

“Character should be
at the heart of our
responses to social
problems...”

THE CHARACTER INQUIRY

Edited by Jen Lexmond and Matt Grist

COLLECTION 30

DEMOS

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Jen Lexmond
Matt Grist
April 2011

Introduction

GNP measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

Robert Kennedy

Until recently, every generation expected to improve the material wealth of their offspring. The task of industrialisation was primarily to improve people's material quality of life. This was accomplished in two ways: through the production of goods that could be purchased and shared by the vast majority of a population (eg reliable power supplies, nutritious food, automobiles, household appliances), and through increases in productivity creating growth that could also be shared, in the form of higher wages, by most of the population. This is the story of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century in developed countries.

But times are changing. Most of the growth in the last 25 years in the UK and the USA has been in high-tech industries and financial services. The former do produce goods from which the majority can benefit but the latter (arguably) do not. Moreover, neither the goods nor the growth produced in these sectors has provided income and wealth that benefits most of the population. It is well documented that median wages as a percentage of GDP have fallen dramatically over the last 30 years, just as it is well known that gaps in wealth and income between the top and the bottom have grown larger and larger.¹

Problems with maintaining growth and sharing its proceeds fairly can be mitigated by policy. But if growth is very low, there are limits to the redistributive impact of tax cuts and/or credits. The West has bulked up economic growth over the last 30 years in part through massive increases in borrowing. This has temporarily put off our reckoning with lower and less

publicly beneficial growth. But as global recession and rising debt reduces the state's ability to subsidise the economy in this way, questions about the practicality and desirability of sustaining high levels of growth have been raised.

As well as the sheer difficulty of maintaining economic growth, there are other reasons to look beyond it. There is a large body of evidence suggesting that increases in GDP only increase general wellbeing up to a certain level, at which point they make no difference.² Moreover, many of the challenges that the current generation faces – global warming, living and getting along in a liberal and diverse society, political apathy and anti-social behaviour – require resources of a different kind to tackle. Rather than material goods and economic growth, we need a sustainable economy and environment, self-control and mutual respect among citizens and neighbours, and motivation and creativity from young people. Speaking at the Google Zeitgeist Europe conference, Prime Minister David Cameron summed up the shift:

*Wellbeing can't be measured by money or traded in markets. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and, above all, the strength of our relationships. Improving our society's sense of wellbeing is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times.*³

The role of character in supporting wellbeing

The aim of *The Character Inquiry* is to investigate the potential of focusing on character, and character development, to help achieve greater levels of wellbeing in society and among individuals or, to put it in rather classical terms, to investigate how building character helps people to live the good life. Demos has published previously on the importance of character – the capabilities that enable individuals to live ethically responsible and personally fulfilling lives.⁴ These qualities, among others, consist of the ability to apply oneself to tasks, to empathise with others and to regulate one's emotions (for a fuller definition see below). In this inquiry, we are continuing to investigate character because we feel it is the best means for

equipping people to shape their own lives and a good life in common with others.

This pamphlet examines the prospects of a more general shift to a character-based approach to policy. It is the result of an investigation into the prospects for such a shift by the 13 members of the inquiry, 12 of whom have contributed essays to this publication, which are presented in the chapters that follow.

In chapter 1 Julian Baggini and Camila Batmanghelidjh discuss the nature of character, and the legitimate bounds of state intervention in building and shaping the character of its citizens. The key conclusion is that character is strongly shaped by environments, and there are many players involved in shaping environments – from parents, to teachers, to policy makers. Character building, then, is not a task to be accomplished in isolation, but rather a collective endeavour.

In chapter 2 Sebastian Kraemer and Stephen Scott discuss the influences of attachment, genes and parenting on the formation of character in young children. They tackle the nature vs nurture debate head on, concluding that, as a growing body of research confirms, there is far less of a distinction between the two than was once thought. The relevant question today is how nature and nurture interact with each other to exacerbate or minimise each other's influence. Much of this new evidence could have implications for how to identify vulnerable children and where and when to target support. It may also challenge pre-existing views about personal responsibility.

In chapter 3 Yvonne Roberts and Jen Lexmond explore how gender roles and socialisation shape the character of girls and boys. Many potent inequalities expressed in adulthood between men and women – in health, wealth and opportunities – have their genesis in early childhood. Key players such as parents, the media and policy makers must take a closer look at how early gendered assumptions lead to reduced opportunities, and eventually damaging inequalities, for both boys and girls.

In chapter 4 James Arthur, Jean Gross and Anthony Seldon discuss the importance of developing character in schools and the myriad of approaches to accomplishing this difficult task.

These contributions challenge the contemporary reticence towards dealing explicitly with matters of character in our educational institutions and provide compelling arguments for the implicit ways in which schools and teachers inculcate character regardless of whether they acknowledge this fact. The chapter concludes that as character capabilities become increasingly important for success, educational institutions should have a more frank debate about how they can be ‘caught’ through a school ethos and/or taught in the classroom.

In chapter 5 Matt Grist, Ed Mayo and Terry Ryall discuss the collective character of societies and the way they shape the character of the individual citizens who make it up. In most cases, it is the actors and institutions of civil society that shape character: our economic system shapes the goods and services that we value and what we view as productive work, and the set up of our communities shapes trust and reciprocity between neighbours and peers. But the state plays an important indirect role in shaping society through its approach to setting regulatory policy, redistributing wealth, or subsidising cultural and informal educational opportunities.

In the conclusion to this pamphlet Matt Grist and Jen Lexmond draw out these and other implications from the preceding chapters in more detail. There is no simple list of policy recommendations out of which character will simply emerge. Building character across society requires an active civil society underpinned by a state that sees its primary role as supporting the wellbeing of its citizens.

Character and social mobility

But character is not only pertinent to wellbeing and the good society; it is also a major determinant of social mobility (of course, the latter is indirectly related to both of the former). In *Building Character* we laid out why ‘character capabilities’ (more on these in a moment) are important for life chances and how different parenting styles, more or less independently of socio-economic factors, build such capabilities in children’s early years.⁵ Since that report was published, Prime Minister David

Cameron commissioned Frank Field MP to write a report on child poverty. In a shift of emphasis from previous strategies, Field urges that we stop thinking only in terms of income levels as proxies for social deprivation. He recommends that wherever possible we directly attack the social deprivations themselves – for example, poor parenting – through targeted interventions. The aim of these interventions should always be to enable parents and children to better author their own successes. Only then, Field claims, will the cycle of poverty be broken.⁶

We have found evidence to support this idea that character is a good focus for breaking the cycle of poverty. First, previous research has shown that those with strong character capabilities have better labour market outcomes and life chances more generally.⁷ Second, we have carried out original longitudinal research for this report, which shows that parents with strong character capabilities as children pass on some of these capabilities to their children in a way that is independent of socio-economic factors.⁸ Third, original longitudinal analysis shows that character capabilities developed in childhood can impact on a range of future outcomes beyond future earnings, such as relationship stability.⁹ In other words, character is important for life chances and when it is built has a good chance of passing from one generation to the next. So character is a self-sustaining phenomenon that can contribute greatly to ensuring that poor children do not necessarily grow up poor.

This is not to suggest that a character-based approach can solve all social problems. Rather, it is to suggest that considerations of character should be at the heart of all our responses to social problems. Crucially, a character-based approach to policy does not necessarily imply more or less state intervention. Sometimes it may imply state withdrawal – for example, where the character of professionals is being constrained by bureaucracy or diktat. But in other instances, such as the case of looked-after children in social care, it may indeed require more (but better) intervention by the state.

Character as capability

The concept of ‘capability’ is derived from Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.¹⁰ It denotes a set of general abilities that allow a person to live a flourishing life, in the ethical and instrumental sense described above. For example, the ability to feel empathy for another’s plight underpins the more specific ability to comfort someone who is upset. Or alternatively, the ability to feel empathy for another’s situation underpins the more specific ability to provide excellent service to customers or clients.

Sen and Nussbaum think of capabilities as internal and external. The subject of this inquiry, character capabilities, is a subset of internal capabilities. But like all internal capabilities, their development and sustenance depend on external capability. For example, in normal circumstances, a person might be highly skilled at weighing up the pros and cons of long-term consequences. But in a banking firm where all institutional capability for reinforcing and supporting such behaviour is lost, the internal capability of prudence may diminish. So to focus on character is to look inside ourselves. But when we do so, we find our gaze immediately pushed outward, on to that which sustains our inner traits (more on the interplay of internal and external capabilities in a moment).

We cannot here define character capabilities in their full range. But for the purposes of this inquiry we define character as consisting of *at least* the following capabilities:

- *application* – the ability to stick at tasks and see things through
- *self-direction* – the ability to see one’s life as under one’s control and to effectively shape its future course; the ability to understand one’s strengths and weaknesses accurately; the ability to recognise one’s responsibilities towards others
- *self-regulation* – the ability to monitor and regulate one’s emotions appropriately
- *empathy* – the ability to put oneself in other people’s shoes and be sensitive to their needs and views

As has been mentioned, each of these capabilities can be shaded as ethical or instrumental. For example, application can be a value-free ability instrumental to getting what one wants –

in order to get the job, one has to apply oneself to the process of making the application. But the capability can also be ethically suffused – in order to be a good parent one applies oneself continually to child-rearing so as to do the best for one’s children. In other words, application underpins commitment and commitment can be instrumental or ethical. In most cases it is both: commitment to one’s work and responsibilities is integral to being a good employee, parent and citizen. And it seems true that one cannot possess character without being capable of being good, just as one cannot be good without also to some extent possessing instrumental capabilities (the ability to actualise one’s good intentions). The shading between being good and instrumental in a person’s character can go many different ways and we only note here that the elements must go together. We make no comment on the proportions of the mixture.

It seems intuitive that as well as always being some composition of good and instrumental, character capabilities come as a bundle. For example, to regulate one’s emotions appropriately it is important to be able to empathise with others’ feelings, so as to know when one’s behaviour is upsetting them. Similarly, to direct one’s life one must not be continually overwhelmed by the ‘noise’ of volatile emotions, and in order to regulate emotions, one will fare better if feeling in control of one’s life. Finally, in order to direct one’s life through diverse social situations, one must be able to empathise with others and regulate emotions.

Although it seems intuitive that character capabilities come as a bundle, it is possible to be deficient in some of them. For example, one can be deficient in empathy, while possessing strengths in self-direction and application, and still ostensibly live a good and successful life. Whether it is possible to lead a fully good life if one is deficient in one or more character capabilities is a moot point we leave to the reader to decide.

Methodology

A research methodology was designed to achieve the three main aims of the inquiry:

- to clarify and test what ‘character’ means in public discourse
- to collect evidence and carry out new research on the importance of character in shaping life chances
- to highlight areas of public policy to which a character perspective can add value

Clarifying and testing what ‘character’ means in public discourse

Media discourse analysis

Using linguistic analysis techniques, researchers analysed different written uses of ‘character’ in two contexts. The first analysis sampled online broadsheet newspaper articles written during September 2008 about the global financial crisis. The second analysed the concept of ‘character’ in a broader selection of written materials from the past decade – journal articles, policy documents, government statements, newspaper articles and academic studies – about multiculturalism, cultural relativism and cultural values.

Interviews and focus groups with over 50 young people

We held:

- face-to-face group interviews with young people who took part in a coaching and residential programme delivered by Youth at Risk and Southend Council about the skills gained from the programme
- semi-structured phone and online interviews with young people from Beatbullying’s programme CyberMentors about what character means and how it is developed
- a face-to-face focus group discussion with young people at Kid’s Company Urban Academy about the meaning of character and how it is formed

Collecting evidence and carrying out new research on the importance of character in shaping life chances

Literature reviews

Researchers conducted literature reviews on the early development of character (looking at new evidence in

evolutionary biology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, attachment theory and epigenetics); the intergenerational transmission of character capabilities (drawing on international research from the academic community); how to measure wellbeing (drawing on research on happiness economics and third sector work on the development of tools for measurement of wellbeing); the ‘existence’ of character (drawing together theory on situational specificity of character, stability of character dispositions over time, and philosophical theories of character such as Aristotelian ethics and liberal character).

Longitudinal analysis

We used the British Cohort Study to carry out quantitative research to investigate the intergenerational transmission of character capabilities. We identified proxies from the surveys for character traits including empathy, self-regulation and application based on questions from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and similar surveys. We identified trends by producing cross tabulations of the 1970 cohort’s character development at age ten (1980 sweep) with the character development of their children (for those of the cohort who had children) captured in the 34-year follow up (in 2004). Using this methodology we were able to capture information about the character development of two generations at similar ages (instead of parents as parents, and their children).

Highlighting areas of public policy to which a character perspective can add value

Case studies on character-based interventions

We conducted desk-based and site-specific case studies of interventions and programmes employing character-based approaches to support disadvantaged and struggling young people. The purpose of conducting case studies was to understand how character-based interventions are delivered and the obstacles and barriers involved, and to speak directly to the volunteers and professionals who design and deliver programmes. Case studies include Youth at Risk’s Motivate the

Estate Programme in Southend; Kids Company Urban Academy in South London; Toynbee Hall's Aspire Programme in Tower Hamlets; Bromley-by-Bow Centre's Learning Programme and Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, New York.

Policy analysis

Researchers conducted policy reviews throughout the inquiry on various subjects, including family and parenting interventions and programmes; public service reform, particularly in the context of early years provision; youth services, and the increase in delivery by third sector and social enterprises; the impact of welfare reform on personal responsibility and international character development programmes and assessment tools (including social and emotional aspects of learning curriculum guides, the Penn Resiliency Programme developed by the University of Pennsylvania, VIA Institute's character assessment).

Character development across the life course

Although the inquiry wholeheartedly supports calls for more investment in early years support, we feel the current rhetoric around this issue is in danger of promulgating what might be called 'early years determinism' – that if a child suffers insalubrious nascent years, she becomes 'damaged' beyond repair. Such determinism is dangerous because it feeds the cynical idea that 'nothing works' for older children, while also encouraging hysteria around young children. Moreover, it conceives of people as pure products of their biology and environment, leaving no room for self-direction or the ability to overcome adversity. It is partly with these dangers in mind that this inquiry explores different ways in which character matters and can be developed beyond the early years.

We have taken this approach because of the strong empirical evidence that character can and should be nurtured beyond the early years. Much of this evidence is based on how the human brain develops.

It is true that a child's brain is particularly plastic in the first three years of life. But plasticity – the way experience

configures the brain through forging synaptic connections – continues through the whole of life.¹¹ The middle childhood years (between seven and ten years old) are particularly important for the development of character according to research in epigenetics.¹² It is at this developmental stage that combinations of genes are switched on and off by experience so that enduring propensities are created.¹³ For example, a violent and aggressive middle childhood will likely give a child a propensity to aggression and fear. Epigenetic changes at this stage are not irreversible by any means, but they are nonetheless life-shaping. Beyond middle childhood, in the early teens, the brain heavily ‘prunes’ itself by streamlining its neural networks.¹⁴ This pruning process is also very important for character because through it many functions are made more automatic, freeing up capacity that enables a young person to concentrate and apply herself to more complex tasks.¹⁵ Finally, in the later teens and early 20s, the brain develops more fully its ‘higher’ functions located in the pre-frontal cortex. This area of the brain deals with planning, thinking and calculations of risk, and so is crucial to good character.¹⁶

In short, despite the massive importance of the early years for brain development, there is compelling evidence that the whole sweep of youth is important for character building. Hence this inquiry has generally focused on how character can be developed in young people. However, supporting the development of strong character among today’s generation of young people requires adults to take a closer look at themselves as well.

Although the inquiry does not see producing citizens of character as a panacea, or even something that is easily done, we do see it as crucial to responding to the most pressing problems and issues our society faces. We discuss below some of the problems that are most pertinent.

The increasingly public consequences of private behaviour

There is increasing pressure on the state to find ways to influence positive behaviour among its citizens as the sum of bad private

choices by individuals results in expensive, public problems. For example, obesity and smoking create higher costs for the NHS. Binge-drinking and its associated public disorder make some town centres no-go areas, and alcohol misuse causes long-term health problems. Similarly, moving to a low-carbon economy requires citizens to change patterns of behaviour around energy use. Finally, creating stronger communities requires citizens willing and able to work together for common goals.

Although there is some scope for legislation to deal with these problems, if we are to preserve the idea of a liberal society, citizens have to choose to change their own behaviour too. The present Government would like to persuade citizens to behave in certain ways by ‘nudging’ them: there is now a ‘behavioural insight unit’ within Number 10, thinking up new ways to influence public behaviour. The state’s concern with shaping citizens’ choices, through changing the contexts within which they are made, has been criticised by some as too paternalistic.¹⁷ But as long as such ‘nudges’ are restricted to influencing decisions people are very likely to want to make anyway, they seem harmless enough. Indeed, choices always take place within a context, so that contexts may as well encourage beneficial over negative behaviour.

