw the capacity for individual growth and development in both cognitive and moral domains and believed that teachers need an understanding of the order and connections of the stages in psychological development so that they can assist in this development. Dewey postulated that human development occurs through interactive adaptation to the environment, but that the final end of growth cannot be determined beforehand. His theory of human development in *The Theory of Moral Life* (1960) makes clear that the ends of human growth cannot be fixed. His influence on progressive education was widespread. For him, the criterion of a good character is not development to some higher stage. His theory of development regards human life as good so long as a person continues to develop – as he put it: ‘the only goal of growth is more growth’. He allied this growth with evolving social structures within society.

The appearance of character education programmes in American schools at the beginning of the twentieth century attracted comment from Dewey. Whilst he saw education as serving social ends, he opposed most character education programmes that were introduced (see Pietig 1977) because of their faulty teaching methods. Most programmes of character education promoted particular ‘virtues’ that involved children in making pledges and oaths, and repeating slogans and creeds. Dewey felt that moral education was hopeless in schools. He saw a vital connection between knowledge and activity and believed that the virtues should not be emphasized at the expense of intellectual attributes. He believed that the crude methods used in character education teaching involved the overuse of extrinsic motivation. Dewey wanted schools to develop an ethos throughout the curriculum and life of the school that encouraged active service and critical social enquiry. Whilst he was concerned with ethical decision-making, he nevertheless accepted that pupils act according to habits, which they follow without much reflection. He therefore emphasized the practice of reflective deliberation grounded in the pupil’s own experience. Dewey believed that education was a moral enterprise and advocated a much broader view of character education than most programmes of his day allowed for. He was also concerned not to separate knowledge from conduct, believing that learning must affect character.

**Jean Piaget**

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was a Swiss biologist who formed a theory of cognitive development based on the idea that the origin of intelligence lies in sensorimotor activity. According to this theory, a child’s cognitive development proceeds in a specified order based on genetically determined stages. Piaget was influenced by Dewey in developing his notion of stages and brought a more empirical
approach, through interviews and direct observations of children’s behaviour and thinking, to Dewey’s theoretical definitions. For Piaget, it was the child’s actions that were important. Some in teacher education concluded from Piaget’s data that didactic teaching methods were not appropriate in education for successful learning to take place and that the sequence of teaching should exactly match the competencies of the pupil’s stage of development. Piaget developed an order in which specific competencies develop. Success in school depends on this order being followed. He believed that intellectual growth is best achieved when a high priority is given to self-initiated and self-regulated discovery activities in situations that involve social interaction.

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development has four stages: the sensorimotor (birth to twenty-four months); the pre-operational (two to seven years), the concrete operational (seven to twelve years); and the formal operational (twelve to adult). His basic concept is ‘mental operation’, which he defines as a process of logical thought. His research concluded that children in stage one are not developed enough to have structures in the mind that allow them to relate terms to one another logically. Fact and fantasy get mixed up. In stage two the child thinks intuitively and pre-rationally. At stage three the child can respond logically to concrete objects and relations. Finally, in stage four the child is capable of abstract reasoning. Piaget postulated that certain developmental tasks accompany each stage; their accomplishment enables progress from one stage to the next.

Piaget recognized that schools are not morally neutral institutions and that their atmosphere is important for imparting moral ideas (DeVries 1998). He described two types of morality. First, ‘heteronomous’ morality, which is when one follows rules out of obedience to authority because of the threat of coercive power. Conformity to external rules is consequently accepted and followed without question. The second type of morality is ‘autonomous’, which is defined as self-regulation – when a person follows rules out of a feeling of personal necessity. The individual follows an internal conviction about the necessity of showing respect for persons in relationships with others. Piaget also recognizes that ‘heteronomous’ morality is often appropriate and unavoidable in adult–child relationships. Nevertheless, mindless conformity is to be avoided as coercion only socializes the surface behaviour and reinforces the child’s tendency to rely on regulation by others. This could result in what he describes as mindless conformity, rebellion or calculation. Calculation is when a child only performs the correct action when monitored by teachers and when not monitored refuses to follow the behaviour. Piaget sees this in terms of power – under ‘heteronomous’ morality the child is submissive, has low motivation and feels inferior. Under ‘autonomous’ morality the child is more confident, respects itself and others, is well-motivated and has a cooperative attitude towards others. He recommends that schools engage with children, ask them for their opinions and share some decision-making with them.
Eric Erikson

