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Perspectives on Developmental Psychology

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Developmental psychology is becoming a significant influence in contemporary society. The interest in and impact of developmental theories and descriptions go well beyond academic concerns. Our bookshelves are lined with texts that promise, based on the latest developmental research, to help us raise smarter babies, to survive our toddlers and teens, to understand relationships, careers and mid-life crisis, and to grow old with enthusiasm and dignity. Secular and Christian authors alike are trying to help us recognize and successfully negotiate

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our own development, assuring us that growth and change is to be enjoyed and mastered. In the midst of all this interest and advice it is particularly important for us to gain a perspective on development that is not only based on the latest research, but also thoroughly grounded in a sound biblical understanding of the nature of persons, our purposes and tasks as stewards of creation, and norms for the conduct of our lives and relationships. Moran (1991) helps us to see the critical importance of articulating a biblical perspective when he claims that the concept of development has been replacing the traditional biblical ideas of "providence, predestination and heaven." Fowler (1984) makes the same point when he asserts that developmental theorists serve as modern day philosophers: "they name and map our experience of personal change, providing reassurance that many of the crises we experience can be understood in developmental terms" (15).

In this essay we will examine the contours of a reformed, biblical perspective for developmental psychology. To accomplish this task we will need to examine the nature, purpose, and goals of developmental psychology, as well as to articulate how Scripture informs this work. In doing this we will look primarily at the broad foundational issues that should guide our developmental investigations. This essay will not address specific developmental descriptions, nor will we critique in detail the major theories influencing developmental thinking. Our purpose will be to establish a set of working assumptions with which the student can enter into the investigation, the critique, and the application of the literature and theory in developmental psychology.

Developmental Psychology:
What is it?

Developmental psychology is essentially the study of "the physical, mental and social changes occurring throughout the life cycle" (Myers, 1992). This branch of psychology finds its roots in the late nineteenth-century scientific studies of children. At this point in time, under the influence of evolutionary thinking, interest was focused on charting the progress of age-related changes, noting individual differences, and finding the early manifestations of adult-like abilities in the child. Detailed observations and the administration of the newly developed psychological tests formed the basis for early developmental descriptions. Development was thought to follow an underlying biological time-table and was seen as largely completed when the child reached adulthood.

The twentieth century brought new areas of interest into the study of children. Behaviorism raised the challenge of the importance of experience, and interest was extended into a period called adolescence. Much of the early work in this century concerned the establishment of developmental norms, the time-table for the typical emergence of skills and capabilities, and taking sides in the ongoing nature-nurture debate. Interest in studying the last period of the life cycle, old age, came next, primarily in the form of charting the inevitable declines in functioning thought to accompany the aging process. By the late 1960's interest in the entire life-cycle had awakened and theorists began trying to connect the various aspects of change and development into a unified perspective. The earlier developmental theme of growth, from a largely physical perspective, had to give way to a more psychological understanding of growth as unfolding or self-realization to accommodate a life-span understanding of development. However, the reliance on essentially a biological, evolutionary process as the guiding principle of development still undergirds much of contemporary thinking.

Developmental psychology has the task of discovering and charting this normative[1] developmental process and understanding the particular nature, capabilities, and vulnerabilities of each developmental step. The goals are to understand the particular features of each developmental step to account for individual variations, and to note the continuities between each step along the developmental path. Interest has expanded from looking at the physical and intellectual aspects of development to incorporate all aspects of human experience. For example, we have theories and descriptions of gender-identity development, the development of social perspective taking, the development of career interests, and faith development. What becomes particularly important, as efforts are being made to chart the age-related changes in every aspect of human experience, is the question of where all of this development is headed. What is the goal of development? As we move from descriptions of what appears to be normal (average, typical) for a given age to questions of where development should be headed, the assumptions of the theorist become especially apparent.

It is helpful when exploring the literature in developmental psychology to realize that to understand development as well as the theorists' own perspective, you need to turn developmental theories upside down. The author's final stage provides the overall goal of development from his or her particular perspective. As Fowler suggests,

> Providing a language for our experience of change, they [developmental theorists] also offer normative direction of the *telos* or goals of human life. Their theories provide bench marks or blazes by which we can determine where we are on the human life course. They provide guidance and encouragement regarding the direction and challenges of the next step. (16)

They tell us, in short, how to find and live the "good life." For example, Piaget's view of the end of development can be seen in his formal operational stage of cognitive reasoning. Kohlberg offers the attainment of a justice-based, post-conventional morality as the ultimate attainment, and Erikson suggests the experience of integrity, that one's life story can hold together, as the highest accomplishment of life. After establishing the goal or end point, these theorists work backwards, uncovering the steps along the development path, noting the possible disruptions, and the necessary motivation required to reach the final developmental destination. It is particularly here, at the end-point, where we need to enter the discussion, if we are to work out a biblical frame of reference for understanding development. The questions of the fundamental nature of persons, the purposes for which we are created, and the nature of the process of growth and

change as suggested in Scripture need to be uncovered.