However, nudges can only achieve so much. If we really want public behaviour to change in a lasting way we must aim to produce citizens of character who are capable of committing to a course of action, consciously, and for the right reasons. This is not to say that ‘nudging’ and character-based strategies cannot work together.¹⁸ On a character-based view, behaviour is changed by establishing habits, such as the habit of healthy eating. These habits are maintained through the character capabilities of self-regulation and application. But they can also be kept on course by ensuring choices are made within a supportive context. For example, a person can make sure she continues to go to the gym by arranging to go with a friend (so it is harder for her to cry off), and fitting visits comfortably into her weekly routine (so it is easier for her to go). This amounts to nudging herself so that she is more likely, when tired after a hard day at work, to make her preferred choice. Through such nudging she is making it

easier for herself to inculcate a habit that then becomes ingrained, and once ingrained, more likely to be maintained.

Rising inequality of opportunity

Previous Demos research shows that parenting style is a key influence on the development of children's character.¹⁹ Parenting that combined love and affection with consistent rules and boundaries was most likely to lead to the early development of pro-social behaviour, the ability to delay gratification, and emotional self-regulation. Crucially, this kind of parenting was less likely to be found among very low income households. Moreover, the body of evidence that inequality in character capabilities leads to inequality in educational attainment is established. For example, studies have shown that character capabilities are almost as predictive of educational attainment as cognitive skills.²⁰ If character is predictive of outcomes like educational attainment, and the factors that develop it in childhood are less likely to be present in the most disadvantaged groups in society, this presents a serious denigration of equality of opportunity.

Evidence also shows that character capabilities are strongly predictive of later outcomes such as employment stability.²¹ As the British economy has become more service-oriented, character capabilities have become more important: they are crucial to negotiating the diverse social interactions that the service sector throws up.

There are also worrying signs that young people are not developing character capabilities quickly enough and that this is affecting their success in the labour market. For example, during the recent recession, the unemployment rates for workers over 50 hovered around 5.1 per cent, whereas youth unemployment (among 16–24-year-olds) has now surged to 20.6 per cent (at the time of writing).²² It should go without saying that almost all this unemployment is due to economic factors rather than matters of character. Nevertheless, it seems that employers would rather hire older people than younger people, even though the latter can be paid lower wages.²³ This preference is matched by a

trend for more young people to enter elementary jobs such as labouring over jobs in sectors like retail, which yield more opportunities for progression.²⁴ Arguably, these trends away from service sector employment for young people are linked to higher demands for the character capabilities prized in this sector.

There is a trend that may help explain these lower levels of character capabilities. Evidence shows that young people in Britain spend much less time with adults during their teenage years than contemporaries in other developed countries. There is also evidence that teenagers in the UK spend less time with their parents and feel less able to talk to them about their problems than their contemporaries in other countries.²⁵ Probably as a result of this disengagement, British teenagers are much more likely to be influenced by their peers. This results in a lack of guidance and support for young people at what is a crucial time for character development.

One reason some young people are faring less well in a service-oriented labour market is that employers are not providing entry-level positions where time is invested in developing (among other things) character. As a result of the disappearance of the British apprenticeship system, opportunities for structured transitions from school to work, and on into adulthood, have been greatly reduced. The importance of such transitions makes it crucial that the current enthusiasm for apprenticeships among politicians in the UK becomes a long-term commitment to increasing their quality and number.

These considerations tell us that inequality in the distribution of character leads to inequality of opportunity. Those with the chance to build stronger character capabilities are better able to shape their lives, and to thrive in a service-oriented economy through a lengthy educational preparation for the labour market. Although it is wrong to discount socio-economic factors when considering equality of opportunity, it is also untenable to ignore the role that character plays in shaping life chances – and the close relationship between the two. It certainly matters what you have got, and whom you know. But it also matters what kind of person you are.

Resisting short termism

One of the most pressing problems we face as a society is how we pay for pensions when the average length of a person's retirement will rise to 25 years by 2015.²⁶ It is also unclear how we are going to pay for the large amounts of social care that many of us will need at the end of our lives. As a society we also face problems over inequalities in wealth between older and younger generations; through a combination of factors, the 'baby boomers' (those born between 1945 and 1965) have accrued almost half of the nation's wealth, creating an historically unprecedented imbalance of power between generations.²⁷ Finally, there is a series of environmental issues that we need to address if we are to hand down a habitable world to our grandchildren. All these problems require changes in the way we live in order to abide by Edmund Burke's injunction that the social contract binds 'the living, the dead and those not yet born'. As a society we need to learn to live more prudentially – to save more for when we are old, and to think more about the world we will leave behind.

There is a role for policy that provides better 'prudential goods': pensions with lower management costs and thus higher returns; affordable social care insurance; and subsidised green technologies. And there is a role for policy in providing national accounts that give value to the natural environment²⁸ and prioritise capital spending on infrastructure. But there is also a role for citizens focused more on investing in prudential goods and ensuring that a sustainable economy and environment is handed down to the coming generations: for example, investing in greener homes, in pensions and simply consuming fewer of the world's natural resources. Citizens of character are more likely to be capable of taking this long-term view and so of living more prudentially.

A decline in personal and professional responsibility

One of the narratives permeating British life over recent years has been a perceived decline in personal responsibility. This can range from worries over everyday incivility, to parents not taking proper responsibility for raising their children, to people not

taking responsibility for their actions. Whether there is truth to these claims is up for debate – perhaps nostalgia for the past clouds assessment of today.

One thing is clear though, responsibility matters. Research shows that when parents are engaged in their children's education it makes a big difference to those children's educational attainment.²⁹ What is more, when many people take responsibility there are knock-on effects for others. New evidence from Demos's recent report *The Home Front* found that individual parental effectiveness increases in neighbourhoods where there are high levels of responsible parenting overall.³⁰ Parents take cues from the parents around them. If the norm in a neighbourhood is that adults are supportive and authoritative with children and young people, then parents will take on that role. One does not have to ascribe to stories of 'feckless parents' to understand the importance of parental responsibility.

But character is a concern in both private and public life. Beyond personal responsibility in families and schools there is a need for more professional responsibility in the UK. The MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 and the financial crisis of 2008 have eroded public trust in professions. MPs have gone some way to recovering their reputations with reforms of the expenses system, but they are by no means out of the woods yet. The powerful in the financial sector do not seem to have learned lessons from the very public crisis they caused. In both these cases a greater focus on character would be appropriate – expectations of higher personal standards of behaviour, and the creation of a longer-term focus, and a system that supports good and profitable decisions, not just profitable ones.

This inquiry is concerned with the character of institutions and environments as well as individuals. As things currently stand in the banking sector, the bail-outs have not only made the public angry, but also diminished 'market discipline', reassuring bankers that if they take excessive risk again the state will rescue them. It is just such a scenario that Will Hutton predicts will occur again in the 2010s, though he claims that the second time around 'the popular revolt against bankers, their current business model in which neglect of the real economy is

embedded and the scale of their bonuses – all to be underwritten by bailouts from taxpayers – will become irresistible’.³¹ Avoiding such a scenario requires policy makers to address perverse incentives and make other systemic changes to ensure workers stay on track – for example, legislating that risk managers be paid close to the same salaries as risk takers.

The deeper point here is that free markets cannot function without trust, and trust is based on the character of the operatives in the market, and the environment within which those operatives act. A character-based approach to reform would take into account both of these factors. As LSE emeritus professor John Gray states, ‘there has been a tendency to think that free markets emerge spontaneously when state interference in the economy is removed. But... free markets *always* involve some moral constraints... which are policed by governments’, whether through banning slavery, enforcing property rights, or defining commodities.³² In short, ‘internal’ character capabilities, such as the personal quality of honesty, require external capabilities supporting them, in the form of a system that reinforces appropriate behaviour. The dependence of markets on the character of market operatives, and the dependence of the latter on supportive systems and environments, are what reformers of the banking sector must take into account.

However, sometimes professional responsibility is not damaged by a lax culture that does not support character, rather an overly bureaucratic one that strangles it. Another narrative in British life over the last few years has been the perils of targets, tick-boxes and tests. Social workers have become too burdened with form filling, teachers with assessment. The effect of these trends is to erode individuals’ initiative, judgement and creativity. Not only are citizens of character well placed to thrive in what David Cameron called the ‘post-bureaucratic’ age, but a character-based approach – with its focus on the interplay between internal and external capabilities – is best suited to understanding how to bring such an age into being.

The need for flexibility

Another long-term trend for which character is important is the increase in employment instability and greater flexibility of the labour market. Here the character capabilities of self-direction and self-regulation are crucial for dealing with frequent change. Research has shown that those with strong character capabilities have fared far better in a flexible labour market.³³ Moreover, in recent decades it has become the norm for young people to change jobs many times in their 20s and early 30s.³⁴ It has also become more common for people to make career changes later in life, often moving to less demanding part-time work. Flexibility is also required within jobs, as more and more roles require workers to adapt to changing market conditions, but also to move quickly through positions within a firm. Thirty-five years ago production-line workers would walk out on strike if asked to do a job not considered within their remit. Today, workers at Nissan's Sunderland factory learn how to do three different jobs on the production line as a matter of course.³⁵

Beyond employment, flexibility is required within families. Men, perhaps previously secure in their roles as bread-winners, may have to become better used to taking over primary carer roles, especially if their partners' salaries are higher than theirs. As a result it is likely men will join women in taking a much more flexible approach to the work-life balance.

There is certainly a place for legislation in making such flexibility possible – for example, through rights to shared parental leave, or through bolder legislation that supports fathers to take up leave despite pressure from employers (eg by making it better paid or through 'use it or lose it' clauses). But citizens of character are also required, who can be flexible enough to navigate the changing work and domestic landscapes.

A decline in happiness and wellbeing

UNICEF's 2007 report into child wellbeing in developed countries famously reported that the UK falls at the very bottom of the aggregate measures of wellbeing compared with the other countries.³⁶ The six categories used to make up the measure are material wellbeing, health and safety, educational wellbeing,

family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective wellbeing. Perhaps the most important reason to take an interest in character development is that it leads to greater wellbeing.

This seems to be in part because feeling in greater control of one's life makes one happier. For example, self-employed people seem to be happier than employees, and people in Swiss cantons with powers to change legislation through referendums are happier than their fellow citizens who lack such powers.³⁷

But character yields wellbeing also through doing things for others. Studies of volunteers in the former East Germany have shown that those who continued volunteering in their communities after reunification were happier than those who did not.³⁸ Other studies have shown that older people who volunteer are happier and even live longer than those who do not.³⁹ And positive psychology has identified developing healthy relationships with friends and loved ones, as well as doing things for other people, as two of the most stable and universal sources of happiness.⁴⁰

Of course, in very obvious terms, citizens of character can better look after their health and wellbeing by taking a longer-term view of their lives – for example, making sure to prioritise family and friends over material indulgences, as well as taking care of their health. But there is also evidence that creating a meaningful life narrative by overcoming adversity through hard work, sacrifice and togetherness has a wellbeing benefit. The happiest generation in twentieth-century USA was the one that grew up in the Depression, lived through and fought in the Second World War, and raised families in the more stable and affluent 1950s and 1960s.⁴¹ And creating such meaningful life narratives is dependent on strong character.

Taking a character-based approach

Although character is not the answer to all problems, a character-based approach to policy would prove fruitful by determining what the state can do, and what it should not do, to enable people to respond to the long-term problems just outlined. In

the following text members of this inquiry lay out why they think character is important and how looking through a ‘character lens’ might shed light on different social problems and solutions. In the prefaces to members’ contributions, more evidence is presented on the merits of thinking about character.

The inquiry members and their contributions are described below. Their articles are grouped together thematically in chapters, and two of the members (Demos researchers Jen Lexmond and Matt Grist) have written short prefaces to each chapter, as well as this introduction and a conclusion (the latter including some policy recommendations). As in any inquiry, there were points of consensus as well as divergent views among members. The narrative running throughout this report makes the most of areas of mutual agreement and members’ contributions provide individual perspectives based on areas of expertise.

1 Defining character in the twenty-first century

It really is of importance not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.

John Stuart Mill, 1859

Character as underpinning a good and flourishing life

As has been mentioned, for the purposes of this inquiry we consider character to be a set of capabilities (or virtues) that underpin a good and flourishing life, but which are also instrumental to success in a (comparatively) value-free sense. A good person requires character to make ethical choices. But she will also require character to further her instrumental needs, such as improving her career. In all of the research we have done, and in all of the submissions to this inquiry, no one has talked about character in either a wholly value-laden or wholly instrumental way. We therefore take it as read that good character is a mixture of ethical and instrumental capabilities, just as Aristotle himself conceived in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It is difficult to describe precisely a good and flourishing life because it entails many things: a sense of personal wellbeing, including a sense of being able to shape one's life to reflect one's values and choices; a verdict of having lived virtuously according to one's self and one's peers; and a more objective set of empirical, positive factors that enable a person to reach her potential (education, health, income and so on). The breadth and variability of these evaluations and outcomes makes it a mistake to define them too specifically. However, for the purposes of this inquiry we have adopted a pluralist rather than relativist position.⁴² We accept that there are *many* but *limited* ways to live a good and flourishing life. It may be beyond the ken of anyone to name how many different ways there are to live

such a life, but nonetheless it is a presumption of having values at all that there is a limit on what can be considered good and flourishing. We adopt this pluralist approach in part because relativism is contradictory – it makes the universal claim ‘there are no objective values’ while denying there can be any universal claims. But we also do it in part because it seems clear that some kinds of life cannot be considered good in either an ethical or practical sense: no one thinks neglecting or abusing a child is good, and no one thinks a crack-addicted person is flourishing.

Character and human behaviour

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.
Aristotle

To think about character is to think of human behaviour as driven largely by a set of reliable dispositions and habits. Applying oneself, empathising or regulating emotions – these are skills and virtues that are inculcated through experience and do not require a great deal of thought once established. So thinking about character is ‘bottom-up’ in the sense of not privileging the so-called higher brain functions responsible for controlled, conscious decision making. Yet a character-based view does not lapse into thinking of human behaviour as mindless coping. Rather, it gives due importance to the kind of practical and emotionally infused behaviour that is not under complete conscious control.

Since character is shaped by practical and emotional experiences – by what happens in one’s regular environment, by what one repeatedly does – an education in character is best described by the German word *Ausbildung*. This literally means to form something fully out of its inherent possibilities, rather like an athlete might train her body to its full potential. To build character, it is not good enough simply to tell someone what to do: a person must learn for herself through repeated experience and until what is learned becomes second nature. This process is somewhat like a goalkeeper training his reactions until they are

habits that require no thought and can be relied on. We cannot simply ‘decide’ to have good character but must work at it by building habits, and habits are built largely through what we do, not only by thoughts we might have. However, we can guide the formation of character by setting ourselves goals, just as an athlete sets herself the goal of training her body. Thus character is best formed when we are lucky enough that experience inculcates capabilities, but also when we guide our own behaviour to the same end.⁴³

Character under pressure

Stressful situations make people show their true character [for] best or worst.
Beatbullying CyberMentor

In his *Poetics* Aristotle describes how we find out about the character of someone in a play when he or she is put under pressure.⁴⁴ We are used to this conception from films, where we see the way the characters of the principal roles unfold as they react to a series of events. Indeed, the concept of character itself has been placed under pressure from a critique that argues that it does not exist. This is the ‘situationist’ critique, which holds that rather than our behaviour being driven by a fixed set of inner traits expressed when we are under pressure, it is the nature of situations that dictates our behaviour. This situationist view is based on social psychology experiments such as Zimbardo’s prison experiment in which a group of liberal students were asked to play the roles of prison guards and prisoners. What Zimbardo found was shocking: within a few days the students playing prison guards became sadistic and those playing prisoners compliant. In other words, the students taking part in the role playing got so into ‘character’ that their internal character traits did not direct their behaviour along ethical lines. Rather, the extreme situation they were in seemed to determine how they acted.⁴⁵

It is beyond the bounds of this inquiry to decide the philosophical question of whether such a thing as character

exists or not. But as Julian Baggini notes in his contribution to this chapter, character is not supposed to be a set of fixed inner traits that direct behaviour come what may. It is rather a set of capabilities that can be built, and dependent on the right kind of external forms of support being in place. In the Zimbardo prison experiment, those 'normal' forms of support were replaced by an extraordinary situation that allowed dispositions to obedience and dominance to win out over character capabilities. We should not take this to signal that character does not exist, but rather that it consists in the delicate balance between internal and external capabilities we have described in this preface.