Eric Erikson (1902–94) was trained in Vienna as a psychoanalyst and became interested in relating psychoanalytic theory to social and cultural patterns. He is best known for his psychosocial theory of emotional development in which he proposes that each of the psychosexual stages of Freudian theory has a corresponding psychosocial modality. His work developed Freud’s conceptions about character formation. Whilst Piaget addressed emotional and cognitive development, Erikson focused on emotional and social growth. His eight-stage theory together with his interpretation of the virtues needed at each stage (Erikson 1950) describe what he believes to be the primary human issues in each phase. He proposes that each person will pass through each of the stages over a life cycle that is characterized by emotional conflict. The resolution of each of these progressive conflicts depends on the development of a particular virtue. His lists these virtues in order of development: hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care and wisdom. These virtues emerge as a consequence of the struggle experienced in each stage and they help shape the person’s ethical character.

Erikson’s theory recognizes that we are all personalities in the making, striving to incorporate the opposites he outlines in each stage. In confronting individuals with a crisis or dilemma, he claims, each developmental stage does not become an end point, but rather a turning point in life. Each stage builds on the past experiences for the future. In stage one he describes the basic conflict of trust vs. mistrust, which occurs between birth and two years old. If the child is nurtured and loved in this stage then it will develop a sense that the environment is trustworthy. If the child is not loved then its trust will become physically and psychologically disabled. If the child develops a sense of hope about moving on to the next stage, as defined by Erikson, then it has been successful. The list of virtues at each stage becomes a set of norms for evaluating the degree to which each person matures appropriately. In stage two, called autonomy vs. shame and doubt, Erikson (1950: 243f.) states that a basic trust in existence needs to be acquired. He explains: ‘Firmness must protect [the child] against the potential anarchy of his as yet untrained sense of discrimination, his inability to hold on and to let go with discretion. As his environment encourages him to “stand on his own feet”, it must protect him against meaningless and arbitrary experiences of shame and early doubt.’

The other stages include: initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. role diffusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation; and ego identity vs. despair. The norms or virtues for evaluating progression through these stages are: self-control, willpower, direction and purpose in life, a sense of competence, fidelity, love, affiliation, care, generativity and wisdom. The overall vision of human growth that Erikson suggests is the development of a clear identity which encourages a creative self-giving. If the child fails to cope successfully with the conflicts in each stage then his or her development is arrested. This has some connections with programmes of character education as Erikson believed
that educators should realize that each individual has their own history and identity. Character cannot be mass produced. It must involve real relationships with people. The developmental task is to form human identity.

**Lawrence Kohlberg**

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–87) has been perhaps the most influential of the developmental theorists in modern times. He asserted that children who understand justice act more justly. Kohlberg posited six stages at three levels of development in moral judgement. His first stage he calls the preconventional level, at which a person responds to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, but interprets these rules in terms of the hedonistic and physical i.e. good is pleasurable and bad is painful. The second level he terms the conventional. It understands the maintenance of the expectations of the individual, family, group or nation as valuable in its own right, irrespective of consequences. Conformity to social order and loyalty are emphasized here. The third level he calls the post-conventional, autonomous or principled, in which there is a clear effort by the individual to define moral values as having validity apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding them.