Christian Approaches to
Developmental Psychology

Christian thinkers have entered into the work of developmental psychology from a number of differing perspectives. Some suggest that understanding of Scripture and the work of developmental psychology are two separate, although not totally unrelated, areas of investigation. Developmental findings may be applied to specific areas of interest, such as the development of religious understanding; however, the process of development is thought to be largely uninformed by revelation. Such an approach fails to address the normative, goal-setting aspects of developmental psychology. To apply Piaget's stages of cognitive development to understanding how children come to understand Bible stories misses the critical question of whether Piaget's assumption, that we as humans create meaning out of our experience, is in fact a biblically sound assumption. Do we *construct* meaning out of our experience, or do we *respond* to meaning?

A second approach by Christians to developmental questions takes biblical revelation more seriously. This approach tends to look in Scripture (e.g. Proverbs) for biblical directives that seem to outline the basic principles for parenting, discipline, or relationships. Authors in this tradition will select developmental concepts that seem to fit these directives and dismiss others that appear contrary. Such an approach fails to appreciate the radical nature of a Christian perspective, and is not helpful in establishing an understanding of the developmental process as a whole. Without addressing foundational issues, this approach is also limited in resolving disputes between well intended but different understandings of a particular passage or concept in Scripture. For example, can we use specific biblical passages to condone or condemn mothers of young children who work outside of the home?

A third approach, the one favored in this essay, is to establish the biblical, foundational norms that guide and direct the work of uncovering the nature of the developmental process. Armed with these foundational principles, we can examine both the descriptions and the implied goals of development of various investigators and theories. It is necessary then to stake out some basic assumptions regarding

a biblical view of persons, the goal or direction of development, and finally some guiding themes regarding the nature of development.

A Biblical View of Persons

To begin with, we need to ask what it means for our psychological work that we are created in the image of God. Our ideas about development need to be rooted in the anthropological implications of being image bearers. In this section we will attempt to set out the psychological implications of our understanding of the nature of humans as image bearers.[2]

First of all, we need to recognize that we are

> *The concept of development has been replacing the traditional biblical ideas of providence, predestination, and heaven.*

creatures, that is, finite, limited, and dependent beings. Humans are not creatures of their own making, nor simply the product of a natural biological process. Our structure and functional capabilities are intentional and dependent upon a creating and sustaining God. Furthermore, as creatures, we cannot claim self-sufficiency nor autonomy as is common in humanistic schools of psychology. This creaturely dependency sounds a stern warning against those developmental psychologists who maintain man's perfectibility.

Secondly, we are more than just creatures: we are created *persons*. We are bestowed with dignity and worth as persons who share the likeness of our creator. As created persons we enjoy an identity unique to ourselves; we are distinctive individuals. To be created persons also requires the capacity of self-awareness. Unlike other creatures, we as created persons are aware of our particular existence and are capable of reflecting on our particular experiences, past and future. Our existence and development as self-aware, created persons is ripe with questions and possibilities for psychological exploration. The unfolding of our sense of self-identity is a central developmental question. The importance of recognizing a sense of personal agency for healthy functioning (e.g. Erikson's initiative stage) is increasingly recognized as a fundamental

psychological experience. Those psychologists who attempt to understand and predict human experience from only the external perspective of behavior and environmental consequences seriously underestimate the importance of recognizing that we are created persons.

As created persons, we are also creatures of *choice*. This is not to suggest that we are not influenced in compelling ways by our environment or by internal biological processes, but rather that our capability to choose, control, direct our attention, think, and behave has to be recognized as a real and legitimate psychological factor. Our past experience, present needs, and future expectations all exert an influence on our present functioning. The mistake in psychology is not in identifying a particular formative influence on our behavior, personality, or understanding, but in absolutizing these influences as the *only* sources of present experience. This view does not suggest that it is hopeless or wrong to look for consistency and predictability in behavior, nor should we refuse to recognize powerful influences. It simply suggests that an account of human behavior and development requires recognizing the person as a contributing partner in an array of influences shaping the individual. On a practical level, viewing persons, including children, as creatures of choice can help parents understand their impact on their children, yet relieve them of the sense of being totally responsible for the child's outcome (Myers & Jeeves, 1987). To understand development from a biblical perspective requires recognizing the child as an active, contributing partner in his or her own development.

