

11-2016

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Recommended Citation

Fyson, Stephen J. (2016) "Character, Oh! Character, Where Art Thou?," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol10/iss2/8>

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Character, oh! Character, where art thou?

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Key words: civic character, Christian education, social trends

Abstract

What has happened to the concept of character in our current times, and is it important? This essay asks this question with reference to the increased use of ‘personality’ in our language and thinking, and contends that this change has resulted in a greater tendency for self-referencing decision-making in the lives of our young people. The suggested educational response to the trend is that we review our teaching too, so that it is more strongly built around the biblical concept of ‘service’, one to the other.

Great opportunities, but loss of character

Australian life is inherently more diverse in its ways of life than it used to be when I was a child (some 50 plus years ago). Some of the diversity is easy to celebrate. Food choice has never been greater! Likewise, the opportunity to learn about more distant places from around the globe is as easy as getting to know more of your neighbours or the people at work or school.

If one looks at these and other opportunities for our young people, they are amongst the most privileged in the history of the planet in terms of the amount of choice in how to obtain an education and then earn a living. More and more, youth are gaining higher levels of education and expect to be able to use this education for increasingly greater remuneration.

Yet daily we see the signs of our young people still casting around to be what they would call ‘happy’. More young women are getting as drunk as the young men. Just when we think we are making progress with one recreational drug (e. g. smoking cigarettes), another bursts onto the scene (e. g. ‘Ice’). Attempted and actual suicide seems resistant to efforts to quell the tragic early loss of life.

A researcher in Australia who investigated whether young people’s well-being was improving or not, within very broad contexts, is Richard Eckersley.

In the conclusion to one of his papers he noted that:

I have argued that, notwithstanding all the complexity and uncertainties, the totality of the evidence suggests that fundamental social, cultural, economic and environmental changes in Australia and other Western societies are impacting adversely on young people’s health and wellbeing. These changes have made it harder for young people to feel accepted, loved and secure; to know who they are, where they belong, what they want from life, and what is expected of them: in short, to feel life is deeply meaningful and worthwhile.

(Eckersley, 2008, p. 24)

These findings about our young also reflect in their confusion or anxiety about the type of social issues that are flying around them – issues of sanctity of life (e.g. abortion, euthanasia); issues of sexuality (e.g. sexual experimentation, homosexual unions, sexual transformation through surgery); issues of sensual experimentation (e.g. recreational drug use, so called); issues of social justice and compassion (e.g. what is our stance in forgiving debt to developing countries, and should we give aid through the tax system); and issues of attitudes to authority (e.g. can we respect our politicians).

Another area of investigation into the lives of our young people is an apparent rise in the public self-centeredness of Western young people. There is a good case to be made that this predisposition has always been there since the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve decided to make up their own minds about what was right and what was wrong. However, Twenge and Campbell (2009) described an increase in narcissism because of the apparent over-feeding of the young’s self-image. They noted what they saw as a growing aggressive behaviour that can be seen in many aspects of youth society:

Even apart from the search for fame, narcissism is a significant risk factor for aggression and violent behaviour ... However, narcissists are aggressive exactly because they love themselves so much and believe that their needs take precedence.

(Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 196)

One way that some commentators have been trying to understand this ‘best and worst of times’

“*changes have made it harder for young people to feel accepted, loved and secure; to know who they are, where they belong, what they want from life, and what is expected of them*”

for our young people, is by studying the concept and application of character. James Davison Hunter (2000) undertook a historical overview of the conceptualising of character from a sociological perspective, and attempted to summarise how different approaches to teaching character has had different impacts on young people. He noted that in the 1800s and earlier 1900s:

... character was always related to an explicitly moral standard of conduct. While the word “character” did not disappear, an alternative vision of the self-emerged. This vision was captured by the word “personality”... The concept of personality reflected a self no longer defined by austerity but by emancipation for the purposes of expression, fulfilment, and gratification. (p. 7)

This shift in orientation of the basis of virtue in Western society, from the mid-1900s on, resulted in an important cultural shift in how we determine what is good for us to do (which is the out-working of character). What is interesting for those who work in schools and with young people, is that Hunter

(2000) also traced what happened to how young people were taught about virtue and vices within the invitation made to ‘grow in their character’.