Kohlberg eventually considered or explored a seventh stage in which the person examines the question of why they should be moral, together with what is the meaning of life? In brief, stages one and two are almost entirely egocentric; stage three appears to be a little less egocentric; stages four and five are based on respect for socially defined norms, such as obeying laws, whilst stage six is based on abstractly and universally defined general principles. His potential stage seven could be described as a ‘faith orientation’. For Kohlberg, each stage represented a qualitively different mode of moral thinking. Kohlberg accepted the Platonic idea of an ultimate unchanging good. Knowledge of the good is obtained from logical–cognitive progress through six stages. Development may stop at any one of the stages and Kohlberg did not believe that many people actually reached his stage six. For him the core of character development is the cognitive structural dimension of the human person. His stages describe a sequence of changes in the way people define and evaluate moral alternatives.

Kohlberg was criticized by Peters (1979) who found his theory defective in its dismissal of virtues as important in morality, especially his failure to recognize the role of habit in the formation of moral traits of character. Kohlberg did not recognize the benefits of the virtues tradition in education. Nevertheless, rather curiously, he proposed that there was one universal, all-inclusive ethical principle – justice. Justice is of course a virtue and the only one to be taught in Kohlberg’s scheme of things. As Craig Dykstra (1981: 10) points out, justice without the virtues of wisdom, temperance, prudence, courage etc is not really possible. Kohlberg awarded Martin Luther King the status of stage six in his developmental theory. In presenting King as a moral exemplar of vision and courage he ignored his social particularities – in fact he placed King in a social, historical and cultural vacuum. King’s age, social background, education and religious
faith were all disregarded. Character has clear ethical and even metaphysical implications that many psychologists simply cannot reasonably explain away. As Edward Beller (1986: 70) says: ‘Not only are the emotional–affective, unconscious determinants of moral growth and behaviour slighted but so are the related elements of will, self-discipline, steadfastness of purpose, or, in short, strength of character.’ Kohlberg’s model of moral or character development effectively turned the individual into a kind of rational, skilled judge who depended on their ability or capacity to reason at a high level. Children or adults who were less educated or for some reason lacked the capacity to reason at stage six could be viewed as less morally sound in their judgements and actions. And yet, children and adults can be actively moral without reaching stage six on the Kohlbergian scale.

A major criticism of Kohlberg’s theory of development is offered by Carol Gilligan (1982). Her argument is that since Kohlberg used an all-male sample in his research he effectively ignored the potential differences that women would have revealed. Her research concluded that Kohlberg’s claim to have found a universal, invariant sequence of stages in the development of moral judgement does not stand. She argues that women typically follow a different pattern of moral development to that put forward by Kohlberg and she lists the virtues of caring, nurturing and compassion which women exhibit more than men. For Gilligan, the ethic of care is more characteristic of women and an ethic of justice or rights is more implicit in the experience of men. The model of women’s moral and character development Gilligan provides is a challenge to some cognitive theories. Kohlberg reduced virtue ethics to a function of social setting and structure of moral reasoning. He accepted uncritically the evidence of Hartshorne and May (1928, 1929, 1930) and believed that morality cannot be based on virtues, but rather on understanding. It was from such a basis that he criticized character education programmes and teaching methods in American schools.

Richard Stanley Peters

Richard Stanley Peters (1919– ) is a British philosopher and former professor of education at the University of London who played a major part in establishing a British school of philosophy of education in the 1960s. His analytical work into the concept of education had great influence on the training of British teachers, especially his assertion that education was the initiation into ‘worthwhile activities’. He was the co-founder of the British Philosophy of Education Society and the first editor of the Journal of Philosophy of Education. Peters was one of the first to critically appraise Kohlberg and developed his own theoretical stage theory of development. Peters believed that moral development involved more than reasoning – it must combine an understanding of moral principles with the ability to apply them in situations. To this must be added a dependable habit of good judgement and conduct. This is called the man of ‘rational morality’.
Peters’ stage theory consists of four stages, as explained by Tobin (1989). First is ‘a-rationality’, which applies up to the age of three. The child at this stage has not reached the level at which their moral thought is structured by judgement categories and therefore reactions are generally impulsive in this stage. Adults sometimes revert to this stage and in adults it is better described as ‘irrationality’. Second is ‘egocentricity’. Borrowing from Piaget, Peters describes this stage in terms of basic egocentric feelings and simple concepts or rules of meaning. Some qualities begin to emerge, such as determination and perseverance. In stage three, ‘conventionality’, people accept conventions and traditions without question.