What the situationist critique of character shows is that it is in fact in the normal run of things, where social norms are in place, that we expect character to be displayed. It is through everyday activities – like going to school, being with one's family and friends, being at work – that we expect to see character built and expressed. Social policy is concerned with these everyday situations, not extraordinary ones. And its concern is with what can be done to make sure the right situations are experienced so that character is built and sustained.

Philosophers have made similar arguments, showing that the situationist critique makes us take seriously the importance of environments for character, and makes us give up any very strong and simplistic view we might have of character being some fixed internal thing impervious to experience.⁴⁶ But, they argue, it is equally wrong to throw the baby out with the bathwater and presume there are no reasonably stable habits that constitute character. The main empirical evidence in favour of retaining the notion of character comes from the fact that situationists appeal to social psychology experiments that are inconclusive. For example, as already stated, the Zimbardo prison experiment does not show that character does not exist, rather that, in extreme situations, a disposition to obedience can override it.

The reason why character is expressed when film 'characters' are put under pressure is not because it consists of some set of inner traits impervious to situations. Things are rather the other way round: character is indeed sensitive to

situations so that when we see how a ‘character’ in a film reacts to extraordinary pressure, the director is exploring just this sensitivity – the fact that character will rarely survive extraordinary situations. When it does, this is exceptional, and we have a ‘hero’ on our hands. But very often it does not (the ‘character’ is shown to be ‘merely human’ and is only saved by a countermanding situation or twist of fate).

Camila Batmanghelidjh acknowledges and explores the idea that character is dependent on situations in her contribution to this chapter. As a result of her work with the charity Kids Company, she argues that for some young people developing character fully is not always possible, and that we shouldn’t blame such young people for this ‘deficiency’, but work at providing them with situations in which they can attempt to develop their characters as fully as possible. She rightly points out that when young people are in tough situations, for the sake of survival, character may be forced into expression through violence and norms of loyalty that lead to harm. It is a lesson very much worth remembering and challenges ideas of responsibility and choice that permeate our legal and moral culture (as does the contribution of Stephen Scott in the next chapter). Moreover, Camila makes the point that we all have character and our experiences allow us to develop it in different ways and to different extents, some more beneficial to us, and some less so.

However, it is worth noting that such real-life dependency of character on situations does not lead back to relativism about character. When we interviewed young people from Kids Company about their experiences, they all talked of the difficulty of expressing character under tough circumstances: how survival often trumped ethics in their lives. They particularly noted that a combination of peer norms and police attitudes made it very hard for them to ‘stay on the straight and narrow’ (that many of them had managed to do so was evidence of extraordinary strength of character). But despite the very different environments they lived and grew up in, their views on character transcended their backgrounds. One young man defined character thus:

I know people that lose a game of poker and flip out and I know people who have seen their brother shot dead and will still talk to the person that shot him. Someone who can overcome the things that want to bring you down.

Another young man said:

Background doesn't matter. You can be from the slums or from the richest background but as long as you have a good heart in you then that's what matters. Being a good person is more than just one act – it's more than just saying something. It comes back to trust.

And yet another young man said:

It comes from the inside. Going out of your way. If someone's sick then you get them a cup of water. It's not only good intentions but having a good heart.

And these young people on the whole seemed quite aware of the fact that character and situations are intertwined:

If you're around people with good characters it helps, you learn it off them.

I'm a good person because I've never had to jack someone. Sometimes the environment makes a difference. It's the context that changes the actions that you do.

It is clear that our environments shape our characters but also that through a combination of support and strength of character itself, we can often overcome our backgrounds. The following contributions explore these issues in greater detail and help to unpick the ways in which our society can be better organised to support citizens of character.

Does character exist?

Julian Baggini

Few would think it controversial to say that a person's character is important for them, their life chances and their interactions with friends, family and wider society. Evidence of the perceived importance of character is everywhere. If you wish to become a UK citizen, you need to meet a 'good character requirement'. If you find yourself in court, your defence may involve not just witnesses to the alleged crime and experts, but character witnesses, who will testify to your good name. Electorates judge politicians not only on their policies, but also on their characters.

Moral philosophy also has a central role for character. In recent decades, there has been a revival in what is known as virtue ethics, a tradition that dates back to Aristotle, which emphasises the need to inculcate good habits in order to live a moral and flourishing life. The idea is that nurturing good character is seen as more important than signing up to a set of rules or duties, because only good character ensures that a person will act well when decisions are called for quickly, or under pressure.

Despite all this, character has not been a significant issue in public policy. But if it is widely believed that character is important for educational achievement, diligence at work, dealing with adversity, avoiding criminality, good citizenship, and any number of any goods that government routinely involves itself in, then why is there no politics of character?

There are several answers to this question, some better than others. Those on the left have been justifiably suspicious of bringing character into politics. They have wanted to resist the conservative argument that poor achievement and more widespread criminality among the poorer members of society is a result of the badness of individuals, rather than of the injustices of their social and economic situation. And their argument has one very important strength: evidence. The links between

poverty and crime, wealth and educational achievement, income and health outcomes are all too plain to see. The argument that people simply need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps is a pathetic counter to the huge mass of data that says otherwise.

Conservatives, however, have not been making a strong pro-character case. To do so would be politically inept. Blaming people for their own misfortune is a smart populist move only if the people being chastised belong to a small, despised minority. Furthermore, while most conservatives reject hard forms of economic determinism, which leave no role for individual virtue, only the most stupid would deny that social and economic circumstances have an important impact on all sorts of life chances.

A different good reason for leaving character out of politics is that to do otherwise risks involving the state too intimately in the lives of citizens. On all parts of the political spectrum, the vast majority accept the basic liberal principle that the state has the right to interfere with people's private lives only in so far as they impact on public goods. Even if the characters of citizens do have consequences for the latter, it would appear to overreach the rights of the state to try to deal with this by actively trying to shape character. The appropriate time for the state to step in is assumed to be when people act in the public square, even if these actions have their roots in private thoughts and dispositions.

However, it has been argued that there is another even deeper reason why character might be best left out of politics: it doesn't exist. Recent work in moral psychology suggests that many of our folk beliefs about character are just wrong. Most of us assume that character is fairly consistent, across time and situation, and that we are pretty good judges of the characters of ourselves and others. Both assumptions are questionable.

John Doris, in his landmark book *Lack of Character*, collects and assesses much of the evidence that suggests that how people will act is much more determined by the specifics of the situation than any abiding character traits.⁴⁷ Common experience in many ways confirms this: does anyone truly believe that German citizens under the Third Reich were just worse than other people? Don't we accept that in the same kind of situation,

British, French or Indian people would have behaved much the same? Hence Doris concludes,

*situational factors are often better predictors of behaviour than personal factors... In very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly determinative of behaviour. To put things crudely, typically, people lack character.*⁴⁸

As for our own confidence in judging character, it seems impervious to counter-evidence. When someone believed to be good is accused of a terrible crime, people line up to insist ‘he could never have done such a thing’, even though often it transpires they did exactly that. When character cannot explain behaviour, we simply shrug our shoulders and say it was ‘out of character’, as if it were some easily dismissed anomaly rather than a challenge to what we believe.

Overall, then, there do seem to be very good reasons to be wary of making character a political issue. But none justify neglecting it altogether. Take the most serious doubt of all: that character doesn’t really exist. Look at the evidence more closely and you’ll find that this is something of an overstatement. Character may not be as rigid and fixed as we’d like to think, but as Jen Lexmond and Richard Reeves showed in their 2009 Demos report *Building Character*, there is evidence that many character attributes and skills such as empathy, application and resilience can be built.⁴⁹

How do we account for the apparent contradiction between this evidence and that cited by ‘situationists’? The key is to distinguish between two understandings of character. The first is no more than a statistical propensity to behave according to certain patterns, in the kinds of situations that people normally find themselves in. But this is just regularity of behaviour, and may well not reflect any deep-rooted traits. For instance, someone might appear to have an honest character, but only because his normal life never presents situations where that honesty is really tested. The second, more rooted kind of character, one that holds across different and novel situations, may be less common. There are reasons to believe that character

in this sense does not necessarily arise naturally, but needs to be built, and fortified. So it is not that character doesn't exist, it's that we too often mistake its more robust variety for a far weaker tendency to act in a certain way. That is why there is no inconsistency between the 'situationist' claims Doris reports and other studies, which claim that some character traits can be built and strengthened.

If this analysis is correct, then there are two ways in which public policy might work with the grain of human nature to produce better outcomes. First of all, if it is indeed the case that much behaviour is strongly influenced by situation, what can be done to make situations more conducive to pro-social and constructive behaviour? The list is probably endless. At the top of it, let us not ignore material conditions, such as income, employment and housing. For instance, it is much easier to be persistent and plan over a longer time-scale when you have a sense of material security. The situationist critique reminds us that taking an interest in character does not mean losing interest in the kinds of hard, economic issues of equality and fairness that have been the traditional concern of left and liberal politics.

There are, however, other changes to situation that could be very important. Take as just one example areas where honesty is important, such as tax avoidance and evasion and benefit fraud. On the kind of naive character view that Doris rejects, we would assume that whether people behave honestly in such situations largely depends on whether they are good, honest people. In reality, situation makes a huge difference. Most obviously, it is not the case that in countries like Greece and Italy people are simply less honest in general. It is rather that there are cultural and systemic reasons why otherwise honest people do not feel obliged to follow the letter of the law.

If we can't rely on honesty alone, then the obvious alternative is to rely purely on the force of the law. But the situationist critique suggests that we might also make small changes to the context or design of processes that encourage the desired kind of behaviour. This follows the aforementioned 'nudge' strategy popularised by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein.⁵⁰ So, for instance, people tend to be less honest when

they feel they are anonymous, and when they do not feel watched. That would suggest the more impersonal the tax and benefit system, the more inclined people will be to lie, which is particularly pertinent given the moves towards online and phone processes. Humanising the system could therefore be a good way of making people behave more honestly. We could then, in some sense, encourage behaviour that is of 'good character' without trying to meddle in the inner workings of people's minds.

There is, however, a second route open. If 'true character' needs to be built, should the state take a part in constructing it? Here, the fear of involving the state too intimately in the lives of citizens re-emerges. These fears can be explained in terms very similar to those of the critique of 'therapy culture' led by Frank Furedi.⁵¹ The argument is that the state risks pathologising all sorts of states of mind and choices that may be legitimate, sane responses to an unjust or plain harsh world. For instance, Lexmond and Reeves may be right to suggest that a person's tendency to report that she 'has many worries, or often seems worried' is generally correlated with poor emotional self-regulation. But facts like these have a habit of being misused, so that anxiety is assumed to be a personal failing, when we know that many people have every reason to be worried, often, and a lot.

Likewise, we do not want the person who is understandably unhappy with her job to be told that she must stop being so negative about it and learn some techniques from positive psychology. There is a controversial political dimension if wage labourers are encouraged not to resist measures that increase job insecurity in the name of labour market flexibility, but to learn the skills of resilience that will help them cope better with the dynamic new economy. Worst of all, for many, since having a sense of spirituality is correlated with various character strengths, why not sanction religious instruction in the name of creating future citizens of good character?

All of these are real risks. But is that a good enough reason to set aside completely any intervention that we have evidence to think builds good character? Indeed, in education, would it not be bizarre to have schools that do nothing other than impart

information and teach practical skills, and do nothing at all to help prepare people for life, as individuals and citizens?

There is no simple answer here, and the risks of an overly intrusive state are serious enough for me to be very cautious about what the state might do. However, I think that the capabilities approach, developed by the economist Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, provides a general framework which I think can help us decide what the state should and should not do.⁵² The approach is a response to the problem of how you promote universal human rights in a world in which there are very many different conceptions of the good life. How do we avoid imposing one particular – western, liberal – way of life on people who may not share those values?

As has been explored in the introduction to this report, Sen and Nussbaum argue that the solution is to focus on *capabilities*, not what people then do with them. So, for instance, people need to be capable of political association, even if they choose to be apolitical. They need to be able to work, but that does not mean being supplied with a job or being forced to work if they choose not to, and having to accept the consequences.

It seems to me that character education, for want of a better phrase, could follow a similar model. As long as we are simply building *capability*, and not trying to fashion people into our parochial ideal of what a good person is, then character education is fine. Of course, in practice, the line is hard to draw. Teaching resilience, for instance, could very easily slide into teaching people when and where they really should be resilient. Teaching people about what facilitates happiness could turn into promoting happiness as a kind of obligation. But these slides are not inevitable. Slippery slopes can be levelled and dried out.

In my view, one of the best ways to stop the slide is to ensure that no character-building programme is allowed to be simply a matter of technocratic instruction. Philosophical reflection needs to accompany it, so that people learn another important skill: being able to think about thinking, to reflect not just on what we are doing, but why. As long as this is done, there is no reason why state-run services – in education, prisons, employment – should not help people to build their characters,

in ways that those people themselves endorse, on the basis of autonomous reflection. The state should not fashion the precise shapes of our character, but it may well help provide us with the skills to build the kinds of characters we would want for ourselves, and our children.

Do bad environments equal bad character?

Camila Batmanghelidjh

Sixteen-year-old Trevor battered 18-year-old Jerome. Onlookers from safer neighbourhoods might describe them as anti-social, ultimately of 'bad character'. However, in his 'ends', Trevor is seen as having 'good character' for enacting his own version of justice because law enforcement by the state is paralysed through terrorised witnesses' refusal to testify. Justice is distributed informally. Trevor beat Jerome because Jerome sexually harassed his sister.

In deprived urban settings, often young people have to be seen to be violent because a 'rep' (reputation) gives you 'cred' (credit rating) enhancing your status to one of capacity for harm. The more dangerous you seem, the safer you are. Is this adjustment evidence of 'bad character' – or of appropriate survival adaptation?

If Trevor had not delivered retribution then he would be considered weak, his sister defiled goods, both therefore victims. Being a victim, in Trevor's world, is a sign of failure, a loss of honour, therefore symptomatic of 'bad character'.

So you can imagine the challenge for our inquiry, in which we set ourselves the goal of defining 'character' in some useful way and figuring out how one acquires it, as well as how it impacts on individuals' life chances. Hesitantly, I agreed to participate, wanting to make sure that yet another document is not churned out from an intellectually detached perspective, in which vulnerable young people end up being labelled as having 'bad character'.

Henri Stendhal, the nineteenth-century French writer, stated 'one can acquire everything in solitude – except character'. Demos's earlier research on character confirms that 'tough love parenting', combining warm affection and clear

boundaries, creates the best character capabilities, which in turn enhance life chances because those of 'good character' have greater power over determining their lives.⁵³ This is where the impact of poverty is not denied but diminished. Indeed, David Cameron used this argument in his 2009 speech at Demos, resulting in mass wriggles of discomfort in the audience, anxious that the Tories were at it again, using a judgemental stick to beat the poor. If Polly Toynbee had been wearing heels she would have hurled them at him, outraged at the suggestion that it is not lack of opportunities or resources but lack of a 'good enough character' keeping large numbers dispossessed. The potential for causing offence is explosive.

Character capabilities involve self-direction, or perceiving oneself as having reasonable control to shape one's life; self-regulation, or being able to regulate one's emotions in order to interact positively with others; application, or the ability to stick at tasks; and empathy, or the ability to be sensitive to others. They are a combination of skills and virtues, instrumental in leading a 'moral' life.

The question is, how do you acquire these lovely attributes? Behaviourists believe you can be trained into them through sanctions and rewards. Developmental neuroscientists consider a quality attachment, specifically maternal care, to be responsible for building pro-social capacity into the brain. There are many theories attempting to answer the age-old 'nature or nurture', or genes or environment, question. In fact if you have a less than competent brain, how can you acquire appropriate self-management abilities and gain agency over your life? Is it true that adverse environmental conditions have relatively less impact?

The emerging field of epigenetics is already altering our understanding of how nature–nurture interactions can shape psychology and even morality. Epigenetics research shows that human beings have an evolved mechanism for varied gene-expression. It is no longer biologically tenable to think about how our brains function without considering genomic influences. The environments in which we live place demands on us. The child coping with neglect and chronic violence requires the up-regulation of genes, which modulate the neural pathways

involved in violence to become more dominantly expressed so the child can have appropriate survival tools. However, epigeneticists believe that this adaptive gene expression can then be passed on as new genetic programming to the next generation – the next child is born with enhanced capacity for violence, programmed into their genetic expression. There is hope because the reverse is also possible – a child born in negative conditions has the potential to adapt in positive care environments, reducing the need for terror.

Suddenly, the locus of control is not necessarily and completely within the individual. Environments play a significant role. At Kids Company our staff have worked over the last 14 years with some of the most disturbed children and young people. We have seen evidence that sustained loving care can transform character expression, provided the child is kept as safe as possible and the reparation is delivered consistently and over a number of years. Some of our most violent young people have gone on to university or college and have become very sensitive parents. Each one of them had been exposed to chronic abuse and neglect, within the home and in the public space.