The table below summarises his historical overview (Hunter, 2000, pp. 146-147), which is extensive, and based in the American experience.

Hunter’s conclusion about our current situation in terms of how we think and teach about character, is that all the major paradigms now are “at root, self-referencing and oriented toward the end of personal well-being” (p. 147).

What does this look like in the everyday language of our times? Hunter describes it as the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’, where-by ethics have been taken over by psychological subjectivism. Indeed, he notes that the language of ‘character’ has given way to the language of ‘personality’. As someone who was a registered psychologist for 30 years, I noted that one outcome of this dominance of personality theory over a teaching about character, was that our teaching about personhood was reduced to two domains:

- a. *Nature* – we are described as being partly

“all the major paradigms now are “at root, self-referencing and oriented toward the end of personal well-being”

Table 1: From moral realism to the death of character – as per Hunter (2000)

Aspect of Character Development	From	To
<i>Content of moral instruction</i>	From the “objective” moral truths of divine scriptures and the laws of Nature	To the conventions of a democratic society, to the subjective values of the individual person
<i>Sources of moral authority</i>	From a transcendent God	To the institutions of the natural order and the scientific paradigms that sustain them, to the choices of subjects
<i>Sanctions</i>	From the institutions and codes of the community	To the sovereign choices of the autonomous individual
<i>Primary institutional location</i>	From the family and local religious congregation and the youth organisations	To the public school and popular culture
<i>Arbiters of moral judgement</i>	From the clergyman	To the psychologist and counsellor
<i>Character of moral pedagogy</i>	From the cultivation of a sense of good and evil through memorization of sacred texts	To a largely emotive deliberation over competing values
<i>Premise of moral education</i>	From the sense that people are, for all their other endearments, sinful and rebellious	To a sense that they are good by nature and only need encouragement
<i>Purpose of moral education</i>	From mastery over the soul in service of God and neighbour	To the training of character to serve the needs of civic life, to the cultivation of personality toward the end of well-being

- determined by our genetic predispositions; and
- b. *Nurture* – we are described as being partly determined by our social upbringing within our familial and cultural contexts.

There have been countless articles and books written about which one of these two is more dominant in our personality formation in relation to certain aspects of our lives, or social patterns and trends. For example, the ‘popular psychology’ of our times wants to believe that (a) above is the most dominant in terms of whether we are heterosexual or homosexual. Personal review of this research has assessed it as unable to support this conclusion, for both methodological and philosophical reasons considered later in this discussion.

Here is the core mistake in this debate. These two aspects of our reality about human beings do have a kernel of truth associated with them. But there is a third dimension which used to be recognised. This ‘nature vs. nurture’ debate, framed with only these two points, completely ignores this third reality.

Yes, we are physical and therefore we are born with certain possibilities and in some areas, probably predispositions, in certain aspects of our lives. As a man of only five feet two inches in height, I was never going to be ‘a natural’ at the long jump, high jump or hurdles. I was fairly handy at long distance running at one stage, because my big mates tired much more quickly than I.

Likewise, our early years of socialisation do induct us into certain patterns of civil conduct, and styles or patterns of normally relating to others. In my country, we shake hands to greet others. In other countries, they bow, or give a kiss on the cheek.

However, the missing aspect of who we are as human beings is that we are embodied souls. We have the capacity to decide what to attempt to do with our physical attributes and our social upbringing. Human beings have a decision making capacity that can rise above the level of physical instinct and social patterning (I note that it ‘can’ rise above these—when it does not, and people act like animals, it is a perversion compared to how we are made to live—See 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 8-10).