Peters believed that most human beings remain at this stage three of development. People accept the values, priorities, and prejudices and customs of conventional morality. In stage four, called ‘reasonableness’, a code of moral behaviour becomes authentically the person’s own. The code consists of intellectual understanding of complex moral ideas, combined with an ability to evaluate the morality of any decisions made. There is no sense of progress through the stages in Peters’ model and there is the assumption that most will not proceed beyond stage three. Peters’ work attempted to provide a balanced approach to debates about character education. He recognized that a rational code of behaviour was beyond the grasp of young children and that as a consequence of this fact: ‘they can and must enter the palace of Reason through the courtyard of Habit and Tradition’ (1963: 46ff.). Peters maintained that how this was done should not ‘stultify’ the development of a rational code. He called this the paradox of moral education.

There have been other influential theorists such as Peck and Havighurst (1960) who proposed four developmental periods of character formation with four corresponding character ‘types’: infancy – amoral; early childhood – expedient; later childhood – conforming/irrational/conscientious; and adolescence/adulthood – rational/altruistic. They emphasized the role of the family in shaping character, noting that religious affiliation is no guarantee of the successful development of character. Peck and Havighurst (1960: 8) describe the qualities of a rational altruistic type in the following terms:

Such a person not only has a stable set of moral principles by which he judges and directs his own action; he objectively assesses the results of an act in a given situation, and approves it on the grounds of whether or not it serves others as well as himself. (He may do this either consciously or unconsciously; the issue is not the consciousness, but the quality of the judgement.) … He is ‘rational’ because he assesses each new action and its effects realistically, in the light of internalized moral principles derived from social experience; and is ‘altruistic’, because he is ultimately interested in the welfare of others, as well as himself.

Peck and Havighurst go on to list a whole series of other qualities or virtues that make up the character of each person.
Implications for educational practice

Dewey, Piaget and Kohlberg shared the liberal Enlightenment faith that the potential growth of individuals justifies the hope that social evolution will reach a point where moral differences will no longer be perceived as a threat to the unity of society. They believed that they had discovered the key to moral development. In some respects they came to conclusions that went beyond their data, particularly for teaching and learning. Kohlberg’s theory, for example, rests on the questionable claim that what makes an act moral is the reasoning motivating it. He does not adequately address or recognize that reasoning can be faulty or self-serving. It is not the case that something should be considered moral simply because an individual believes it to be so.

A number of psychologists outside education have asked interesting questions: Is what we become biased by what we are? How can we be responsible for the way we develop our character? Are we ultimately responsible for our character? In their arguments, contained in Ferdinand Schoeman’s edited collection (1987), we are confronted with certain virtues that dispose us to a certain way of viewing what we might become. The developmentalists described in this chapter shared Rousseau’s idea that if a child is to understand something then a method of teaching should be designed which conforms to the nature of the child’s learning. In order to do this it is necessary to understand the internal development process of a child. This includes their motivations and needs. Rousseau spoke in general terms, but Piaget and his followers have since sought to clarify the process, to the extent of trying to determine what knowledge a child can actually acquire and whether it is relevant. These many theories remain for the most part unknown by teachers. One obvious reason for this is that it is sometimes difficult to apply psychological theories to the classroom. Kieran Egan (1983) argues that these theories have had no influence on teaching whatsoever and that they reduce the effectiveness of teaching, having nothing to offer curriculum design. In his Education and Psychology (1983) he sees no legitimate implication for educational practice of any psychological theory. Like many others, Egan asks what these theories prescribe. A student teacher, he suggests, could spend a whole year studying them and be no wiser about teaching. Egan is extreme in his criticism and does not distinguish between a theory of education as a comprehensive statement of principles produced as a guide to educational practice, and some cognitive theory intended to be used to provide insights into particular aspects of educational practice. Psychologists would not claim that educational theory should be substituted for cognitive theories of human development. Unfortunately, this is sometimes the aim, more or less, of many involved in education.