Often I am asked, why do some young people present with such disrespect towards human life (remember 99 per cent don't)? How can they violate without remorse? Setting aside potential genetic vulnerabilities I want to present an example, illustrating the way civil society teaches young people disrespect for fellow human beings.

Jerome's capacity for harm took years to evolve. As a three-year-old he would be dragged into social services by his disturbed mum. The social worker was behind reinforced glass, his mother shouting, threatening and pleading for help. The department's resources fall short of demand; Jerome's mum is denied help and eventually security staff escort her off the premises. The three-year-old feels numb; he has been through this so many times. On the waiting room floor are the same broken and dirty toys; no one bothers to reassure him or worries about how he is coping. The double-glazed glass separates the social worker but Jerome is exposed. Just in this little encounter, he picks up a message: he wasn't worth helping; in fact, the

‘good people’ lack the potency to protect him or his mum. He can only conclude that he must be rubbish, worthless; if he is, the same must apply to others – human beings are trash. As time goes on, he notices the potency of violence, the man with the firearm or the knife is revered and he gets things done so bingo! Be violent to have your needs met.

From Jerome’s perspective those of ‘bad character’ are those in the social work department who didn’t protect him, teachers at the school who didn’t support him for his learning problems, members of the mental health team who left his mother untreated because she has a personality disorder, and all these agencies in turn would put the blame at the politicians’ door. Jerome’s perversion is visible, the professional’s more hidden. So exploring the impact of a transformation of character on life chances is a key goal, as is identifying the resources required to deliver reparation to young people negatively impacted by damaged care environments.

The argument that childhood abuse should not be used as an excuse to explain disturbance is flawed. All children exposed to maltreatment pay a price; some have greater capacities for managing the consequences of abuse because they have greater brain resilience because there has been someone in their life who has given them sufficient attachment and care. The truly toxic combination is present in those children who have suffered maternal deprivation as well as maltreatment. The by-product of this complex ‘trauma’ is significant changes in the structure and functioning of the brain. Most recently brain imaging research exposed critical structural and functional differences in the brains of violent adolescents, notably in the orbital cortex, the area of the brain that is imprinted with ethical and moral thought thereby controlling violent and aggressive impulses.⁵⁴ Even in identical twins, the twin viewed more negatively by the mother and receiving least maternal warmth went on to show more anti-social behaviour by the age of seven than the twin viewed more positively by the mother.⁵⁵

Kids Company’s campaign – www.kidspeaceofmind.org – aims to research in partnership with major clinical institutions the impact of maltreatment and maternal neglect as well as the

most efficient strategies required in reparation. Neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to change continuously in response to care environments, is our biggest hope and the greatest challenge to our politicians. A little caution: Big Society requiring the public to fish rather than giving them fish is honourable in spirit but children and vulnerable adults cannot be left to survive on personal attributes. Ultimately, society is systemic; we all create 'character' in each other and the bad in another is potentially also the bad in us.

I am hopeful that the combined leadership of David Cameron and Nick Clegg will build on Labour's priorities to enhance the life chances of children. Self-direction, self-regulation, application and empathy are needed to mobilise the 'good character' of our politicians in delivering a 'moral society' as well as a big one. Perhaps they might want to follow the example of Winston Churchill: 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'

2 The early development of character

Camila Batmanghelidjh's mention of epigenetics touches on a larger body of recent and groundbreaking research in evolutionary biology, neuroscience and genetics. This research has yielded new insights into how biological mechanisms, genetic code and early life experience come together to shape infant brains and set out paths of development. The implications are relevant to not just children's physical and cognitive development, but also the development of their character: their ability to empathise with and trust others, to take risks or shy away from challenges, to bounce back from adversity or succumb to it. As Sebastian Kraemer movingly describes in this chapter, what has been found out about early influences on the development of character arguably changes our conception of personal and collective responsibility. More than that, the implications may even alter the way we think about free will, as is explored in Stephen Scott's contribution. Ultimately, the seeds of our character sown in our earliest years play a big part in determining the type of adults – and the type of citizens, partners, friends and parents – that we are able to become. The development of character, then, is part of a debate about how to build a society where people are as free as possible to shape their futures. It is not the whole of the answer, but it should certainly be of major concern to anyone worried about social mobility, equality of opportunity, and building and sustaining a good society.

The more we know about the way our brains grow and develop, the more we find science pushed into ethical territory. Greater understanding of how the 'plastic' brain interacts with environments is why neuroscientists are suddenly at the forefront of discussions of family and criminal justice policy, shedding light on the impact that neglectful care may have on future criminality. Or why policy makers developing anti-social

behaviour strategies are drawing on the work of primatologists like Frans de Waal, whose research points to an evolutionary basis for reciprocity and collaboration. ‘Science’ is beginning to yield hard evidence for what some theories of ethics, politics and psychology have set out in principle for many thousands of years. But, while this rather positive view of human nature has been borne out by some scientific evidence, a darker side is well within our potential as well.

To put it in the simplest terms, the environments that we grow up in shape the development of our characters. For instance, we are designed to be capable of cooperation and empathy, as well as to pursue long-term goals. But these ‘capabilities’ require the right kind of relationships and interactions with others in order to be fully realised. Crucially, the healthy development of infant brains depends on warm and responsive care from adults. But a negligent or abusive environment in the early years can stymie the development of social dispositions to cooperate and reciprocate. Similarly, if environments play people off against each other and reward selfishness, dispositions will not be fully developed. After 2,500 years, Aristotle’s theory that the ethical dispositions that constitute character are natural, but only as propensities to be actualised through the right kinds of experience, seems to have been proved true by science.

Below we explore new findings from science on the early development of character and consider some of the implications.

The role of parents and carers

Given that children’s first relationships are almost invariably with their parent(s) or other carers, it is unsurprising that parents and carers have an overwhelming influence on children’s development. As development psychology has theorised for many decades, the quality of parenting and the quality of a child’s home environment is primarily responsible for the shaping of early non-cognitive or soft skills in infants. The unconditional attention, love and care that a carer gives to a baby sets the groundwork for the development of trust, and eventually the

capacity to love and care about others in return. As babies grow and begin to want to do things for themselves, a parent's role in setting boundaries and clear, consistent rules, helps toddlers learn how to get along and respect others, and how to plan ahead (if you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert after). Having a calm and safe home and having their needs met as babies gives young children the right foundation to feel secure in the world and able to cope with future difficulties and insecure situations that would otherwise lead them to despair.

Recent changes to our economy and a host of social and lifestyle changes mean that these types of skills, or character capabilities, are far more predictive of children's life chances (earnings, likelihood to be anti-social, academic attainment, and so on) today than they were even a few decades ago.⁵⁶ As a result of an increasingly affluent and liberal society predicated on the idea of instant gratification, the will to delay gratification and commit to the long-term are more important to our health and our wellbeing, even the stability of our relationships, than they have perhaps ever been. Moreover, moving from a manufacturing to a service and knowledge economy has meant that non-cognitive abilities like communication skills, creativity, initiative and enthusiasm pay a high premium.

At the same time that character has become more important to future success and wellbeing, the kinds of environments and parenting skills that best help develop grit, application, empathy and so on are more likely to be found in certain socio-economic strata. In research comparing the relative importance of parenting and socio-economic background factors for the development of children's soft skills, parenting quality remained the single most important indicator of character development in young children. However, other factors such as household income and family structure also have a big influence, in a direct way through material deprivation, but also indirectly through effects on parents' confidence and approaches to child rearing.

Although parents across the UK love their children equally (based on a measure of warmth and attachment) regardless of household income, parents from lower income households are less likely to be consistent in setting rules and boundaries for

their children at home. As the gap in income and wealth between the richest and poorest in society continues to increase, as 'soft skills' become more important to success, and as parents in the lowest income households struggle to nurture these skills in their children, a triple disadvantage is carried by the poorest in society, with serious repercussions for social mobility. The irony is that parents caring for children in the toughest circumstances require the strongest character of all to cope. And yet the difficulties, frustrations and sacrifices that they face – struggling from pay-day to pay-day, or with unemployment, difficult or violent neighbourhoods, isolation and loneliness, and relationship instability – are the situations that erode character the most.

Differential susceptibility

But there is more to the story. The foundation laid by biological make-up can predispose children to respond to the care they receive in different ways. A growing body of research into what is called 'differential susceptibility' suggests that the brains of emotionally temperamental infants are even more plastic and susceptible to environmental influence than their more stable peers.⁵⁷ For example, in a study in 2000, proactive parenting (based on an observed supportive presence and clear limit-setting) yielded greater benefits for seven-year-olds who had high levels of problem behaviours like disobedience, aggression and anger at age four than for other children.⁵⁸ This was the case even after controlling for problem behaviours when the initial measurement was taken – in other words, disobedient and aggressive children became more 'pro-social' than their calmer peers as a result of good parenting, so the latter is all the more important for 'difficult' children (they have further to fall but also fly higher).

Another set of studies from the USA in 1997 and 2005 show that infants with highly negative emotionality in the early years benefit disproportionately from strongly supportive rearing environments.⁵⁹ There are now hundreds of studies showing similar results.⁶⁰ This tendency to respond more positively to

good care is associated specifically with children who have negative temperaments. What can explain such a phenomenon? Differential susceptibility has been ascribed to a combination of factors, one set environmental and the other evolutionary.

The environmental explanation holds that very early environmental factors – even factors affecting the unborn foetus – can trigger biological mechanisms such as increased hormone levels, which lead to different temperaments among infants. For example, if a mother experiences very high-stress situations while pregnant – such as violence, homelessness or starvation – levels of hormones such as cortisol, which are responsible for our reactions to stress and fear, can become elevated in the womb. Drug and alcohol abuse or violence during pregnancy can have a similar effect, also leading to the development of negative temperaments in young children. One theory suggests that infants with such temperaments tend to be less participative than other infants, often leading to heightened awareness of their environments and greater opportunities to learn through mimicking and watching others.⁶¹ These infants often develop highly sensitive nervous systems that experience and react more severely to both positive and negative environments.

Evolutionary theories of differential susceptibility are likely to cite natural selection as its cause. The theory is that natural selection ensures – through genetic or biological mechanisms – that offspring will differ in their receptiveness to parenting strategies, in case parents raise their children in a way that does not prepare them well to survive in the world. On this reading, the less susceptible child becomes a form of family insurance, or an evolutionary way to ‘hedge bets’ on an uncertain future. For example, assumptions about what constitutes ‘good parenting’ in the UK today – with an emphasis on teaching children about sharing, building relationships, trusting one another, thinking before acting and so on – might not be suitable at all for children growing up in a post-climate change world, characterised by flash flooding, food and clean water scarcity, and lack of security. Indeed, as Camila has pointed out in chapter 1, there are many environments today where children might be better served by their parents if they were to be taught how to act first and think

later, to be cautious and untrusting of others, to take care of themselves before considering others, and to be self-reliant rather than collaborative. The natural selection theory of differential susceptibility proposes that some children are less likely to respond to their parent's care in order that they have a better chance of successfully navigating the world they inherit.

Although the causes of differential susceptibility are not fully understood, there is probably some truth in both the evolutionary and environmental explanations. A poor start in very early life could be putting many infants in a particularly vulnerable, but also particularly receptive, position. For these children, the influence of their rearing environment and quality of their care are doubly important. And although these children are found across the socio-economic spectrum, the environmental factors that most commonly lead to higher susceptibility (domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, premature birth) are likely to be impacting negatively on the parents as well, often affecting their parenting style and confidence. But children in wealthy households can struggle too, without the right kind of care. Efforts should be made to identify families in need and provide them with support and advice. For there is also a hopeful story here – if interventions occur in the right way and at the right time, there is every reason to believe that differentially susceptible children can make up for lost ground, and even exceed their peers, helping them to buck the trend.

The enduring effects of environment

The message is clear: environment matters a great deal to children's character development. But a new message is emerging too: the effects of environment can endure beyond one life and carry on to future generations. The aforementioned study of epigenetics is concerned with the environmental factors that can 'switch' gene expression on or off in this enduring way – across generations. Until recently, the prevailing view was that our DNA carries all heritable information and that nothing an individual does in her lifetime could be biologically passed to

her children. Epigenetics proposes that experience of our environment can affect gene expression and suggests that things such as levels of care, nutrition and stress can switch on combinations of genes, causing heritable effects in future generations. As leading epigenetic scientist Marcus Pembrey describes, our genetic code is

*rather like a set of piano keys, it provides a blue print for the type of music that can be played, but our environment and nurture determines what keys are pressed when, how hard, how long, and in what order.*⁶²

Rather than setting out a blueprint and then stepping back, it seems our genetic make-up is part of our evolving identity as we grow, responsive to our choices and our environments. The new findings of neuroscience and development psychology show us that the care received from parents and carers and the environments surrounding infants in their early years are even more important than we once thought in shaping character. It is our environment that kick starts certain combinations of genes into being expressed and allows others to lay dormant. Our environment can trigger hormonal changes that inhibit our ability to remain calm and think straight, or it can support even the most vulnerable of children to flourish given the right type of care and attention. What little we know about these fledging sciences tells us that our nurture shapes our nature – in ways that can even be passed along generations. These findings point to the need for a greater collective responsibility to create the kinds of environments – in homes, communities and society at large – that will help children fulfil their potential and not forgo the most vulnerable as a lost cause.

How does insecure attachment impair character development?

Sebastian Kraemer

What conditions undermine the development of good character? To answer this we have to agree on what good character is, but we do not. The fault line between political left and right separates differing views on virtue. A good character is honest, courageous and loyal but also in my view someone who can understand and get on with others; a good partner, neighbour, friend, son or daughter, sibling, citizen, colleague, lover and, if he or she has children, parent. I do not rate obedience so highly. Until not so long ago this quality was seen as highly desirable, especially in children, but it is now tarnished by its misuse in the futile battles of the First World War and the genocides of the Second, all carried out under orders. Independence of thought, knowing your own mind and being prepared to defend your views is of greater value to me. This fragile but liberating product of the Enlightenment – the freedom to think whatever you like – is always under threat from orthodoxies of various kinds. So good character has a cultural and historical context that defines it.⁶³ What is your view?

The pilot light of character

‘Insecurity’ is a term from attachment theory and is experienced as danger. Any newborn creature is vulnerable but the human is the most immature of all mammals, born much earlier than others because of its already massive brain, which still has most of its growing yet to come. While nutrition is necessary for survival, John Bowlby and others showed that the drives to seek and give protection are independent from the need to feed.⁶⁴ Being looked after is also a matter of life and death. All healthy infants are born (‘programmed’) with an optimistic expectation that someone will be there to protect them, and a

keen social instinct to reward whoever does it with an intent gaze, remarkable feats of mimicry⁶⁵ and, after a few weeks, smiles and laughter.

This is the biological spark which when lit by attentive care gives you the capacity to love as you have been loved. But to keep the flame alight you need caregivers⁶⁶ attuned to your states of mind and body, to help you make sense of what goes on there. The methods are universal. For example, a man with a deep voice raises its pitch to female levels (around middle C)⁶⁷ when talking to babies, so they can most easily hear the tones, even though they do not understand the words. Attunement is a matter not only of pitch but also of timing. When you speak to someone on a phone line from the other side of the world have you noticed how the tiny lengthening of the time between what you say and the response you get can make you wonder fleetingly if you have caused offence in some way? When we are slow to respond to their messages that is how it is for babies too. Here is an experiment carried out with normal infants. The mother is with her child and is told not to react when he tries to engage her. She just displays a blank face. This is the 'still face paradigm', a research method developed in the 1970s by the developmental psychologists Colwyn Trevarthen in Edinburgh and Ed Tronick in Boston.⁶⁸ It shows what well-adjusted infants do when the link with their primary caregiver is broken. They try in vain to get a response and within a few moments give up completely, as if they have lost the will to live. Their light goes out. It is upsetting to see recordings of these episodes.

In a short moment the life of the infant with no one to answer him seems to have become a tragedy. The seventeenth-century metaphysical poet George Herbert describes precisely the same experience of an adult in relation to God:

*Therefore my soul lay out of sight
Untuned, unstrung
My feeble spirit, unable to look right
Like a nipped blossom, hung
Discontented.*⁶⁹

The infants in the laboratory recover quickly when mother's attentiveness is restored and no harm is done⁷⁰, but in real life you encounter unresponsive caregivers – who may be depressed or ill for example – your despair becomes chronic. You begin to adapt to being forgotten. Stress hormones are flooding and changing your brain while it is still growing in size and complexity. Parents of good character might not be aware that they are out of touch with the child, yet in the developing child these failures, often seemingly inconsequential to adults, can lead to insecurity.