As creatures of choice, we are also *responsible* and *accountable*. Van Leeuwen (1989) discusses the implications of man's imaging in terms of accountable dominion. She suggests that we are given the task of being stewards of creation and that stewardship implies accountability. Scripture is clear in its directives here. We are to rule over nature, to admire its beauty, to discover its secrets, and to explore its resources, and we are to do all of this before God (Hoekema, 1986). Our responsibility also extends to our behavior toward our neighbor and ultimately to our response to God. Choice, accountability, obedience, and disobedience also suggest that there are norms for the proper care of the creation and loving relationships with our neighbor. These norms are both given in Scripture directly (e.g. the ten commandments) and by example in the teaching and actions of Christ and the apostles.

Some developmental theorists (e.g. Kagan, 1984) are willing to accept man's accountability and suggest that man has to evaluate himself according to some standard, some norm, but they do not recognize that standards or norms are not individually, collectively, or even biologically set. The standards, or norms of scripture, are not man-made. We need to be busy exploring and articulating these norms for our particular situations, both individually and collectively.

Recognizing man's accountability is fundamental to a biblical perspective; however, recognizing the limits, degrees, and development of responsibility is also necessary. Questions of how children as responsible beings come to understand and take on their responsibility, or how responsibility is to be understood in cases of diminished ability because of disability, disease, or emotional trauma still need to be resolved in both psychology and theology.

Another important aspect of a biblical understanding of persons is that we are emotionally sensitive creatures. We are capable or responding to experience in a personal, penetrating manner, beyond merely behaving or calculating. We feel, sense, respond to life from deep within our being. Unfortunately, our emotional life and the development of our emotional capacity has not been studied as extensively, nor seen as crucial to our functioning, as other aspects of our experience. This neglect of the emotional side of experience has led to two extreme positions. On the one hand, there are those who see emotions as primarily a hinderance: emotions only get in the way of rational, logical, and objective thought and decision making. For others, emotions become the ultimate source of personal authority: "If it feels good, do it!" Mary Vander Goot (1987) recognizes this neglect of the emotional, sensitive dimensions of life and offers a number of helpful suggestions in her book *Healthy Emotions*. She suggests that we need to help children (and I would add adults) to learn to express the full range of emotion, not restricting ourselves only to certain emotions. For example many men seem to allow themselves to experience only anger. It is a mistake to look at only certain emotions as legitimate. The richness of our emotional sensitivity can only be appreciated when we recognize the full spectrum of our emotional responsiveness.

Secondly, Vander Goot suggests that we must learn to match our emotional expressions to the situation, asking do they fit? Is the emotion experienced appropriate for the situation? Are we overreacting or restraining our feelings? The issue here is one of accountability, being responsible for our emotional reaction and expression. This accountability is also seen in her third suggestion, that we must learn as emotionally sensitive creatures to follow up our emotions wisely. No locking up or blowing up, but following up in a way that is constructive.

What we have outlined so far is that the biblical view of persons informs us that we are created persons, limited and dependent, yet responsible. We are creatures of choice and capable of responding to our experience in a personal, sensitive, and self-conscious manner. Two additional considerations must be addressed to complete the picture. As created persons we are by nature *relationally defined*; that is, who we are depends on and is a response to who God is. Man can be understood only in relationship to God and his fellow creatures. The ultimate and primary relationship is man with God, a covenantal relationship established and sustained by God. Man's response in this relationship colors all other aspects of his being. The particular importance of recognizing this creator—creature relationship will be explored in the next section when we ask about man's ultimate purpose and direction in life. For our purposes here I want to focus on the interpersonal aspect of man's relational, covenantal nature.