These cognitive developmental theories are perhaps no longer as important as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. James Hunter (2001: 10) describes the pedagogy based on these theories as a strategy of ‘shared method’ – in other words, character traits are developed by bringing them out from within the child. In this view, these traits already exist: they simply have to be released by the shared psychological method. Hunter identifies two strategies opposed to this dominant
strategy and calls them a ‘backlash’ against the psychological approach: first, the neoclassical strategy, which is a pedagogy of cultivated ‘shared virtues’; second, the communitarian strategy, which is a pedagogy of ‘shared experience’ in community. In practice, Hunter claims, there is not much difference between the communitarian and neoclassical strategies. Hunter’s (2001: 128) main criticism is that whilst both these strategies attempt to teach traditional moral values and virtues in the classroom, they are not effective because they rework the psychological strategy within their own traditional conceptions of moral education. They present no real challenge to the dominant teaching method in schools. Hunter has a point here, since many character educators have a background in educational psychology and argue that character-based conceptions of virtue need to be embedded within a larger framework of morality as justice.

Larry Nucci, director of the Moral Development and Character Education Unit at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is one such educational psychologist who seeks to develop character in this way. His approach can be contrasted with that of Kevin Ryan, who was director of the Centre for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University and who adopts a virtue ethics approach. The difficulty with both approaches is that there is little evidence to prove the effectiveness of the character education programmes they promote, due to a lack of research.

Many developmental theorists neglect the positive role of parenting. They suggest that the parent–child relationship constrains moral development. What is meant here by ‘moral development’ is the rational ability to make moral choices. This tends to ignore the role that child dependency plays in moral development, especially in infancy. Infancy is a period of life in which parents help shape the future behaviour of the child. This parent–child bond is necessary for both development and survival, and character traits emerge through trial and error. Young children can read the faces of both parents and teachers – they recognize disappointment in them as well as expressions of pride and they generally adapt their behaviour accordingly. In these formative years they model their actions on others and much of their behaviour forms ‘automatic patterns’ as they reach adulthood. The process is described by William Gaylin and Bruce Jennings (1996: 123): ‘a set of constraints and imperatives will be imposed on [their] freedom of action by an inbuilt set of values operating both consciously and unconsciously through the mediation and collaboration of their conscience, their identity, and their self-image’.

Knowles and McLean (1992: 165) believe that character is comprised of, but not equivalent to, dispositions, traits, habits, and tendencies – all of which help define a person’s identity. Character is also related to behaviour in a deterministic way, either by influencing the goals an individual chooses to obtain or the actions taken to achieve these goals. Since our character controls the most profound aspects of our behaviour, it is interesting to ask in which circumstances we will sacrifice our self-interest on behalf of others. An understanding of familial influences is essential to viewing changes in children’s behaviour. As every teacher will testify, the habits formed in early childhood can be stubbornly resistant to change.
We can recognize that lessons learnt in childhood persist in the unconscious perception of every adult. As William Gaylin and Bruce Jennings (1996: 123) explain, by the time a child reaches adulthood he carries within him certain values and sensibilities that will drive much of his behaviour into automatic patterns. The message is that we are not as self-determining or as autonomous as we would like to believe. Other modern psychologists, such as David Shipiro (2000: 9), detail how character can act as a ‘regulating system’ – it inhibits certain actions in the individual, enabling him to retain his stability as a person.