Though we are clearly born with different temperaments, character develops in the human environment from birth onwards. Each stage of childhood builds on the achievements of the previous one. The intimate reciprocity of the first year is carried forward into the wider social relations of the second. As toddlers on our feet, we enter the great university of moral advancement, conducted in a storm of passionate, magical and violent emotions. Learning how to manage relationships – how to share for example – requires firm and affectionate looking after from familiar adults.⁷¹ This is the time to forge character, in the heat of the moment.

Compulsive self-reliance

In response to what may be quite small but recurrent lapses in attentive care some children become increasingly anxious and clingy, but others suppress the experience of it, even while their physiological levels of anxiety remain high. If you are one of those, you may become hyper-resilient, learning to do everything for yourself without help. Teachers, parents and others begin to admire you for it. You can in time become a clever, successful and powerful adult. But this comes at a cost to your sensitivity. You have to work out through trial and error how to pay attention to other people's states of mind⁷² – even to your own – because you have not had enough of this done for you earlier on. It will not come naturally to you to wonder how others might view the world, or how they are feeling.

In a state of compulsive self-reliance, admirable though it may be, just feeling okay in yourself is harder to achieve. To reduce anxiety you might need something distracting or addictive, such as working or playing extremely hard, using alcohol, gambling or financial dealing, overeating, taking drugs or being sexually promiscuous. Although the kind of personality behind these different activities can be similar, the moral value attached to them is very different. In general only hard work merits approval. And when you do feel bad it is not easy to ask for help, because you have become used to finding your own respite. Your body and mind have by now learned from early experience to expect that help will arrive too late, or not at all. You do not want to expose yourself to the shame of feeling frightened and abandoned, and will have greater difficulty dealing with the inevitable conflicts of intimate relationships. Such crises can feel like the end of the world – that tragedy again – rather than the painful row that for most people can soon be repaired. A crucial ingredient in the development of good character has been missed. It is never too late to learn that we are good enough to be loved and trusted by others, but it gets harder the longer we leave it.

The character of society

In societies where conflict and survival is the rule, such as classical Sparta, or the gangs of street children in modern Brazil and India, compulsive self-reliance is an advantage. Gangs give some security but your membership is always provisional (see Camila Batmanghelidjh's essay in chapter 1). Stealing, even killing, could save your life. In a plural democracy where pro-social attitudes are valued, compulsive self-reliance is not necessarily an asset, though it can lead to success. Admired individuals at the top of sport and entertainment, business, politics and the professions may be just like this. Whether they are of good character depends on their behaviour, but also on your view. Someone who makes his own way to the top without needing financial or moral support is often held up as a model

citizen, a 'self-made man', especially by those who aspire to such success themselves.

'If they can do that, so can I' is one version of the American dream, with many echoes in the rest of the world, and this view is most supported by people who also see themselves as self-reliant. But this ideal of good character implies that those who need looking after – children, the disabled, mentally ill, the poor, refugees, the old – are less worthy. Hard-working citizens question why they should have to fork out for others who appear to do nothing for themselves,⁷³ and often pay no tax (and some without children ask why they have to contribute to child benefit). In times like the present these sentiments are more easily expressed and felt, perhaps by you and me too. It is as if we were like the toddler who refuses to accept that the parents now have a new baby in their room: 'It's not fair! What has he done to deserve this extra attention? That's my place, and he has taken it from me.' In the displaced child's eyes the new baby is a scrounger but parents can help by acknowledging his fury while at the same time showing him how to become a proud and more responsible older sibling.⁷⁴

Current welfare policy tends to encourage successful and self-reliant citizens to see people dependent on benefits as undeserving failures. Of course there is cheating and incompetence in a welfare state but shameless prejudice against vulnerability⁷⁵ is a sign of social disintegration, and a betrayal of human consciousness.⁷⁶ Humans became one of the most successful species on the planet because we evolved, over hundreds of thousands of years, in social groups small enough for everyone to be interdependent.⁷⁷

Like all societies ours goes through historical phases of cohesion and division, but this time we have knowledge of child development and social science that did not exist in the past. Insecure societies⁷⁸ promote insecure attachments, and anxiety in a parent is transmitted bodily to the child.⁷⁹ If you are not confident of your home, in your job, or even of your safety, your capacity to care for children is undermined. In very unequal societies everyone is living on a steep slope and only the very richest can shelter themselves from unease. Under these stressed

conditions ‘what’s in it for me and mine?’ will always trump ‘what can I do for my society?’

Social investment in early childhood creates a benign cycle⁸⁰ rather than the vicious one we are in. At the most critical and anxious phase of their lives, parents need time, money and advice in order to support each other and their young children. This means paid parental leave (which actually saves lives)⁸¹ and highly qualified staff in children’s centres.⁸² The kind of good character we want to promote turns out to be closely related to the kind of society we want to live in. Character must be defined in moral terms, but morality is not simply a matter of dutifully trying to be good, to follow the rules. The bleakness portrayed in the film *The White Ribbon* perfectly illustrates morality without attentive love.⁸³ Character grows out of our desire and our capacity for human relatedness.

Is character formed by nature or nurture?

Stephen Scott

So is that it then? If we bring up our children responsively and responsibly, will they pretty much develop good characters? The predominant view during most of the twentieth century has been just that: the new born is seen as a pure 'tabula rasa', a blank slate, born with a mind that is a 'blooming buzzing confusion', as William James put it, onto which experiences get written to shape an orderly character.⁸⁴ However, from the 1970s on, developments in genetic and biological sciences have proven this view to be at best incomplete, and at worst wrong. This is not to say that parents and the world around the young organism do not play a crucial role – after all, without nutrients from the womb onwards, without stimulation, support and guidance, there would be no physical growth, no language, and no integration into the social world. The huge difficulties of children deprived of these nurturing factors, such as those raised in Romanian orphanages, attest to that. But in some cases our biology and our genetic make-up determine more than we may have thought, with important repercussions for how we think about responsibility and potential.

The impact of genetics on human development is a sensitive topic. Many claims about the power of genetics to predetermine our developmental paths come from a dark history: from the eugenicist justifications for racial superiority to the appalling genocide of humans born with learning or mental problems. However, genetic studies have also illuminated the human condition by showing what forces help make us who we are. Taking a broad-brush approach by looking at people's character traits (so-called behavioural genetics), two main strategies have been used to disentangle genetic influences from rearing influences: adoption studies and twin studies.

In an example of the former, when examining the origins of intellectual ability, a landmark French study showed that babies from disadvantaged birth parents who were adopted by advantaged ones had an IQ about 12 points lower than babies from advantaged birth parents who were adopted into a similar upbringing.⁸⁵ Perhaps the fact that intelligence has a heritable component is not so surprising. But could this apply to character traits? A Danish study looking at conviction rates of teenagers found that children adopted before the age of one whose birth parents had been alcoholic or criminal had four to six times the rate of conviction compared with those whose birth parents had had no such problems.⁸⁶ Thus their rearing was the same, but their different genetic inheritance was powerfully influential. There are a lot of environmental factors that could impact on future criminality, but as the adopted children were in similar rearing environments, it is likely that character traits such as attitudes to risk, or levels of empathy, were genetically transmitted from parent to child.⁸⁷

In the case of twins, a third are identical and share the same genes, and two-thirds are like any siblings, and share half their genes. If the character traits of the former (identical twins) are more similar than the latter (fraternal twins), this is another way to examine the extent of any genetic contribution. Indeed, comparative studies show that several traits are indeed under quite a bit of genetic control – shy, withdrawn people are largely so because of their genetic inheritance.⁸⁸ For angry, aggressive offspring the story is more complex. If they are regular in other ways but antisocial, this is mostly due to their upbringing, typically engendered by parents who were inconsistent and harsh in their discipline, low on warmth, rather uninterested in their children and poor at supervising where they were and what they were up to as they became teenagers.⁸⁹ However, if as well as being antisocial, the character of the offspring is ‘callous and unemotional’ – types who can be superficially charming, but don’t care about the distress of others and have no qualms in using and deceiving others then moving on – this character type is strongly inherited.⁹⁰ These children and adolescents develop their rather unattractive character traits irrespective of the way

they were brought up. They are also expensive – many are prolific offenders and conmen, some costing society over a million pounds in public expenditure by the time they are 30.⁹¹

The mechanism through which genes confer traits (such as a predisposition to be shy or withdrawn, more intelligent, or callous and unemotional) are generally speaking not yet at all clear, with one or two exceptions to be mentioned later. The way genes are read in cells and code for specific proteins is well worked out, but how certain brain proteins or arrangements of them confer these characteristics is largely unknown, although for most traits very many genes appear to be involved.⁹² This means that in the current state of knowledge, it is unlikely that there will ever be the opportunity for genetic engineering of character traits – thus obviating the need to address a hornet’s nest of moral issues. However, there are some clues regarding the biological substrate of some character types. For example, people with callous and unemotional traits have an underactive amygdala, the part of the brain where emotions, especially fear, are processed.⁹³ It has been shown experimentally that these individuals don’t react very strongly at all to fear-provoking stimuli, which makes them ‘punishment-insensitive’ and therefore willing to take risks that others wouldn’t, as they don’t care about the consequences (they make very good commandos).⁹⁴ It is likely that the next few decades will yield huge strides forward in our understanding of the processes involved in going from genetic code to observable behaviour. But one of the already established findings is that our environment has a greater impact on our biological make-up than we once thought: it can even alter our genetic make-up in ways that are heritable across generations.

Some 40 or 50 years ago, Cartesian dualism reigned: the body was one structure, and our thoughts and feelings had, well, a mind of their own. The prevailing belief was that genes gave us our body structure, and upbringing gave us our beliefs and habits – rather like a computer has structural hardware, but any programmes can be written onto it, without altering its composition inside the box or skull.⁹⁵ Bodies were real but thoughts and character dispositions were rather ethereal – a

reflection of, and changeable by, the realm of experience. Sure, the physical brain was seen as the seat of thought but at a fairly crude level – put it to sleep with an anaesthetic or a blow to the head and thoughts were no more, knock out particular parts and funny syndromes ensued. But only thoughts were seen as malleable, of being susceptible to learning and unlearning, so that character could be written by upbringing. But what if upbringing doesn't just reprogramme the inner computer, as it were, but instead changes its structure?

The last 20 years have seen huge strides in understanding the biological effects of parenting. Animal experiments have led the way. Baby rats taken away from their mothers for extended periods of time and then returned are neglected by their mothers who lick and groom them less, and don't nestle them in close (so called arch-backed nursing).⁹⁶ The young rats grow up less well adjusted than their peers, and in adolescence, when challenged with a minor stress (a puff of air in the eye) react with six times the level of stress hormones including cortisol.⁹⁷ This latter finding is important since it ties in with other findings in adult humans who were abused or neglected as children. They too have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and often lose the normal healthy daily rhythm whereby cortisol levels are high in the morning then gradually decrease during the day. These findings also help explain why those who take on abused children – most fostered or adopted children nowadays were abused or neglected by their birth parents – often find that their wards are prone to fly into rages and take hours to calm down from a serious over-aroused state. Such rages have probably arisen, in part, from frightening and unpredictable upbringings that result in children's stress arousal systems being set at lower thresholds. Understanding this helps foster carers choose the techniques they use to re-educate these children. For example, calm, logical discipline is more effective for these children than a show of anger – and equally importantly helps the foster carers understand their charges' apparent over-reaction, so it can become easier to accept and love them.

Thus at the extremely poor end of parenting, there are biological consequences of psychological abuse that extend to

hormonal reactivity to stress. Higher levels of such reactivity can lead to poor self-regulation of emotions, likely to be deemed by most an important feature of good character (it is surely a desirable trait to stay calm and not to fly off the handle at the slightest stress or provocation). But could there be biological consequences of more everyday, but still sub-optimal parenting? Recent findings suggest there could. In an authoritative study of nearly 1,000 individuals, the third who experienced less good parenting as children (whose parents who were by their own account less warm, less involved, somewhat harsher in their punishments) were found when examined in their 30s to have significantly higher levels of C-reactive protein, a marker of general inflammation associated with more cardiac events such as heart attacks and earlier death.⁹⁸ Other possible confounding explanations such as social class and dietary and smoking habits were controlled for.

These and other examples show that the way we treat our children affects a core aspect of their being – the bodily fluids that determine how they react, and how their character is formed. Why does this matter? Well, at the least, it changes the significance of child rearing. Before this information was available, it was possible to think that there were different ways of bringing up children that were interesting (sub)cultural variations but little more. It now seems that child rearing approaches have profound effects on people's biology and hence predispositions to react and behave. It behoves us to try to improve good upbringing and minimise bad upbringing, for the corporeal health and wellbeing of our citizens as well as developing good characters in society.

What of those who are just born biologically or genetically predisposed to be 'bad characters'? In the Danish adoption study referred to above, there was an interesting twist: as well as categorising the birth parents into alcoholic or criminal vs the non-alcoholic or criminal, the researchers also categorised the *adoptive* parents the same way (you might think that the placing social worker had not done their homework very well if some of the children were placed with alcoholic or criminal parents, but unfortunately some were). But the point is that among the

higher genetic risk children, 12 per cent had been convicted by age 17 if they were in a more favourable upbringing, whereas a huge 40 per cent had convictions if their upbringing was by alcoholic or criminal parents (the comparable figures for lower genetic risk children were 3 per cent and 7 per cent respectively).⁹⁹ Thus the genetic predisposition was made much worse by the unfavourable upbringing. Put the other way, if we can ensure good child-rearing, we can often substantially mitigate undesirable character outcomes for individuals and society. We may not be able – or want – to alter people’s genes, but we can – and should – find ways to improve the environments that children grow up in, given what we know about the mitigating and mediating effect that environments have on gene expression and physiological mechanisms.

A full discussion of where this leaves free will and responsibility is beyond the scope of this essay, but the answer has implications for how we judge people and deal with the outcomes of ‘poor character’. If our genetic inheritance and upbringing shape our physiological mechanisms, which in turn shape our behaviour and character, then can we honestly be deemed to have freely chosen our actions? The answer is likely to be complex and require a shift in mind-set as we get to understand human nature better. The notion that we can all decide our fates, that somehow there is a level of consciousness perching, as it were, above the fray and that after logical reflections it guides our actions is beguiling but overly simplistic. It is much harder for young people to avoid, say, the temptation of petty theft or to remain calm in the face of threatening provocation if they were born with an irritable, overactive temperament and then were subsequently neglected and abused by their parents, and given little comfort or effective guidance. Can we really hold them as morally responsible for these actions as someone born with a calm temperament who had a privileged upbringing? As a result of his or her biology, it will be far easier for the latter person to resist the temptation and to stay in control; put another way, it will require far less of an act of will. The extent to which responsibility should be attributed may not equate to how society should treat someone – for example the

Is character formed by nature or nurture?

former person may be less to blame but may need more remedial help. Such issues, raised by the new knowledge of the biological influences on character, now need a renewed public debate.

3 Gendered identities

Gender is one of most important lenses through which we can view human behaviour and identity. One of the longest running arguments about gender is whether basic character traits belong to either one sex or the other: girls are empathetic and collaborative; boys are competitive and single minded. But far from being value-neutral, the different and dichotomous character associated with men and women, respectively, presupposes a whole set of right and wrong behaviours, aspirations and roles for each sex.

As Yvonne Roberts shows in this chapter, centuries of ‘counterfeit knowledge’ about female character have restricted the opportunities and development of generation upon generation of women. The women’s liberation movements in the second half of the twentieth century brought a sustained period of reflection about women’s roles in society, and a subsequent deconstructing of that role, which broadened enormously women’s freedom and recognised the diversity of their identities. But so many competing and often contradictory visions of the feminine have been confusing and difficult to negotiate for many girls and young women, creating new problems. Traditional usage of the term character has tended to describe the rugged, masculine traits of independence and self-reliance typically associated with men. But, questions Jen Lexmond, have modern times seen men somewhat at a loss, demoralised in a world where interdependence, communication and collaboration are rated more highly in tackling today’s challenges and succeeding in work and life? It seems that both women and men are constrained by the character associated with their sex.

Gendered character: born or made

But are gender and the resulting influences on our character really determined by our sex? Such assertions are made on the basis of all types of ‘evidence’, some a priori, some empirical. One can find experts and respected contributors across the disciplinary spectrum, in neuroscience, sociology, political theory, history, pop culture, developmental psychology and so on, who claim that there is a natural basis for gender differences in character and behaviour.