Interestingly, this mistaken understanding of who we are as people (our anthropological beliefs) is even being discussed by some atheists. One of the leaders of atheistic philosophy, Thomas Nagel (2012), has explained the limitations of naturalism, defined as the belief that all of life is simply physical matter. Within this framework, explanations of life are therefore nothing but the application of the scientific method to physics and other disciplines within natural science. One of Nagel’s conclusions from his

exploration is that:

It would be an advance if the secular theoretical establishment and the contemporary enlightened culture which it dominates, could wean itself of the materialism and Darwinism of the gaps – to adapt one of its own pejorative tags. I have tried to show that this approach is incapable of providing an adequate account, either constitutive or historical, of our universe. (p. 127)

One aspect of the universe that Nagle focuses on is the capacities of human beings that cannot be explained by Neo-Darwinism. He noted that, “Consciousness is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science” (p. 35). And that because of this lack:

[The next problem for naturalism is] thought, reasoning, and evaluation... These are the functions that have enabled us to transcend the perspective of the immediate life-world given to us by our sense and instincts. (p. 71)

... [i.e.] the development of consciousness into an instrument of transcendence that can grasp objective reality and objective value. (p. 85)

However, at this point of time in the Western world, our educational syllabi are full of Neo-Darwinian ideas of how persons develop, and what determines who we are and how we make decisions, as summarised in points (a) and (b) above. These syllabi also contain the ideas of how to help people who are focussed on self-referencing therapeutic idealism. Check any Australian Government syllabus on Personal Development, or History, and these days, English and the Creative Arts, to see this in action. This is easily accessible educational evidence illustrative of the kind of trends that Hunter (2000) identified.

That is, humankind has moved from understanding ourselves more fully as physical and spiritual beings, to being highly developed animals that look to preserve ourselves and those around us. This shift has been represented in psychology by a movement away from character, to a focus on *personality*. Consequently, we have seen a shift within education away from training in *moral responsibility* towards facilitating *fulfilling of self-oriented goals*.

Another way of viewing this shift in focus is to suggest that our society is struggling with the loss of the concept of sin in the understanding of our social life together. As Professor Emeritus from Yale, Seymour Sarason (1986), noted some time ago, the result of the loss of the divine centre is a loss for

“Consciousness is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science”

society generally:

Therefore, one must ask what price has been paid in the substitution of the concepts of morals and values for that of sin as a transgression of divine law?... I would suggest as have many others, that the price we paid was in the weakening of the sense of interconnectedness among the individual, the collectivity and ultimate purpose and meaning of human existence. (p. 405)

A more recent review of this shift of the basis of moral character – individually and socially – is by Theodore Dalrymple (2015), actually a pen name used by Anthony Daniels. Dalrymple's basic thesis is that each manifestation of psychology from Freud on has (a) overstated their efficacy and (b) has also, critically, helped develop a reduced awareness of and enactment of personal responsibility for our moral decisions and actions. Thus he concludes:

But the overall effect of psychological thought on human culture and society, I contend, has been overwhelmingly negative because it gives the false impression of greatly increased human self-understanding where it has not been achieved, it encourages the evasion of responsibility by turning subjects into objects where it supposedly takes account of or interests itself in subjective experiences, and it makes shallow the human character because it discourages genuine self-examination and self-knowledge. It is ultimately sentimental and promotes the grossest self-pity, for it makes everyone (apart from scapegoats) victims of their own behaviour. (Dalrymple, 2015, p. 112)

Such critical evaluations about psychology generally, and Neo-Darwinism specifically, are not new (See Kline, 1988; O'Hear, 2002; Vitz, 1977; White, 1987). However, these recent ones are focussing on the individual and collective impact of our character, and are suggesting that we as a society need to do something about it, and quickly. Almost inevitably, these analysts and commentators address the role of families, governments and education to improve this situation of the loss of character in the face of increasingly diverse self-focussed options for our young people.