A biblical understanding of persons requires that we acknowledge we are *social creatures*, embedded in a network of relationships. Much of our sense of self and our behavior is dependent on our awareness and relationships with others. Our identity is social and our behavior has social meaning. Developmental psychology has generally recognized this aspect of our nature, theories have focussed on attachment and early parent-child relationships, and stages of social perspective-taking and the establishment of a variety of social relationships (e.g. peer groups) have been identified. The tension in development psychology is not whether the importance of our relational nature is recognized, but whether self or others should take the highest priority. Many approaches in psychology honor the autonomy of the individual person and stress the im-

portance of self-realization and self-determination over the importance of meeting the needs of others. This assignment of the priority of self can lead to selfism and self-aggrandizement, both of which stem from the failure to recognize the primary defining relationship of God and man that shapes and gives direction to all other relationships. We will establish a solid footing in explaining developmental concerns relative to interpersonal relations if we keep in mind that the biblical directive is that we not view ourselves and our lifestyles as an avenue for self-aggrandizement, but as the means whereby we can enrich the lives of others (Hoekema, 1986).

In developmental psychology the concept of

A great deal of care is required before labeling a particular process or observation as normative.

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humanity's inherent religious nature is reflected in the emphasis on cognitive development. The person is seen as operating within a context in which he is continuously trying to make sense out of his experience. Humans are viewed as a cognitive system. This implies that we are predisposed to formulate a logical, orderly view of reality. All of our thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and motives flow from our developing view of reality. The process through which we, as purposive and cognitive creatures, try to make sense out of our experience is central to understanding development. We need to be careful at this point not to fall into the trap of seeing man as the creator of truth, or of adopting the constructionistic assumption that all truth is relative. The process of developing our worldview needs also to include listening, responding, and cooperating in meaning (Moran, 1991). From a psychological viewpoint we tend to emphasize the active, cognitive process of "making sense of our experience"; however, we need also to keep in mind the words of St. Augustine: "I believe in order to know." We find meaning in the context of placing our trust in God and of being committed to our particular response to his call.

The Goal of Development
Having established a working set of assumptions regarding the biblical implications of man's nature

as a created person, we can turn to the second fundamental question: What is humanity's purpose? As suggested earlier, development theories need to be examined "upside down." They point to where humans ought to be heading. In short, they make a statement about the purpose and direction of life. For example, Erikson's (1963) eight stages of life provide a good example of how a theorist maps out the goals of life (Fowler, 1985). Each of Erikson's eight stages, if successfully negotiated, provide a critical ingredient or virtue with which the ultimate goal of integrity (stage 8) is achieved. Reading backward, then, the good life might be achieved if the person

1. forms and reforms a strong foundation of basic trust
2. develops a sense of independence and has clear ego boundaries
3. develops the capacity for initiative and purpose, has a project and a set of competencies to contribute to society
4. has a personally satisfying and publicly convincing answer to the question, "Who are you?"
5. develops the capacity for intimacy and readiness to enter intimate relationships

These ideas of Erikson seem useful in establishing the meaning of maturity and the unfolding of a purposive life. But Erikson doesn't really answer the question of the ultimate purpose in life except to say it is to live "the good life." Fowler (1985) is more helpful here in his interpretation of Erikson when he suggests that the answer to the question of life's direction is best answered in the concept of vocation. Fowler (1984) suggests that vocation is "the response a person makes with his/her total self to the address of God and the calling of partnership" (95). Vocation is not limited to a person's job or career, but to finding a purpose for being that is related to the purposes of God. This view of vocation as the purposive direction to human development affirms what makes humanity special and unique and calls one to excellence, self-sacrifice, courage, and commitment.

To suggest that vocation or partnership is the developmental direction with which we should examine our lives and understand the growth of maturation of children does not mean that other needs or motivations are not operative. Certainly the psychological press for independence, mastery,

or intimacy are valid and important. All of these motives and directions fit under the one defining direction of our response to God and his call to be of service to our neighbor and to rule over creation. Development, then, can be understood as the process whereby we come to possess the capabilities to accomplish the particulars of this call, the unfolding of our sense of identity and purpose within this partnership, and the progressive discovery of the normative characteristics of living obediently in response to the call of God. From this perspective we can examine concerns such as the child's growing in understanding of the world and creation, the establishment of a sense of self, including one's career, as well as maintaining a sense of purpose in life after one retires. Each of these developmental tasks will seem different when viewed from the perspective of responding to the calling of God than it would from the popular perspective of seeking one's own destiny or self-actualization. In fact, I think the concept of vocation is a liberating one, freeing us from the bondage to self.