The best-selling book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* argues that men and women’s values, communication styles and emotional needs are inherently different.¹⁰⁰ Reams of popular science publications echo the sentiment: *Why Men Don’t Iron: The fascinating and unalterable difference between men and women*, *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and men in conversation* and *The Essential Difference: The truth about the male and female brain*.¹⁰¹ These arguments perpetuate a difference model, which suggests psychological differences between men and women are natural, normal and unalterable. For example, statements such as: ‘the female brain excels in verbal tasks whereas the male brain is better adapted to visual-spatial and mathematical tasks’.¹⁰² A range of rigorous and not so rigorous research is used to back these accounts up. Some, such as Simon Baron-Cohen’s study – which found that within the first 24 hours of birth, male infants were more likely to gaze at an inanimate mobile than girls, with girls more likely to look at the face of their carer – seem to point to genuine differences between the sexes.¹⁰³ However, the precise link between the research findings and the book titles is more difficult to ascertain.

Meanwhile, most comprehensive investigations into psychological gender differences find very little by way of difference. Maccoby and Jacklin’s *The Psychology of Sex Differences* looked at over 2,000 studies of gender difference across a range of domains, concluding that many popular beliefs of gender difference (eg that girls are more social than boys) are not supported by evidence.¹⁰⁴ Janet Hyde, Professor of Psychology and Women’s studies at the University of Wisconsin, and others have suggested an alternative hypothesis: the ‘gender similarities hypothesis’, positing the radical idea that men and women are

more alike than they are different.¹⁰⁵ Hyde conducted a meta-analysis (a statistical technique that aggregates research across an extensive range of studies) of research into gender difference. Her analysis supports the gender similarities hypothesis on almost all psychological attributes, bar a few motor behaviours (eg throwing distance).

If the latter reading is correct, it suggests that rather than being biologically and genetically determined, gender is a product of socialisation. Or, what political theorist Susan Moller Okin describes as the ‘deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference that is largely socially produced’.¹⁰⁶ This lived reality is what led Simone de Beauvoir to write: ‘one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one’.¹⁰⁷ The process of gender socialisation, then, starts at the very beginning of life – perhaps even with the choice of name for a child and colour of the walls in their room.

Feminist theorist Ann Oakley described in detail the role and complicity of families in the social construction of gender in *Subject Women*. She argued that the family was central to the process because as the agent of primary socialisation families have the responsibility of entrenching notions of *normal* and *valued* behaviour from the early stages in a child’s life.¹⁰⁸ She described four ways that families socialise their children according to gender:

- *manipulation* – when parents encourage normal gendered behaviour and discourage abnormal gendered behaviour, for example laughing when their son lightly smacks someone but scolding their daughter if she does the same
- *canalisation* – when parents channel their sons and daughters down the correct gendered path, for example buying girls dolls and boys toy soldiers to play with
- *verbal appellations* – used by parents when talking to their children, for example calling them by gendered pet names eg ‘love’, volume of voice (loud for boys, quiet for girls) and tone of voice (harsher for boys and softer for girls)
- *different activities* conducted by parents with their children – mothers might encourage their daughters to help out in the

kitchen and fathers might take their sons out to play football in the garden while the meal is being cooked.¹⁰⁹

If she were correct, these subtle and unsubtle methods of gender role socialisation would be heavily implicated in the gendered roles that girls and boys take on. As they grow up, other institutional agents such as schools, or the media, would take on the baton, reinforcing these ideas.

Mixed messages

Clearly, there is a strong case to be made for the impact of biology and socialisation on our gendered development. The evidence provides mixed messages, or perhaps provides what the investigator wants to find. It seems that the debate could only be solved through understanding the link between the chemical and genetic processes in our bodies and our subsequent behaviours in the social world. As Germaine Greer wrote in her seminal 1970s text, *The Female Eunuch*:

*It is true that the sex of a person is attested by every cell in his body. What we do not know is what exactly the difference in the cells means in terms of their functioning... Perhaps when we have learned to read the DNA we will be able to see what the information which is common to all members of the female sex really is, but even then it will be a long and tedious argument from biological data to behaviour.*¹¹⁰

Little did she know at the time that it would not be so long before we did uncover the mystery of our DNA. The long-term, multinationally supported Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, identified every gene in the human body along with the sequence of our DNA. Surely, if there was a gene for male self-reliance and female empathy, that project would have identified it? But in fact its limited success in identifying genes responsible for aspects of our personality lends more support to the nurture side of the debate. Even in the cases where sex difference has been identified, it is indeed a 'long and tedious' path to connect it to behaviour.

The pioneering work of neuroscientists over recent years has showed us that there is no definitive line between our nature and our nurture. Our environment shapes our thoughts, reactions and habits until they become part of who we are. This process is most powerful when we are infants, as the brain is at its most malleable in the early years. It is particularly worrying, then, that early childhood is when we are surrounded by the most stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a girl or a boy.

The consequences of gendered socialisation

The debate about the origin of sex difference, while fascinating, is however perhaps less important than the ways in which it has led to disparities in the aspirations and outcomes of girls and boys. Without doubt, the norms about gender roles that are supported and legitimised by our social and cultural institutions – family, media, the state – place different values on ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits, celebrating those who embody the right ones for their sex, pathologising those who might try to appropriate the wrong ones.

It is not difficult to make the causal link between Lego for boys and dolls for girls at age two, and the subsequent gender disparity in workforces such as engineering or early years care. Nor to see how it came to be that one sector – associated with masculine ideas of building and logical thinking – is valued and paid much more highly than the other – associated with the feminine attributes of supporting and caring. There is far more involved in the origin and continuation of the pay gap, but the implicit values that we place on masculinity and femininity makes up an important part of that story.

In another example, policy makers are increasingly concerned about men’s health – their reticence to get health checkups, their greater tendency to be isolated and lonely in old age, and their lower life expectancy. How might ideas about masculinity – that men are independent and self-reliant – contribute to their choices and subsequent outcomes?

Could society’s implicit view of women as somehow purer, more innocent than men be supporting the destructive,

appalling and surprisingly frequently held view that a woman is partially or totally responsible for being raped if she is wearing revealing clothing (26 per cent of survey respondents), or simply for having had many sexual partners (22 per cent)?¹¹¹ Perhaps our increasing use of sexual stereotyping and objectification in the media plays a part in male aggression and supports the status quo of one in four women experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime.¹¹² We have to remind ourselves that

*male violence, sexual or otherwise, is not the unusual behaviour of a few 'odd' individuals, neither is it an expression of overwhelming biological urges; it is a result of the social world in which we live.*¹¹³

Gender is an integral part of our character in the truest sense of the word, and of the behaviours, habits and performances that add up to make us who we are, and define our aspirations and anxieties. Such debates usually fall outside the realm of public policy. But understanding and mitigating the ways in which our socially constructed world affects different groups in our society and leads to inequalities of opportunity and outcome is the *raison d'être* of policy makers. Gendered outcomes for boys and girls are most certainly of concern to a society concerned with equal opportunities and fairness.

How have stereotypes shaped women's character?

Yvonne Roberts

In 1941, the Amazonian Wonder Woman, daughter of Queen Hippolyta, was blessed in her crib with a range of enviable capabilities. She received beauty from Aphrodite; wisdom from Athena; strength from Hercules, which enabled her to rip a steel door off its hinges; super-swiftness from Mercury; and the no doubt useful capacity to talk to animals from Artemis. Then, her creator, psychologist William Moulton Marston, gave her life on the pages of *All Star Comics*. In addition, in a touch of ambivalence about Wonder Woman's future employment prospects, he also gave her the ability to type at over 160 words per minute.

Marston based Wonder Woman on Olive Byrne and his wife, Elizabeth; the three had a polygamous and polyamorous relationship. Elizabeth had wanted to study law but when she asked her father for financial support, he had allegedly told her, 'Absolutely not. As long as I have money to keep you in aprons, you can stay home with your mother.' Elizabeth, against the odds, proceeded to study for three degrees. Her force of character influenced Marston's misguided belief that the female gender is inherently superior to the male. He created Wonder Woman to help make his case.

'Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world,' Marston wrote in 1943. Later, in an issue of *The American Scholar*, he elaborated further:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace loving, as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.¹¹⁴

Marston was in keeping with his time when he defined some of the capabilities associated with the character of a 'good' woman – submissive, peace loving, nurturing, and residing in the domain of the private. Her attributes moderated and mediated the aggressive, unruly robust character of men as they went about their serious business on the public stage.

A year earlier, in the UK, Edward Glover, President of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, gave an influential series of broadcasts for the BBC, published in book form as *The Psychology of Fear and Courage*.¹¹⁵ He saw women as key to the morale of the country at a time of war. He argued that women's constitutional weakness was addressed once they became wives. That love of family and domesticity was also the basis of male morale. He warned that without this domestic corset the character of single women was particularly fragile. Lacking self-discipline, these spinsters might fall prey to their instincts, having recourse, Glover wrote, to 'an orgy of knitting. Failing such solace they are inclined to eat their hearts out.' As Gillian Swanson points out in *Nationalising Femininity*,

*While women's maternal instinct could provide the familial context that secured male morale, this could not lead to the 'inner discipline' of individual responses so characteristic of the superior form of British character.*¹¹⁶

Swanson describes how popular culture shaped a notion of female character in the service of men and country:

*Magazine advertisements and articles suggested how women should function: keeping courage; keeping heart; fending off sexual temptations provided by other men; maintaining composure, patience, being understanding, standing firm... Above all it is women's management of self – their commitment to a selflessness – which is crucial to male morale... Femininity... became a key site for the redefinition of a modern British national identity.*¹¹⁷

So what has that process got to do with the girls and young women today? Marston and Glover's views were influenced by

centuries of counterfeit 'knowledge' about the inferior biology, character and psyche of women and femininity. These views cast shadows long enough to reach to today. In *Sexual Visions*, Ludmilla Jordanova, provides example after example, drawn from the past 200 years, to illustrate the challenge facing women in their attempt to transcend stereotypes, defy constraining notions of femininity and develop capabilities admired in men but often seen as aberrations in a girl and woman.¹¹⁸ Capabilities such as self-discipline, motivation, resilience, a sense of agency and persistence or grit, which, unless camouflaged by a femininity in which these qualities have little place, mean that women take the risk of landing up literally in a no man's land.

In 1705, Mary Astell pointed out that women who achieved in a male world 'acted above their sex'. Conflating science and sexism, the medical philosopher Cabanis in the eighteenth century explained the dependent nature of women and its impact on character:

*Muscular feebleness inspires in women an instinctive distrust of strenuous exercise; it draws them towards amusements and sedentary occupations. One could add that the separation of their hips makes walking painful for women... This habitual feeling of weakness inspires less confidence.*¹¹⁹

Rousseau believed women's destiny was predetermined. They would become wives and mothers. They were unable to reason and were inferior to man so a basic vocational education was all that was required. Lotze, writing in the next century, declared 'analytical reflection is so little natural to women'.¹²⁰ Jordanova gives a list of 'centuries of dichotomous thought' that underpinned science and fuelled the concept of middle class femininity as sedentary, domestic and emotional. In contrast the characteristics of the male was (and is) active, powerful, bold.¹²¹

The dichotomous thoughts she lists that have influenced character include:

- active–passive
- muscles–nerves
- action–experience

- male–female
- public–private or domestic
- subject–object
- self–other
- seeing–seen
- reason–passion or desire

Women's position has changed in modern times. Yet the battle continues between a desire to fulfil one's potential and the fear that, in doing so, femininity might be risked, and the loss of male admiration is the price paid. Even when this is not the experience of individual girls and women, the story of how women get their comeuppance is daily reworked in the media – successful single women barren and without children; wives with a sense of adventure who lose their husbands to the au pair; middle class graduates forging into careers hitherto dominated by men allegedly paying the price of this unfeminine behaviour by a rise in depression and alcoholism. Pathologising what it is to be female, popular for several centuries, is alive and well today.

What best-selling author Susan Brownmiller in the 1980s called, 'the challenge of femininity' remains as vivid as ever in the heterosexual world. Brownmiller wrote,

*Femininity always demands more. It must constantly reassure its audience by a willing demonstration of difference, even when one does not exist in nature... To be insufficiently feminine is viewed as a failure in core sexual identity... a woman found wanting will be appraised (and appraise herself) as mannish or neutered or simply unattractive as men have defined these terms.*¹²²

Paradoxically, equality of opportunity, sexual liberation and the multiple inroads females are making on traditional male territory mean that femininity has tightened its stranglehold. Celebrity culture, the increasing sexualisation and objectification of women in the media and the pornography industry, materialism, and the profit to be made out of exploiting female insecurities continue to undermine the very capabilities that

constitute a strong woman of character. The position of women has improved and opportunities increased, yet girls continue to drag around the ball and chain of allegedly immutable biological differences between men and women and what the female brain is supposed to be like 'naturally'. The eighteenth-century views of physicians to explain the constraints on female character have now been replaced by the sometimes shoddy interpretation of research by neuroscientists.

Cordelia Fine in *Delusions of Gender* shows how the current narrative of certainty around what the 'hard wired' brain shows is misguided.¹²³ The impact of environmental cues on our remarkably malleable brains is alarmingly rapid; a sense of self is easily manipulated, as are qualities of character that make up that sense of self. Fine gives the example of Adam Galinsky's series of experiments.¹²⁴ He and his colleagues showed participants a photograph of a professor, a cheerleader and an elderly person or an African American man. Some of the volunteers were asked to be the person in the photograph and write a day in the life of that individual. Asked to rate their own traits after the exercise, those who had imagined themselves as cheerleaders rated themselves as more sexy and attractive compared with the controls. Those who walked in the shoes of the elderly person felt weaker and more dependent.

The researchers then went on to show that these changes in self-concept had an effect on subsequent behaviour. Pretending to be a professor improved analytic skills compared with controls while 'self-merging' with cheerleader traits impaired them. Fine quotes the Australian writer Helen Garner that one can either, 'think of people as discreet bubbles floating past each other and sometimes colliding or... see them overlap, seep into each other's lives, penetrate the fabric of each other'.¹²⁵

Cues for girls and women are particularly contradictory. The positive cues are sparse on the ground and the sense of vigilance that constantly reminds us that this is the case is distressingly absent. To give one example: the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media published a study in 2011 that looked at 122 major Hollywood films released in the three years to 2009. Of the 5,554 characters studied, 71 per cent were male

and only 29 per cent female. In addition, 24 per cent of females were portrayed as eye candy (compared with 4 per cent of males).¹²⁶ Females were also often portrayed as younger than their male counterparts, reinforcing the idea that youthfulness, beauty and a sexy demeanour are more important for females than males. A study commissioned by the advertising group Kaplan Thaler showed that 68 per cent of those who watched *Commander in Chief* in which Davis played a female president of the US, were more likely to take a female president seriously – even though it was just a TV series: cues again.¹²⁷

Geena Davis has written:

*Zero progress has been made in what is specifically aimed at kids... What children see affects their attitudes towards male and female roles in society. And as they watch the same movies and shows repeatedly, negative stereotypes are imprinted over and over again... The more we see female characters who are hypersexual one-dimensional eye candy, [who are] sidelined or not even there, the more it affects the way that boys think about girls.*¹²⁸

And how some girls think about themselves.

Even when there is a strong female character – DCI Jane Tennison, for instance, the star of *Prime Suspect* – there is a price to be paid. In her case loneliness and isolation. Lisbeth Salander, star of Stieg Larson's *Millennium Trilogy*, can fight, scheme, hack into computers and inflict torture with detachment – she is also the anorexic survivor of sexual abuse whose lack of emotional engagement is explained by Asperger's syndrome: not your average girl then. So where are the positive heroines?

As Cordelia Fine and Simon Laham write,

For some time those who study human social behaviour have understood our minds as collections of stereotypes, and schemas, scripts, beliefs and attitudes, lying dormant in wait for the appropriate environmental stimuli to trigger them into action. This means that much of what we think, do and feel can be influenced by subtle cues and surroundings... Supporting moral development and behaviour or rewaving the fraying strands of the social fabric is not just a question of instilling appropriate feelings and knowledge

*inside the head, but also creating outside the head the kind of environment that will best draw out the right moral mindset and motivations... there is no such thing as a 'neutral' environment that leaves the mind in a natural unprimed state.*¹²⁹

A healthier and more enriching environment obviously encourages young people to flourish. Yet, for many, a number of modern cues, influenced by the past, undermine rather than strengthen the desire to become a person of strong character. Changing those cues may be beyond even the might of Wonder Woman but it is the passport to a better future.

Is the crisis of masculinity really a crisis of character?

Jen Lexmond

‘Acceptable at a dance, invaluable in a ship wreck’ was the response of Headmaster JF Roxburgh when asked what kind of young men he hoped to turn out at Stowe School in the 1920s and 30s. His quote may seem old-fashioned and quaint today, but it describes the type of virtuous behaviour – resourcefulness, initiative, courteousness and leadership – that has been associated with good character throughout history right up to the present day. But Roxburgh’s conception of character is a masculine one, not only in that it applies to his male students, but also, arguably, because ‘character’ originated as a masculine idea.

