
A Developmental View of Man

by Catherine Stonehouse

A particular view of man is basic to any educational philosophy. In theology a major area of interest is the God/man relationship. Since a certain view of man is essential to both theology and educational philosophy, the Christian who is involved in education should take a hard look at his educational philosophy and theology to see whether or not the two are compatible. This article and the one in this issue by Dr. Wynkoop are designed to explore the compatibility of a developmental view of education and the Wesleyan Arminian theological perspective. In the following pages I will describe concepts from the developmental philosophy which seem to me to have theological implications.¹

A Holistic View of Man

A holistic view of man suggests that he must be viewed as a unit. Man is more than the sum of separate parts which can be studied and understood in isolation from each other. Rather, each aspect of man's being is interrelated with all other aspects. Cognitions, affects and behaviors cannot be separated. As children learn facts, they are also learning feelings.

Attitudes and feelings influence the way one interprets perceptions and readiness for cognitive learning. Attitudes may be changed by behaving in new ways, but in other situations changed attitudes lead to new behaviors. Man is a dynamic unit with each aspect of his being in complex interaction with every other facet.

A Positive View of Man

The developmentalist is impressed by the potential and capabilities of man. He sees development as a natural process which will take place

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unless it is inhibited. Man does not need to be coaxed and teased into learning and development through rewards and punishments. Motivation comes from within. A developmentalist believes that man has the potential to reach high levels of development. In the area of morality he can come to comprehend justice and consider the perspective of a wide range of persons.

Man Is Active

Each person is actively involved in the construction of his own understandings and perspective of the world. The infant enters life with the biogenetic endowment of a brain which is actively doing something with the perceptions that come to it. The natural activity of the brain is to organize these perceptions.

Here is an example. In the first months of life the child is busy organizing the sensations, sights, sounds and feelings he is experiencing. With these earliest experiences he begins to construct his understanding of "mother." As he is picked up, held, and fed, the baby organizes these sensations into a mental category he would call "pleasant and satisfying," if he knew the words. As time goes on, he notices that one person tends to provide these experiences most frequently – his mother. She is associated with the pleasant and satisfying. She is a special person to the infant even before he has learned her name.

For many years the child, teenager and adult will continue to construct his understanding of mother. Someday in a moment of crisis he will discover that mother is not merely one who fills his needs. She is a person with needs and feelings of her own. Each individual constructs his own understanding of "mother" as he actively organizes his perceptions of experiences with his mother and the mothers of others. The mind does not pick up concepts from the environment as mirror reflections of reality. Individual concepts are more like the paintings of an artist. Each person looks at his world and then paints – constructs – his own interpretation of that world.²

Human beings are born to mature. The maturation releases the potential for development. The young child is not able to engage in certain kinds of thinking until his brain has reached the necessary level of maturity. He cannot gain an idea or a concept until he is capable of constructing it for himself.

We are also born with the need to resolve conflicts which arise between our perspectives and the point of view of another. Jean Piaget refers to this process of conflict resolution as the process of equilibration.

When a person becomes aware of an interpretation of the world which is contradictory to his own, he must question his own thinking as well as the new interpretation that has come to him. Through this process he discovers the inadequacies of his own thinking, refines and reorganizes his perspective to bring it more in line with reality. This is development. Piaget refers to the process of equilibration as the motor of development.

Man in Transaction

Man constructs his understandings through transactions in his world. The developmentalist believes that the environment influences the individual profoundly, but not as an external force shaping a passive being. The individual is experiencing his world. He is interacting with the persons around him. He is being changed by the world and the persons in it, but he is also making changes in his environment. As the child transacts with his physical world — feeling, touching, seeing, hearing, smelling — he is discovering the physical properties of that world. As he acts upon objects he discovers the cause-effect relationships that exist. From these experiences he abstracts broader concepts.

The learner is transacting not only with the physical world but with other persons. The pre-school child is totally egocentric in his perspective. He is unaware that there is any point of view but his own. As he plays with his little friends and becomes involved in childish squabbles, he bumps into the fact that not everyone sees things as he does. The discovery that his point of view is only one among many is a very important step in the process of development. For the first time the child begins to question his own thinking and to understand the perspective of others. Through social interaction the developing person gains an ever-increasing understanding of the perspectives of a growing number of persons. One can determine what is just and fair for another person only when he can put himself in the other person's shoes and comprehend the needs and feelings of that person.

It seems that experiencing social responsibility is essential for reaching the highest levels of moral development. Research indicates that those who reach the highest levels of moral development are those who have had to make irreversible decisions for their own lives and who have carried responsibility for the lives and welfare of others over a period of time.³

We have been discussing the four causes of development which Jean Piaget, the noted developmental psychologist, believes to be essential.