An example of this, from an overtly Christian position, is found in the first of a proposed series of books on academic disciplines from Inter Varsity Press—*Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a transformation psychology* (Coe & Hall, 2010). In the preface to the series, Moreland and Beckwith described seven reasons that establish the need for bringing our faith back into our academic endeavours. They first noted that:

In the early centuries of Christianity, the church

presented Jesus to unbelievers precisely because he was wiser, more virtuous, more intelligent and more attractive than Aristotle, Plato, Moses or anyone else. (Coe & Hall, 2010, p. 14)

They then proposed reasons why it is critical for the Church, through education in particular, to get back to such a position of Christ being introduced to intellectual endeavour, wherever it can. They ultimately concluded that:

Christians should do everything they can to gain and teach important and relevant knowledge in their areas of endeavour. At the level appropriate to our station in life, Christians are called to be Christian intellectuals, at home in the world of ideas.... As Christians, our goal is to make Christian ideas relevant to our subject matter appear to be true, beautiful, good and reasonable to increase the ranking of Christian ideas in the culture's plausibility structure. (Coe & Hall, 2010, p.17, 21)

These reflections are similar in scope to other commentators such as P. W. Eaton (2011). He outlined the social history of thought as it relates to the tasks of Christian universities. His description followed the pattern seen in Hunter (whom he quotes a number of times). His challenge is similar to that of Moreland and Beckwith, in calling Christians back into the centre of the Academy in a way that makes truth, in Christ, attractive and engaging again (Titus 2:10).

His particular call, in the tradition of the notable Christian authors Chesterton, McDonald and Sayers, is for Christians to regain a transformed imagination:

We must use the power of our imagination to discover signs of the sacred in the ordinary – the first step as we go about the challenge of learning to announce the good news of the gospel... In a culture of denial and absence, we need, not so much the tools of apologetics, but to open ourselves to the power of transformed imagination.

(Eaton, 2011, p. 107)

Eaton has strong conviction about the impact of transformed imaginations. Quoting Milosz, he makes the claim that:

Evil grows and bears fruit... which is understandable, because it has logic and probability on its side and also, of course, strength. ... The resistance of tiny kernels of good, to which no-one grants the power of causing far-reaching consequences, is entirely mysterious... Such seeming nothingness not only lasts but contains within itself enormous energy.

(p. 113)

Similar conceptual perceptions are related by Hitchen's in *The rage against God—How atheism led me to faith* (2010, pp. 141-152).

This 'power of little bits of good' is also taken up

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We must use the power of our imagination to discover signs of the sacred in the ordinary”

by Hunter in a later book, where he describes this as Christian communities (in the *gemeinschaft*, or strongly relational sense) being committed to being a 'faithful presence':

Against the present realities of our historical moment, it is impossible to say what can actually be accomplished. There are intractable uncertainties that cannot be avoided. Certainly Christians, at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom and seeking it on behalf of all others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world a little bit better.

(Hunter, 2010, p. 286)

David Brooks (2015), in a book that is not explicitly Christian, has similar sentiments. He outlined the shift from the moral realism of the pre-18th century that then found a competitor in moral romanticism. However, Brooks noted that realism fell away completely as the basis for character in the late 1940s and 1950s (pp. 243-245). From this time through to the 1960s, "The self-esteem movement was born. Our modern conversation lives in this romantic vision" (p. 247).

In the face of such a 'Big Me' culture, Brooks says there needs to be a counter-cultural movement to restore balance back into the training of character (he does note, in the spirit of fairness, that the more romantic notions have helped bring compassion to some groups who were missing out previously). But, his concern for now is that the time for "narcissism and self-aggrandisement" (p. 261) cannot go unchecked. Brooks, after doing case studies of a number of significant historical figures who lived prior to this modern conversation (including Augustine), claims society needs to get back to some moral realism. Does that simply mean teaching more Bible in our Christian schools? This discussion concludes with a brief alternative (or complementary) suggestion.