Some developmental psychologists reject the moral and social authority of the teacher, both in their professional capacity and as adults. Instead they promote the idea that child and teacher are equal and should participate on a collaborative basis through democratic methods in constructing their own moral positions. The use of coercion or punishment by parent or teacher is considered wrong. Consequently, the school itself is problematic for those who subscribe to their cognitive theories, for they believe that schools also restrain moral understanding and growth through their use of punishment. In England, within primary school education, child development has traditionally been taken to mean the natural process which occurs regardless of education. It is a spontaneous and unique happening in each child. The English system of education appears to have emphasized moral development as part of a growth process rather than being learnt through some kind of structured training.

Many cognitive psychologists also reject virtue ethics approaches because they say you cannot begin with any substantive content in moral teaching, e.g. you shall not kill. Moral content is secondary to their considerations of character development. From Rousseau through Dewey to Piaget and Kohlberg, all reject metaphysics and subordinate it to method. Process is more important than content. Neither Dewey nor Kohlberg fully appreciated the power of virtues in education, preferring to view them as historically fixed social conventions. For them moral judgement is more important, process not product is their educational concern. In the absence of any objective morality, teachers simply become facilitators of discussion and refrain from imposing any views on others, rather along the lines of the School Council Humanities Curriculum Project pedagogical recommendations (see Stenhouse 1970). The teacher does not judge anything in Kolhberg’s approach, which was often portrayed to be an improvement on values clarification methods, in which the teacher could present a point of view but had to avoid any hint of ‘indoctrination’.

Hunter (2001) goes much further in his criticisms of cognitive psychologists. According to him their theories take no notice of the powerful influences of the media, economics or politics. They make no sense of human commitment and appear to operate within a social vacuum. Above all they do not reveal the framework in which they operate – they talk about the importance of justice, respect and tolerance, but what is the origin of these virtues? Why are they important? These cognitive theories of character education contain nothing that might lead to the ends for which they are designed. As Hunter (2001: 191) says: ‘These moral ends are conceived as extensions of an autonomous self yet these
ideals are themselves subordinate to self and, often enough, its overriding moral purpose of self-actualisation and fulfilment.’ He continues: ‘A moral code that is, at bottom, self-generating and self-referencing undermines the existence of and adherence to a prevailing communal purpose; it precludes the possibility of any compelling collective discipline capable of regulating social life. Simply put, there is nothing to which the self is obligated to submit.’ These cognitive theories do not make any clear distinction between right and wrong. Hunter is also critical of some virtue ethics approaches. He appears in general to be more positive towards virtue ethics since it, he claims, has the potential to restore some kind of ‘objective morality’ to moral education. However, in reference to schooling he believes that virtue ethicists simply advocate thin versions of the virtues which are really collections of virtues selectively appropriated from the general culture.

Ultimately, according to Hunter, cognitive psychologists and some virtue ethicists are not able to provide any ‘normative meaning’ for their approaches. Their ideas are not anchored in any ‘thick conception’ of the community and there is a denial of particularity. Hunter is perhaps incorrect in his total condemnation of cognitive psychologists, as it is often the application of cognitive theory as dogma by some in education rather than the theory itself that is the real issue. Graham Haydon (1995) argues that the content of morality can be thin and based on a few shared values. He asserts that children can be exposed to a limited range of values, which he considers good as long as they are reflected upon critically. Haydon presents these values as a selection from a number of ‘options’, but he forgets that authority, loyalty and commitment are also part of character building, for as Clark Cochran (1989) says: ‘Acceptance of authority, loyalty to ideals and commitment to an historical community, though they do require sacrifice and closure of options, are the very stuff of character building.’ Virtues have connotations of the past, of deference to authority and a tradition of belief and conduct that many in education would not accept. This is why it has to be admitted that there is no rational consensus on character education. The metaphysical approaches adopted by Jewish, Catholic and Muslim schools are seen as non-rational by the educational establishment. Yet they can produce particularity, ‘thick conceptions of community’ and clear normative meanings for moral education. According to Haydon, religious schools can focus on particular moral traditions as long as they present alternative views of the good. However, most children experience these alternative views in the general culture and so the church school does not necessarily have to teach various life options as these are already presented – for example, on talk shows on television.