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They are: (1) biogenetic endowment of heredity and maturation, (2) direct experience, (3) social interaction, and (4) equilibration. As we have noted, heredity and maturation provide the potential for development. It is only through direct experience and social interaction that these capabilities are actualized. Persons develop as they transact with their physical and social environment because of their need to resolve conflicts and restore equilibrium. Each of these four factors must be at work for development to take place.

The Pattern of Development

The research of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg indicates that both cognitive and moral development take place according to a universal pattern of sequential stages. This pattern is not wired into the individual at birth to automatically unfold as one matures. But each person is born with the potential to develop if the experiences and social interactions necessary to actualize the potential for development are provided. Development will follow a predictable course. Since each stage of development is preparation for the next, no stage is skipped. The rate of development and the highest stage reached varies from person to person, but not the order of the stages.

The various stages and levels of development are qualitatively different ways of reasoning and viewing the world. The process of expanding one's understanding is a part of development. Piaget refers to this as assimilation. From experiences and social interactions persons add new information and feelings to their understanding of a certain concept, person or thing without making any major changes in their way of thinking on the subject.

Development also involves reorganization of thinking. This is called accommodation. When one bumps into a new piece of information or a new perspective which does not fit in with his current thinking, he must do something to resolve the conflict. He looks at his understanding of the subject, discovers errors or the need for reorganization, and makes these adjustments. Through accommodation, qualitative changes are made in thinking and moral perceptions.

Kohlberg has identified three levels of moral development. The difference in the quality of moral reasoning at each of the levels can be seen in the source of authority to which the individual looks in making moral judgments. At level one, the person looks within himself to his own desires and fears which dictate whether to do right or wrong. For the young child the main reason for doing this is either to avoid punish-

ment or to gain pleasure. As the child develops, he sees that he needs help in knowing how to be good and competent. He needs a standard outside of himself. This is a major discovery and as he begins to look around for those external standards, he moves into level two.

His standards are first found in the actions of persons who are important to him. Later he discovers that there are rules to govern both his actions and those of his model. At level two the standards for right and wrong are external to the individual. As he develops in his understanding of the standards or rules and begins to make them his own, he moves on to level three.

The standards for right and wrong are internal at level three. This internal source of authority, however, is very different from the internal source of level one. It is not a self-centered, lawless source of authority, but rather it has grown out of external laws. These have been experienced, understood and evaluated. The individual has come to understand the reason for the laws – the principles out of which the laws grew. As these principles are understood the individual makes them his own. He is committed to them and his life is governed by them.

Another concept in which we can see qualitative changes through the levels of development is the concept of justice. The young child begins by believing that anything an adult commands is just or fair. He has no other base from which to decide what is, or is not fair. As he experiences unfair treatment and starts to question his own thinking and the commands of others, he begins to doubt the perpetual fairness of adults. He comes to understand justice as equal treatment for all persons regardless of age or abilities. But as one becomes increasingly aware of differences in persons, he becomes uncomfortable with justice defined simply as equality. Justice is next defined as equal consideration for all persons, which may not always result in equal treatment for all. Kohlberg views the concept of justice as the basic moral principle.⁴

Within each of Kohlberg's three levels of moral development there are two stages. It seems that persons develop from one stage to the next within a level without much difficulty. The changes of perceptions and judgment necessary to move from one level to the next, however, seem to be more difficult to make. A few adults never move from level one to level two. Many more never make the leap from level two to level three. They spend their lives tied to laws, never able to understand and apply the principles beneath the laws.

A Comprehensive Balance of Emphasis

For years, psychologists have debated whether nature or nurture is

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most powerful in determining what a person becomes. The developmentalist would refuse to become engaged in this argument. He believes that both nature and nurture are involved. The biogenetic endowment and the natural processes of maturation are provided by nature. These, as we have noted, provide the potential for development, but it is only through the nurture of experiences and social interaction that the capabilities provided by nature can be actualized. Another debate is whether the inner functions or the environment are the most powerful. Here again, the developmentalist says it is not an either-or situation. What is going on within the person is essential. However, the individual develops as he transacts with his environment.

A Cognitive Developmental Theory

Lawrence Kohlberg refers to his theory of moral development as a cognitive developmental theory. He is describing the development of the reasoning used in making moral judgments, a cognitive act. Kohlberg does not explore the question of the relationship between moral judgments and moral actions. Some Christians may tend to set his findings aside because they do not deal with moral actions. But reasoning is an essential part of actions. Our complex and changing world demands high levels of moral reasoning to guide moral actions.

FOOTNOTES

¹Sources for further reading on the developmental perspective:

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²Elkind, 1974, p. 22.

³John S. Stewart, "Toward a Theory for Values Development Education." (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1974), p. 423.

⁴L. Kohlberg, "From is to ought: How to commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it in the study of moral development." (revision of Kohlberg, 1971a.) Cambridge: Laboratory of Human Development, Harvard University, 1972b, p. 220.