Within the self-actualization tradition, persons are seen from the individualistic assumption of being self-grounded. From this perspective we have within us, and are totally responsible for generating within us, all the resources we need to create a fulfilled and self-actualized life. The pursuit of one's destiny becomes the prime reason for living and the goal for all striving (Fowler, 1985). From this view failure at work becomes failure at life. If, instead, we view our sole purpose in life to be in partnership with the will of God, we are called to work obediently, not to be successful. The success or failure of our endeavors is not the criterion by which we are judged, but rather, whether we have been faithful in our walk. Thankfully, even when we stumble in our walk, God calls us back and restores us to the partnership.

The Process of Development

Having staked out some basic claims regarding the nature of persons and the purpose or goal of development, we also need to establish a basic guideline for understanding the process of development. A fundamental principle for development is that it is *structured*. There is an orderliness in the developmental process that reflects the design and intent of our creator. The concept of structure operates on a number of levels. A structural view

of development is perhaps most clearly seen at the genetic and physiological level. Genetically, development follows a very broad and comprehensive blueprint that influences in direct and subtle ways many aspects of the person, ranging from intellectual capacity to personality dimensions. Physiological structure is operative in the development of the organs and systems of the body as well as in determining the pattern and sequence of motor development. A structural view also implies that development unfolds in certain prescribed sequences or stages, with certain skills or capabilities maturing and laying the foundation for further refinements and new capabilities to develop. This type of development is referred to as normative age-graded change (Baltes, 1979). Changes of this type are maturational and are seen across persons, cultures, and historical periods. The discovery of age-graded changes tends to lead to the identification of stages and sequences. Most of the developmental work devoted to identifying age-graded changes has been with children and adolescents, and most of these theories have been limited dominion theories, focussing on one or two aspects, such as cognition or personality. Integrating all aspects of age-graded change still remains to be accomplished. We know even less about the age-graded changes of the adult years. In fact, some authors reject the notion of normative, age-graded changes in adulthood. Others have suggested "stages" that supposedly fit into a normative developmental pattern, but they have failed to provide evidence for the universality of their descriptions. The concept of mid-life 'crisis' as necessary and inevitable is a good example of the confusion of descriptions of personal experiences with a normative pattern.

In addition to discovering the underlying structural pattern of development, we must also recognize that some changes over the life span are more reflective of particular historical or cultural influences. Differences in attitudes, abilities, or interests among various age groups may not be developmental differences, but rather differences due to changes in educational opportunities, medical practices, or economic conditions. These changes, called normative history-graded changes (Baltes, 1979), recognize the tremendous influence of history and culture on the individual, such that common experiences leave a lasting mark on all those experiencing it. Paying attention to these history-graded changes has only recently become an area of concern. Many Western psychologists have failed to recognize that what looks typical or average in their investigations may be heavily influenced by cultural and historical factors and that persons from different cultural backgrounds are not slower, deviant, or developmentally disadvantaged, but are merely demonstrating the influence of different cultural values and traditions.

Finally, the underlying order of development may also be influenced in a variety of ways, either positively or negatively, by experiences unique to the individual. These influences, known as non-normative life events (Baltes, 1979), such as the death of a parent or being the victim of abuse, are important to understand for a particular individual and perhaps can serve to demonstrate both the vulnerability and stability of the normal developmental process. Trying to discover and tease out the differences among the factors influencing and shaping the development of persons is an exciting and challenging task.

As we go about the work of unraveling the many questions about and mysteries of the changes in a person's experience over a lifetime, we must remember that many competing theories and ideologies attempt to describe and influence our understanding of the nature of human development. Recognizing the influence of the psychologist's beliefs on the psychological work produced and critically examining these assumptions from a biblical perspective will help us all to be obedient partners in our task of reforming our understanding of this aspect of God's creation.

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END NOTES

1 The term normative, as generally used in developmental psychology, refers to a characteristic or pattern that is similar across individuals and cultures, that is common to all. A normative developmental pattern is one that is assumed to be "built-in," an underlying structural aspect of human nature. A normative developmental characteristic should not be confused with the descriptive category of normal, average, or typical. From a Christian perspective, a normative developmental pattern is one that is believed to be part of the intended structure and lawfulness of creation. A normative developmental process can be, and is influenced by a variety of factors, e.g., biological, environmental, or historical; therefore a great deal of care is needed before labeling a particular process or observation as normative.

2 This discussion is based primarily on Fennema (1980), *Nurturing Children in the Lord*; and Hoekema (1986), *Creation and Image*.

3 The references listed here provide the student with additional resources for dealing with theoretical issues underlying developmental psychology.