So whither character in our Christian Schools?

So what is a starting point for us in Christian schools when "*we end up epistemologically and linguistically with a moral cosmology that is beyond good and evil?*" (Hunter, 2000, p. 213 – his emphasis). We know that any deep educational change takes time—often, lots of time. Where can we start to check that we do not neglect a full understanding of the richness of character formation that is in God's Word? For example, many schools turn to their Bible or Doctrine or Christian Life Studies classes (See Turnbull, Fyson & Eynard, 2008). Yet such understanding can sometimes, or often, be taught with little imaginative attraction to the young person who is confronted by so much media

input that encourages sensuality, transitory partner commitments, travel adventure and the promise of lucrative careers of influence and opulence, as the optimum rewards for their efforts.

Put more simply, we need to consider how we can bring a different conceptual framework to our teaching and learning if we wish to include in our educational vision the 'training in the discipline and instruction of the Lord' (Ephesians 6:4).

A starting point for many schools may be to reflect on what we claim our core goals are in the educating of our students. For example, many Christian schools have something like 'fulfil the student's potential' in their vision or mission statements. This is consistent with the therapeutic strategy that Dalrymple (2015) and others identified. However, as educational communities we need to ask ourselves whether this focus also tends to support the 'admirable evasion of moral responsibility' identified by Dalrymple.

When parents and educators look at this need to bring a stronger basis to the invitation to mature character (or better balance in our character, as some see it—including Brooks, 2015), one different approach can be summarised in the phrase '*learn to serve*'.

Contemporary analysts see that the loss of the divine centre in understanding morality has led to a self-focussed therapeutic approach to personal development. The biblical principle that is evident in passages like 1 Peter 4:10-11 is that we are made to live a different way to this.

In short, the way that we are meant to live is that each person, made in His image, is to be God's representative. The purpose of this role is to extend His 'sanctuary'. Eden was the sanctuary that was supposed to be extended to the whole of God's temple (His Earth), which was His good creation, brought from chaos to order (Gen 1:2; Walton, 2009). However, our self-focus back then, as it is still evidenced today, was to ignore the Creator's intention (His will), and thus dis-order was brought into how we relate to each other, the Earth, and the Creator.

Our task, if we want to respond to the loss of character that results in more chaos and disorder, is to pray as Jesus did—'on Earth as it is in Heaven'. The outworking of such a prayer is to learn to be His representatives to do good (See Titus and Ephesians 2:10), as God has always intended.

We can describe 'doing good' more succinctly as 'service'. We are made to live as 'service agents'. Service is using any capacity for good that we have to look after God's place (His temple). God's place includes His world, right here and now, in every day in every way. All good things come from God (James

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1:10), and so as we use our good gifts to serve others, we are therefore spreading God's gifting to us—His grace (1 Peter 4:10-11).

It does not matter if we are involved in teaching and learning with five year olds or college students. If we want to teach Biblically, and in doing so attempt to answer one of the critical problems of the loss of individual and communal character of our age, then we will 'teach for students to learn to serve' (See Fyson, 2014). In short, the ways we teach for students to learn to serve will only be limited by our imagination, as suggested by Eaton above.

But even our imaginations need redemption and sanctification. Perhaps learning to serve will help us greatly even with the task of renewing our imaginations, while we "renew our minds" (Romans 12:1-2).

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Biographical Note:

Stephen J. Fyson has worked in the helping and teaching professions for over 35 years. He has had the privilege of combining his research into how people relate interpersonally, and what that looks like within community, with his work throughout this time. For the last 30 years, Stephen's focus has been in Christian schooling. He has pursued the themes of belonging, engagement, respect, and the balance of justice and mercy as worship in this context. This has been done with an eye to consider the impact that these relational dynamics have on teaching and learning from a Biblical understanding.