Virtue and success have been explicitly tied to ideas of manhood and masculinity throughout history. The root of virtue, *vir*, is the Latin word for man. The Roman virtue, *virtus*, has been translated as ‘manliness’, ‘courage’, ‘valor’ and ‘character’ itself. As the great Cicero said, ‘The term virtue is from the word that signifies man; a man’s chief quality is fortitude.’ Similarly, a failure to be manly, or effeminacy, is linked to poor character – cowardice, impotence and ineffectiveness. Look up the verb ‘to emasculate’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and you find: ‘to make weaker or less effective’. It is not surprising that, as has been pointed out previously, women who showed proficiency in typically male worlds, like politics, science or literature, were described as ‘acting above their sex’.

Today, there is a growing anxiety that young men are experiencing a ‘crisis of masculinity’. Flurries of statistics about boys’ development and educational outcomes slipping compared with their female counterparts abound. In 2010 the number of boys who achieved A*–C grades at GCSE was 8 per cent lower than that for girls. At university, women are more likely to pick up a first or upper second degree than men, and after graduation women are more likely to go on to employment, and to go on to

it more quickly.¹³⁰ Young men are living at home with their parents far longer than young women, unable to fly the coop. As fathers, young men are too often absent from their children's lives or disengaged as parents.

Considering the close conceptual connection of masculinity and character, it is particularly surprising that many commentators have attributed this 'crisis' to a lack of character among young men. In his poverty and life chances review Frank Field identifies a lack of responsibility, resilience and grit in many boys, young men and fathers and goes so far as to say it is a leading cause of poverty.¹³¹ Will Hutton describes an 'army of underperforming, unnecessarily idle and too often unemployed young men' developing out of a collective lack of ambition and motivation.¹³²

There are more and less sensible explanations for this supposed decline. Many remind us that the 'crisis', far from a new phenomenon, simply marks a timeless anxiety towards young men. Certainly, a look into the past reassures us that a lack of motivation among young men is nothing particularly new:

A lazy youth becomes a burden to those parents, whom he ought to comfort, if not support. But you can no more rouse them, with all of their fine arguments, than you can a log. There they lie, completely enchained by indolence... Business tires him; reading fatigues him; the public service interferes with his pleasures. Ask him what he has done with his morning – he cannot tell you; for he has lived without reflection, and almost without knowing whether he has lived at all!¹³³

A depressingly small number have attributed the gaps to the relative success of women as opposed to men's failures. Between 1994 and 2003, the number of male students at university rose by less than 1 per cent a year, while the numbers of female students rose by 42 per cent. Could it be that young women are more motivated students because they are more aware of how much of a privilege it is to be there?¹³⁴ Some on the fringes even claim that men's struggles are a direct result of women's liberation.

The majority thinks that the growing gaps have more to do with the 'feminisation' of our schools and economy. They argue that our education system is biased towards the 'female brain' and that we have fashioned education so that it suits girls better, with more of an emphasis on coursework than exams. On this account, boys are struggling because we prize the 'naturally feminine' ability to write and communicate well over the more masculine acquisition of knowledge and hard facts. The same argument has been applied to shifts in the economy from manufacturing to services that have led to increased demand for skills in communication, multitasking and customer service over capabilities such as physical strength, and an ability to cope in dangerous working environments. It seems that 'feminine' qualities are growing in demand.

But can it really be true that boys and men are simply hard-wired to be less good communicators? Studies abound attesting to the naturally different strengths and weaknesses between the sexes.¹³⁵ At first glance, it is difficult to argue with these findings, as they are captured at such an early age. But humans are incredibly impressionable, particularly in the early years and there is much evidence to suggest that gender norms are at least partially responsible for even these early differences. If little girls spend their pre-school years playing with dolls, barbies and tea sets, and little boys spend their time playing with trucks, building blocks and footballs, is it really surprising that we would see a corresponding difference in the development of social skills between them?

In Sebastian Kraemer's 'fragile male' thesis, he notes the extent to which male foetuses and newborns are consistently more vulnerable than their female counterparts, as evidenced through their higher death rates and greater reaction to maternal stress or drug abuse. He suggests that parents' gendered attitudes about their sons could 'amplify [this] pre-existing biological disadvantage'.¹³⁶ In other words, early developmental differences between girls and boys, for example boys being more likely to suffer from developmental disorders like reading delay and hyperactivity¹³⁷ and twice as likely to have conduct and oppositional disorders, may be down to differences in both

biology and care.¹³⁸ Social prejudice that assumes boys must be, or must be made, more resilient than girls, perversely may lead to them becoming less resilient as a result of their harsher early upbringing. As made clear by Sebastian himself in the last chapter, empathy, self-confidence and resilience is developed through trusted, loving care from a parent. But if parents treat infant boys in even subtly harsher ways than girls, it may exacerbate their already more fragile temperaments, leading to a less trustful and communicative, although perhaps more self-reliant, character. Sebastian calls this adding ‘social insult to biological injury’.¹³⁹

The burgeoning study of neuroscience has thrown up thousands of findings on the truth behind our gendered brains. It is tempting to equate science with fact – after all it is hard to argue with an MRI. But the greatest finding of neuroscience so far has been to show us the overwhelming plasticity and malleability of the human brain. What we once assumed was hard wired or genetically ingrained in us, we now see is shaped and responsive to our environment. Although the evidence has only been forthcoming relatively recently, some had cottoned on to the idea long ago:

*Of all difficulties which impede the progress of thought, and the formation of well-grounded opinions on life and social arrangements, the greatest is now the unspeakable ignorance and inattention of mankind in respect to the influences which form human character. Whatever any portion of the human species now are, or seem to be, such, it is supposed, they have a natural tendency to be: even when the most elementary knowledge of the circumstances in which they have been placed, clearly points out the causes that made them what they are.*¹⁴⁰

In what other ways are boys being limited by established views on intrinsically ‘male’ characteristics they should exhibit? The case of parents and their sons is relevant in all sorts of ways. Although parents are more and more accepting and encouraging of girls playing with ‘boy’ games and toys – sports, building blocks, trucks – the same is not so true the other way around. Cross-gender play has become far more acceptable for girls –

being a ‘tomboy’ – but not so much for boys, where masculinity is still more consciously developed by parents (for example, a flurry of news coverage in the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* in March 2011 followed the sensational story of a boy wearing a dress).

In one study, parents unanimously agreed, when asked, that it is important for both boys and girls to develop social skills. Yet, over a third were uncertain or would definitely not buy their son a doll to encourage this development. Boys as young as three years old are aware of this ambivalence, reporting that they thought their parents would be unhappy with them playing with a doll.¹⁴¹ It may not seem consequential, but most parents – even those who hold genuinely egalitarian views – are consciously and strategically thinking about their child’s gender performance, ‘crafting it to ensure not their children’s free agency but instead their structured and successful performance of gender’.¹⁴²

Between the 1960s and the 1990s there was a sustained period of reflection on and redefinition of what it means to be a woman. The result was a great overhaul of outdated and restrictive norms about what was appropriate or expected of women and a great broadening of opportunities. In many areas of life, it has become acceptable for girls and women to undertake traditionally ‘male’ activities or act in traditionally ‘male’ ways, but not vice versa. Understandably, there was no corresponding pressure to do so in the case of men, given their clearly privileged position in society. But the evidence associated with the ‘crisis’ suggests that the lack of similar scrutiny of men’s role in society is now really starting to be felt, and felt more keenly in already deprived parts of society.

The economic shift from manufacturing to services has hit the working classes hardest, with middle class professional jobs being less affected. It is in the same groups in society that these new skill sets are being required that the most rigid forms of masculinity are being perpetuated most strongly.¹⁴³ In the working – and more and more workless – classes, not only are men’s traditional, masculine skills no longer required, but men are also finding it harder to fulfil their traditional role as breadwinner and provider for their families because of job

scarcity and lack of sought-after skills. As social mobility has declined in recent decades, and the gap between rich and poor has steadily risen since the 1960s, men in the most deprived parts of society appear to be emasculated in both senses of the word.

Many young men are failing to fulfil their breadwinning role in the family, but are equally unlikely to take on caring responsibilities. The local authority of Knowsley, just outside the city limits of Liverpool, is one of the most deprived areas of the county with the highest levels of single mums. In addition to men's lack of involvement as carers in their children's lives, data from some areas of the country show that they are also less likely than their female counterparts to want to work.¹⁴⁴ The lack of father figures for boys is a nationally recognised concern, which affects boys in poorer households more. Interestingly, while a gendered attainment gap exists across all socio-economic groups, the gap between girls and boys is almost twice as large among those eligible for free school meals as among those who are not. What accounts for this difference?

Part of the answer to this question may be uncovered through a more focused deconstruction of contemporary ideas about masculinity. Failing to do so is having negative results for all of us. Sexual and domestic violence, a lack of father figures and role models for young boys, a skills gap exacerbating what are already the highest levels of unemployment in generations, and so on – these problems have many drivers. But part of the explanation comes down to the routine devaluing of the 'feminine' in our society and our failure to consider the effect of outdated masculine identities on the next generation of boys.

We are now beginning to cotton on to the value and importance of traditionally 'feminine' traits like interdependence, communication, empathy, commitment and so on. The kinds of challenges that young people face as a generation today certainly will require a mix of typically 'feminine' and 'masculine' character traits. The next generation should be encouraged and supported to develop the skills that will help them succeed. We should not allow outdated and constructed roles to stymie those opportunities.

4 Character in education

Policy in education in the last two decades, especially in schools, has been centred very much on the attainment of qualifications. Yet against this trend there has been rising interest in how education can build certain character traits, and in understanding the relationship between academic development and social and emotional wellbeing and skills. The essays in this chapter are testament to the very well established debate that now exists in the UK around how best to approach the issue of character and education. The interest in character in education is nothing new – state education in the UK was at its inception concerned with ‘building character’. The 1906 Board of Education’s Handbook states, ‘The purpose of the Public Elementary School is to form and strengthen character.’¹⁴⁵ In 1949 a concern with character was still prominent in government thinking on schools,¹⁴⁶ but the concept largely disappears from education policy after the early 1950s.

It is difficult to say what inspired the move away from character – there is no doubt that the emphasis on academic attainment was related to increased globalisation and the need to be competitive. But it seems that the very notion of school, rather than the home, being a place to develop character fell foul of politics and the move away from organised religion. In any case, the story of what happened to the teaching of character at school is not uniform. Among the more elite institutions developing social and communication skills has always been viewed as a core responsibility; but within the state sector teaching character skills arguably became tangled up in tackling behavioural and emotional and wellbeing issues, and came to be viewed by teachers as yet another burden placed on their shoulders.¹⁴⁷ Frankly, it came to be viewed as a luxury not an essential aspect of learning.

In the last five years this view has slowly changed in response to new evidence of the important role that character skills play in learning,¹⁴⁸ in particular when international surveys have highlighted that countries (such as Finland, Canada, Norway and Sweden) which have placed more emphasis on developing character skills, particularly among younger children, reap the benefits of greater aptitude and engagement among children in learning later on.¹⁴⁹

The contributions to this chapter attest to the claim that contemporary understandings of ‘character in education’ are not uniform. Today, there are roughly three contemporary approaches to building character in schools in Britain. The first is values-driven ‘character education’, a history of which is presented by James Arthur. This is where the values and virtues of good character are conveyed and discussed in clear, ethical terms in the classroom. The second strand of character in education, and one which Jean Gross explores in this chapter, is one where schoolchildren learn about social and emotional issues, informed by psychological methods and theory, usually under the banner of social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL), but also under the banner of ‘resiliency training’ (learning how to cope with and manage one’s emotions). The third kind of character education is broadly speaking one where the ‘ethos’ of the school builds character. Through such an approach character is nurtured through the explicit and implicit norms that are expressed across the gamut of a school’s activities and interactions – from assembly topics to behaviour in the corridors, to extracurricular activities and general pedagogy. Anthony Seldon’s contribution to this chapter discusses the importance of ethos, and how it relates to the previous two approaches as well.

Although all of these contemporary approaches can be put under a ‘character in education’ umbrella, they are often aiming at different things. The more psychological approaches concerned with the social and emotional aspects of learning do not have as their goal only the building of character. They also aim to increase wellbeing through boosting students’ ability to make and sustain positive relationships, and to manage stress.

But in so far as they teach self-reflection and self-regulation, they are concerned with character too. On the other hand, explicit ‘character education’, as learning about ethics and values, is more normative than psychological and concerned with discussing moral conduct.

The submissions to this chapter will map out most of the different ways in which character has been reintroduced into the curriculum. However, one aspect which is only touched on in Anthony Seldon’s contribution is the issue of how an understanding of character might inform general pedagogy: how can teaching methods *in general* develop character?

It is beyond the bounds of this preface to discuss this issue but future work should aim to investigate how pedagogies could be informed by what is known about how to build character. For example, pedagogies around educative play might be best for developing five- to seven-year-olds’ abilities to learn core skills in literacy, and empathic and social skills.¹⁵⁰ Or for those at Key Stage 4, more practical learning scenarios might be needed to aid the learning of mathematical skills at the same time as imparting character capabilities in self-direction and application.¹⁵¹

The difficult but exciting challenge is to create pedagogies that integrate the development of core ‘academic’ skills with the development of character capabilities. We simply note here that only a few pioneers, such as the Studio Schools Trust, have embarked on the road to meeting this challenge. We hope that more will follow, for something that seemed so natural to educationalists in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century cannot be impossible in the twenty-first century.

Should character be ‘taught’ through the curriculum or ‘caught’ through a school’s ethos?

Jean Gross

Education expert David Hargreaves once described two components of the school curriculum – the ‘taught’ and the ‘caught’. The taught curriculum is the overt subject matter; the caught is the implicit learning that pupils absorb from the school environment and the behaviours unconsciously modelled by adults. Traditionally character-building at school sat firmly in the ‘caught’ category: resilience learned through cold showers, respect through disciplinary procedures, responsibility through house systems, determination through valiant struggles on the playing fields of England.

It is certainly true that contemporary equivalents of these practices continue to make a significant contribution to character development. For example, schools where older pupils take a defined role in buddying younger ones, where ‘friendship stops’ in playground encourage children to notice anyone standing alone and sweep them up into their games, where restorative justice practices mean that pupils have to confront the consequences of their actions and make reparation, and where learning involves pupils setting themselves their own stretching goals and being mentored to find ways to cope with setbacks.

So far, so obvious. Schools help build character through their everyday policies and practices. What is more open to dispute is whether there should also be a taught element in what they do. I argue that what can be ‘caught’ alone is not sufficient, and that curriculum reforms under way in this country and elsewhere should include explicit taught components which build resilience, determination, application, agency and empathy.

Teaching character

In one primary school, children have been given a compass, scissors, paper and pens and asked to design a 'round tuit'. They ask what a round tuit is and what it is for. Their teacher says that she has heard that, when it is made, desks will be cleared out, paint-pots washed, bedrooms tidied and so on. The answer becomes apparent through the well-known saying that we will do something when we get 'round to it'... The children then make their 'tuits'. These are displayed in the classroom and used to prompt discussion whenever children say they will do something later that would be better done straight away.

At a secondary school, 12-year-olds discuss the difference between having an external locus of control, where you habitually attribute events to factors you cannot influence, and an internal locus of control, where you attribute them to your own actions or efforts. Later they sort cards into 'internal' or 'external' piles; the cards bear statements like 'I lost the game because I haven't been practising', 'He made me laugh so I got thrown out of class', 'I got good marks because the teacher likes me' and 'I got good marks because I've been working hard lately.'

In a third school a class of six-year-olds has listened to the story of *The Three Little Pigs* told from the wolf's perspective. The teacher has cut out large newspaper 'footprints'. Children are given scenarios to read out, first standing in a set of footprints representing one point of view, then moving to 'stand in the other person's shoes' and saying what they think might be the perspective of the second protagonist.

These examples come from resources available to schools in the UK through the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) curricular initiative. SEAL seeks to define the character capabilities that children should be helped to acquire by the time they leave school. It then suggests classroom activities for every age group from three to 14, which progressively develop these capabilities in a sequenced manner. It also suggests ways of embedding the learning within the traditional subject curriculum.

SEAL is only one initiative among many that seeks to develop character through the taught curriculum. It was developed in this country and has a particular fit with our

curriculum, but schemes from other countries are also widely used in the UK. They include Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Second Step, You Can Do It, Roots of Empathy, and the Penn Resiliency programme. Collectively, these various programmes go under the name social and emotional learning (SEL).

Is SEL a distraction from schools' core purpose?

There will always be debate about the purpose of schooling, but no one would disagree that one aim is to help young people acquire the educational qualifications they need for employment or further study.