The idea that the child is innately good has its origins in Rousseau. Since the 1990s there has been a greater focus on the affective domain of educational psychology and teaching. Personal well-being and the idea of ‘self-esteem’ have become important to the promoting of character education. The reasoning is that children must be made to feel good about themselves if they are to develop good conduct or virtuous behaviour. Levels of self-esteem, or ‘emotional intelligence’, are increasingly considered important for human development by some
psychologists who seek to focus on the individual – it is the ‘self’ which has become all-important for them. Individuals have increasingly been left to themselves to decide their own standards for moral interpretation, with external points of reference including sources of traditional authority no longer available to them. It is often argued that children need to be liberated, not taught to conform to a school policy; also, that they need to develop autonomous decision-making through their own personal liberation. The standards of morality lie within the child, and the teacher simply helps draw them out so long as that child is emotionally stable. There is little evidence for this theory. Children are viewed by some psychologists as adults in the making and the method is to bring out their innate and natural moral dispositions – children are only ‘developmentally delayed’ if their unfolding does not occur. This view has not gone unchallenged by character educators.

James Nolan (1988: 7) speaks about the therapeutic ethos in society and in education, which has produced a ‘new priestly class’ of psychiatrists and psychologists who understand and decipher the emotive language coming from the ‘authoritative self’. They assume, he claims, the role of the priest, of a ‘secular spiritual guide’ deciding not whether an action is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, but rather whether something is healthy or not. Nolan (1988: 179) details how some character education programmes in America that encourage children to help others are based not on an appeal to others or for the common good but to the self. This helps the child to enhance his or her own self-esteem and so character education is about the child’s feelings, emotions and ideas. Nolan (1988: 19) concludes that the therapeutic ethos is both a derivative of the modern “scientific” discipline of psychology and quasi-religious in nature. There appears to be no conception of the good character outside of the self – Stanley Hauerwas (1981: 131) calls it ‘slavery to the self’. What is ignored is that true self-esteem is only possible by an individual’s sense of achievement through hard work. The glamorization of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychological testing in popular literature, television and films has at the very least consciously extended teachers’ concerns to encompass the ‘whole child’ – the pupil’s feelings, emotions, attitudes and beliefs.

All of the cognitive theorists mentioned in this chapter reject God or faith as a factor in their consideration. They believe that that which is measured, observed and experienced is all that matters – the endorsement of the scientific method. Whilst the models of development favoured by cognitive theorists are widely used to understand how children learn, we are perhaps less likely to see many teaching methods resulting from this understanding. Many of the methods used have been variations of the values clarification approach that advanced moral understanding in the 1960s and 1970s. Moral psychology can be useful, especially in normative reflection of the kind advocated by Owen Flannagan and Amelie Rorty (1990). This kind of moral psychology, whilst taking account of empirical psychology, is much more attentive to philosophy, history and theology. For example, whilst recent empirical psychological research indicates that shyness may be deeply rooted in our biological nature, it raises questions for the
moral psychologist about whether character is chosen or self-constructed. Even if character is not chosen, Flannagan and Rorty (1990: 4) argue that we can still exercise some control over it. Nevertheless, character must be to some extent shaped by genetic factors. Otherwise how are we to explain why children born into the same family environment can have such differing temperaments? The child cannot be simply a tabula rasa, on which nurture engraves its mark. The tabula rasa theory is an inadequate concept to explain the individuation of character. More research is needed to explain the complex interaction between biology and the environment in producing character. Whether the formation of a particular type of character is a matter of chance is another interesting question discussed by moral psychologists. If character is simply about random fortune, then any idea of responsibility in respect of it becomes a nullity. Flannagan and Rorty make a clear connection between character and behaviour because if no connection existed no one would be responsible for their actions. Moral psychology, in my view, is often a more fruitful source of ideas for education, even if no statistical methods are employed and no rigorous experiment is conducted. The enthusiasm for empiricism has often obscured the real meaning of character, with many academics focusing on the scientific methods employed at great length to validate the tenuous findings of a study.

Joel Kupperman (1991) believes that empirical psychology is more appropriate for discerning what people do and not what they say. Kupperman (1991: 161) notes that no questionnaire can distinguish between what a person's character genuinely is, what a person pretends his or her character to be and what a person thinks his or her character to be. Kupperman (1991: 160) provides an example in the form of an experiment with politicians. Politicians are articulate, knowing how to use the vocabulary of moral principles in order to appear virtuous. In the right situation, with minimal risk of being exposed, even some of the most publicly virtuous politicians may take a bribe. Kupperman believes this reveals something about their character. Kupperman then refers directly to Kohlberg's empirical methods for his stage theory and reflects that if different temptations had been used, and different standards of ethical sophistication, then perhaps different results would have been forthcoming. Someone who scores highly on a moral development questionnaire and who has always had good habits and patterns of behaviour may surprise the teacher when a real temptation appears. Kupperman believes that there are strong grounds for thinking that moral education based on stage theories is badly conceived. Kohlberg's theory is built upon the notion that becoming virtuous is like becoming good at mathematics, the only differences being in subject matter and progression of intellectual skills. Kupperman (1991: 174) reminds us that no major ethical philosopher has believed this. He concludes: 'To treat a student's preferences at a certain stage as basic, incorrigible data is, in effect, to regard the student as incapable of growth. Such an assumption may well promote the result it assumes.' Rigorous empirical psychology clearly requires a solid philosophical basis if it is to account adequately for character formation.
Conclusion

Different shades of meaning pertain to the term character in different psychological contexts. Cognitive psychologists place much emphasis on the development of a structure of moral reasoning that, they claim, underlies decision-making. Some claim universality for this method, claims which may go beyond that which their methodology and data can justify. The cognitive theorist also stresses the pupil's independent reasoning ability. This contrasts with the virtue ethics approach which gives first place to the internalization of virtues that change a person and their behaviour. The two approaches are in competition and (see chapter 3) are founded on very different rationales. Development theories of moral judgement do not necessarily lead to the performance of moral actions when applied to schooling. David Carr (2002) also casts doubts on the scientific basis of many of these developmental theories and questions their logical status. He rightly observes that these theories are generally employed in support of progressive approaches to education with their emphasis on choice of value and lifestyle. This ignores the more traditionalist perspectives that are generally concerned with initiating pupils into the knowledge, values and virtues of civil society. Progressives, according to Carr, reject traditional perspectives because they do not wish to predetermine the ends and the goals of human development and because they question the worth of received knowledge and values. The difficulty for most teachers is trying to understand fully the pedagogical implications of this traditional/progressive dichotomy. We need to ask what are the purposes of theories of development in education. Above all, teachers need to be careful to avoid giving uncritical acceptance and general application to any particular cognitive, emotional or behavioural theory in the classroom. These kinds of theories are not general educational theories, but are often used to promote progressive teaching methods without a full consideration of their implications for teaching, positive or otherwise.

Russell Gough (1998: 10) maintains that we have the capacity to determine who we are or what we want to be or what we should be over and above what we are by nature. In summary, he offers four central points in his thesis: a what we are has an inseparable ethical dimension; b we have an innate ability to choose to be good; c we, in the end, determine what kind of person we ought to be; d we cannot blame others for who and what we are. All these points can be debated but Gough uses a powerful piece of literature in support – an extract from Anne Franks' diary dated 15 July 1944. Anne is aged 15 and it is two weeks before the Nazis would capture her. She writes: ‘I have one outstanding trait in my character, which must strike anyone who knows me for any length of time, and that is my knowledge of myself.’ Anne describes and examines her conscience here, particularly her knowledge of right and wrong, and then continues: ‘Parents can only give good advice or put them [their children] on the right path, but the final forming of a person’s character lies in their own hands.’ In this quotation she demonstrates both her remarkable insight and her character.