So is time spent on any learning that does not lead directly to subject-based qualifications time wasted? Research suggests otherwise. Non-cognitive skills are almost as important as cognitive skills for achieving basic qualifications.¹⁵² There is 'a strong overall relationship between self-regulation and academic achievement that is not explained by prior attainment'.¹⁵³ Additionally, there is now a considerable body of research showing that discrete curriculum time spent in this area is a necessary feature of success. Initiatives that have relied solely on the caught curriculum do not work.¹⁵⁴

A recent US review of SEL programmes has found that when properly implemented they generate an 11 percentage point uplift to average attainment scores.¹⁵⁵ These are large gains, larger than those achieved by most school improvement initiatives. Given these findings, even those with the most utilitarian view of education would surely seek to embed social and emotional learning within the curriculum.

Character education for some, or an entitlement for all?

Research shows a negative correlation between social disadvantage and character capabilities. Importantly, it also shows that the curriculum-based approaches described here make more difference to disadvantaged pupils than to others.¹⁵⁶

This would suggest that explicit school-based character education has an important part to play in achieving policy goals around increased social mobility.

Perhaps then, as many have argued, since the majority of children and young people will acquire essential character capabilities in the home and community, work in schools should be restricted to the minority who have not had the appropriate opportunity to learn outside school? This is unhelpful. Even in the best-kept emotional landscapes of home and community, the opportunities that children have to acquire empathy, grit and responsibility need to be supplemented by opportunities within the school curriculum.

Here I want to draw on my own experience. At school I learned, for example, that failure of any kind was to be avoided. If I was not good at something, I gave it up as soon as I was allowed to. My experience was that of the young people whom student counsellors at Oxford and Cambridge are increasingly concerned about today, who 'arrive apparently confident, with four or five As at A-level, but lacking resilience, lacking the ability to cope if they do not get great success'.¹⁵⁷ Like them, and like other young people from supportive home backgrounds, I would like to have learned to be better at bouncing back after failure, at lifting a negative mood, at managing worries and avoiding uncontrolled angry outbursts. Who wouldn't?

As a middle-class parent I wanted, too, for my own children to have the chance, in the particular social context that a school provides, to learn about peer pressure and to practise the assertiveness skills that would enable them to withstand risky behaviours in adolescence. I wanted school, home and community to align in a shared effort to help my children

*learn how to communicate their feelings, set themselves goals and work towards them, interact successfully with others, resolve conflicts peacefully, control their anger and negotiate their way through the many complex relationships in their lives, today and tomorrow.*¹⁵⁸

I believed and believe that our internal environment, the way our brains work (or sometimes fail to work effectively when

flooded with adrenaline and cortisol), should be as much a legitimate subject of study as the physical environment we inhabit. I believed and believe that we should spend time learning to understand ourselves as well as undertake character studies for essays about the class novel.

Is SEL brainwashing?

Toby Young, of new schools fame, has expressed concern that schools as they currently stand 'are now required to indoctrinate children with positive social values'.¹⁵⁹ Others have claimed that SEL programmes are 'at best a waste of time and at worst a conspiracy to brainwash the nation's youth into conforming, undermine the nation's backbone and meddle with children's psyches by turning teachers into therapists'.¹⁶⁰

Much of this criticism is based on assumptions that SEAL and its ilk are about encouraging children to let their emotions hang out, or that they aim spuriously to boost their self-esteem. These assumptions are unfounded. SEL programmes teach children to be aware of how they are feeling in order to better manage strong emotions that can potentially overwhelm them. The focus is on staying in control. Aristotle had it right when he wrote, 'Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time – that is not easy.' I personally wish I had been taught this at school, instead of the message that all anger was inappropriate and to be avoided.

SEAL and other schemes like it do not prescribe values. They recognise that such prescription always raises the question 'whose values?', and the risk that pupils may reject learning which they see as imposed and moralistic. Instead, the schemes seek to develop the underlying dispositions that will enable children to make wise choices – choices that benefit others as well as themselves.

The key to this is developing empathy, the capacity to take another's perspective and feel both *for* and *with* them. I would argue that if empathy is present it is not necessary to teach a discrete set of values, although I know that other contributors to

this volume would disagree. Fully enacted, empathy means that if others experience happiness or hurt as a result of our actions, we will experience some part of that too. Reciprocity becomes the natural regulator of social interaction, without recourse to moral positions.

Summing up

In recent years, partly as a result of SEAL, an increasing number of schools have been undertaking staff training and developing their own curriculum to include explicit teaching of character capabilities. We stand now at a turning point. There is a risk that this work becomes polarised in the traditional versus progressive debate on education. This polarisation must be challenged. Teaching character is neither soft-focus emotional wallowing, nor a distraction from 'real learning'. It is, as I have argued, core to schools' purpose of effectively preparing pupils for gaining qualifications.

For those of us who believe that the purpose of education is somewhat broader than this, who 'want kids not just to succeed in tests, but succeed in the test of life',¹⁶¹ social and emotional learning or character education is even more vital. A letter from an anonymous Holocaust survivor makes the point far better than I can:

Dear Teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.

Children poisoned by educated physicians.

Infants killed by trained nurses.

Women and babies shot by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

Ultimately, if education is not about making our children more human, whatever is the point?

How do we build educational institutions of character?

Anthony Seldon

I have seen character building downgraded in significance in British schools, I believe, based on my own limited experience of 25 years in independent schools. It is no longer seen as fundamental to the purpose of schools, but rather as an incidental ‘add-on’ to the overwhelming and all-encompassing task of maximising exam passes at GCSE and A level.¹⁶² Exam passes are what government values in schools, this is how the press rates them, and it is increasingly how parents assess schools. One cannot blame teachers for this change, though heads are culpable, but they needn’t let their schools be so subordinated to the drumbeat emanating from government for exam grade improvement at all costs. Time given to ‘character building’ can often thus be a by-product of the need to have disciplined pupils who can maximise their exam performance, rather than an end to itself.

Many state schools struggle against the currents and place the building of good character at the heart of what they are trying to achieve, though I cannot speak directly about their experience. The formation of good character remains at the core, however, of independent schools. In part this emphasis derives from Christianity being a fundamental force in many of these schools, especially those founded with religious missions. The basic principles of Christianity, serving others, trying to make the most of one’s talents, and avoiding lying, unkindness and theft, fit naturally with the ethos of these schools. These virtues are not specific of course to Christianity, or to any religious faith, but they do represent values which will allow individuals, and communities, to flourish. This ethos is underpinned by religious services, which often occur regularly during the week. But even in independent schools that eschew religion, like University

College School in Hampstead, north London, character building is regarded as a central task.¹⁶³

The 'house system' is fundamental in helping to embed character building. Students are placed in houses, commonly 50 or 60 in number, with a housemaster or housemistress at their head. The focus is on serving the house and its members at every suitable opportunity, through an array of activities including participating in house teams for competitive sport, taking part in house debates, plays and concerts, and serving house charities. The system of house prefects sees older pupils looking after those who are younger, fulfilling supervisory and pastoral tasks, especially in boarding schools, which might otherwise be taken by adults. The housemaster or housemistress at the head is assisted by 'house tutors', for whom a primary purpose is the drawing out of good character traits. 'House spirit' as a subset of 'school spirit' while sounding old-fashioned, still features heavily.

Independent schools typically offer many other opportunities for character building, all of which can be available in state schools, and indeed are. The Duke of Edinburgh award scheme offers chances for the young to test themselves in a variety of challenging ways, including physical endurance.¹⁶⁴ Combined Cadet Forces give the young experience of leadership, teamwork, physical hardship activities and coping with stress and risk.¹⁶⁵ There are abundant opportunities for community services and volunteering, both in the local community and abroad.

At Wellington College, much of the focus on character building comes through the wellbeing or positive psychology programme, which focuses on the identification and development of character 'strengths'.¹⁶⁶ In charge of the programme is Ian Morris, who writes in his book *Teaching Happiness and Well-being in Schools*, 'character strengths are those personal qualities which allow us to achieve excellence: qualities such as perseverance, courage, belief in justice, loving and being loved, curiosity, humour, wisdom'.¹⁶⁷ In this approach, we lean heavily on the pioneering work of Professor Martin Seligman of Pennsylvania University.

Character building is further underpinned by the core objective of the school, which is to develop all 'eight aptitudes' of the young people: logical and linguistic, creative and physical, social and personal, spiritual and moral. In this endeavour, our guide is another US professor, Howard Gardner of Harvard University. The students set objectives each term under these eight headings, and they are reviewed with tutors regularly, all building up to a holistic model of education. The punishment system is focused increasingly around 'restorative justice', with the aim of helping offenders to understand the unkindness of their actions, rather than thumping them with harsh punishments, which are almost always counter-productive.

Everything on the topic of the role of character building revolves around the aim of education. If, as the government seems to be saying, it is all about exam passes and preparation for the world of work, then character building will have little place. If one has a more holistic model and says that schooling is not only for exams, but also to educate young people into the wonders of the universe, as well as to educate them to lead a happy, meaningful and valuable life, then the building of good character is central.

Is it appropriate to teach students about morality and values?

James Arthur

To begin a discussion using the moral language of character and values is to enter a minefield of conflicting definition and ideology. The only generally agreed position seems to be the acknowledgement that a person's character and values count for something and that education ought to contribute to helping young people develop good human qualities.¹⁶⁸ Character and values education are therefore umbrella terms to denote the teaching of a number of qualities such as civic virtues, respect, responsibility, empathy, caring, tolerance and service to others, and they are terms that are often interchangeable with civic education, moral education and citizenship education. They are consequently broad terms that signify no single teaching approach or agreed content. We are left in contemporary education with the often controversial questions of whether core values can be identified, justified and taught. The moral language of character and values has also become politicised with some believing that this kind of language is authoritarian in approach, anti-democratic and connected with a conservative mindset. The history of character and values education would suggest otherwise.

Nineteenth-century progressives used the term 'character' as an alternative to the moral lessons derived from Bible teaching. They adopted it to avoid conflict with religious-based moral education in schools. The Ethical Union (1886) and the Moral Instruction League (1897) were established by some of the most prominent liberal educational thinkers and philosophers of the day to disconnect religion from moral instruction and to challenge rote-learning in schools.¹⁶⁹ This secular movement was nonetheless aware of the need to uphold moral standards in society and the individual and to this end sought core values that it believed were apparent in the secular world. Indeed, values

began as part of the jargon of liberal progressive thinking and the term was introduced in the early 1900s from German sociology.¹⁷⁰ The rise of values rhetoric exactly corresponds to the decline of religion. By the 1920s a number of progressive organisations in education were promoting citizenship education that included character and values education.

By the 1960s progressive educationalists turned their attention to psychology and increasingly to an emphasis on individual rights and child-centred learning. The new emphasis was on individual autonomy, freedom, criticism and choice, and Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget dominated discussions of moral development.¹⁷¹ While these thinkers rightly acknowledged the multifaceted nature of human learning and development there was a preoccupation with individual rights, which valued freedom over any form of commitment. This in itself helped to undermine the capacity to form the convictions on which character and personal values must be based. Conservative thinkers responded by adopting the language of values and turned it against the progressives. There was a marked politicalisation of the words 'character' and 'values' with conservative thinkers focusing on the decline of cultural standards concerning the moral behaviour of young people. By the 1970s conservatives had already begun to talk about 'traditional values' in an attempt to evoke some golden age of moral public standards. Indeed, values were being used in a way that almost presumed the point of view of the right.¹⁷²

It was the American Democrats who first recognised that the right had effectively usurped the terms, and with the advent of communitarian thinking more liberal educationalists began to challenge the right's dominance over the V word. President Clinton organised a series of White House conferences on character building and declared, 'I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship.' Communitarianism emphasised the public virtues of citizenship, social responsibility, civility, duties and participatory democracy. As a political creed it was less interested in child-centred learning and autonomy and more interested in shared public responsibility. Communitarians were discontented with

the psychological approaches in moral education and sought a more robust moral content for the school curriculum. These Communitarian ideas found their way into New Labour thinking in the UK, particularly in the expectation that education contribute to the necessary 'restoration' of values in society by attending to moral education in schools.

The Labour Government in the late 1990s articulated a number of goals for the National Curriculum in England, which included ancient words such as 'virtues' and 'common good' together with a greater emphasis on duties and responsibilities. It also endorsed the previous Conservative Government's statement of values in education and the community, which was concerned with whether there were any values on which there was common agreement within society. The Labour Government believed that such agreed values existed and incorporated this statement of values into the National Curriculum in 1999. Two years later the Government published a green and white paper on education, which explicitly talked about schools helping to build character in the young, and connected this with the school's duty to develop good citizens. In this way, Labour attempted to recapture the V word and character for the progressives in education.¹⁷³ In so doing, Labour recognised that character and values are inseparable from the larger culture and that character is social in its constitution.

Any attempt to define character and personal values as simply enabling young people to better understand and function in their immediate surroundings is insufficient. Character and values are deeper than this. If virtues are considered to be good human qualities then the acquisition of these virtues ought to be a goal of education. The context (culture) will obviously influence the choice of virtues to teach. Capabilities and skills are important for character building, but they only partly constitute the means – we need to understand something of the ends in education. Children are as innately capable of developing character as they ever were. The liberal position on values and character often lacks a clear sense of the end – as Hunter says,

*We want character but without unyielding convictions; we want strong morality without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it.*¹⁷⁴

My own research in the field represents probably the largest study of character education in the UK to date, involving – formally and informally – responses from over 70,000 participants.¹⁷⁵ The research was mounted in the context of the relatively recent explosion of interest in the general area of values education – or more specifically ‘moral education’ – across the world. While the study of moral character has been of enduring interest to ethical theorists, the major proponent of character as a core moral concept was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. By contrast with most modern moral theories and theorists, Aristotle conceived moral development as the development of more than just reason: for him, moral growth as the development of character or ‘virtue’ involves cultivation of appropriate volition, emotion and conduct as well as reason. So, for Aristotle, moral education essentially involves the right training of emotions, feelings and appetites in the light of that wise reflection he termed *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’.¹⁷⁶ The rationale for my research follows Aristotle and more modern virtue and/or character ethicists in conceiving character education as a particular (broader) form of moral education. For the purposes of my research it construes character as:

- an interlocked set of personal values that normally guide conduct
- not a fixed set of personal values easily measured or incapable of modification
- a matter of choices about (good or bad) conduct that agents can shape in themselves and others

The major part of this research involved an extensive empirical investigation – by means of semi-structured group discussions or interviews and semi-structured individual and questionnaire surveys – of the thoughts on values and character education of young people in different parts of the UK, across the entire spectrum of formal education and beyond. It therefore covers children of nursery age, the earlier and later stages of primary education, secondary education, further education, tertiary education and into employment. A subset of the tertiary education sample included trainee teachers, whose importance as educators of future generations of children and young people should be evident.

The research constantly asked whether it was the business of either government or schools – not least in a culturally plural liberal democracy in which individual autonomy is often promoted as a core value – to determine the values and character of its individual citizens. Nevertheless, while recognising that families and communities have a right and a role to play in such determination, we conclude that government, schools and educational policy cannot avoid a normative role in the formation of the attitudes and values of citizens and pupils and that value neutrality is not a serious option. Teachers are constantly sending moral messages to children in the language they use: be honest; do not cheat or steal; have the courage to do the right thing; treat others with respect; be tolerant and accepting of differences; use good manners, not bad language; be considerate of the feelings of others; do not threaten, hit or hurt anyone; consider the consequences; be accountable for your words, actions and attitudes; set a good example for others; play by the rules; be kind; help people in need; cooperate; obey laws and rules; and much more besides.

Many social and educational theorists seem to have agreed that education and schooling cannot be value-free and must therefore have an influence for either ill or (hopefully) good on students and pupils – perhaps at least through the individual discipline and responsibility they strive to promote. It was also clear from our research that interviewed teachers largely agreed with this and took their roles as moral exemplars very seriously.

On the other hand, pupils did not themselves see either teachers or schools (apart from the opportunities for socialising with peers) in such positive light. They did not generally (despite differences at different stages) regard teachers as good moral role models or as influences on character formation and often seemed to find them unsupportive.

Taking the view that education and schools are inevitably the most important moral influences on the young after the family, we believe that teacher education and the school curriculum need to be developed in ways that may enable more effective development of character and values. Understanding character involves a large number of assorted concepts: values, morality, virtues, duties and principles. However, there is no consensus either on how these should be fitted into a single system of thought or on the practical matter of what should be included within each. Moreover, there is no agreement on how education does or should impact on these things.

5 Collective character

As the recession slows economic growth and the Coalition Government works to scale back the welfare state to reduce our rising debt, there has been a renewed interest in the power of ‘civil society’ to step in and ‘fill the gap’. What exactly is ‘civil society’? It consists in the formal and informal voluntary and social organisations and institutions that do not fall into the category of government or commercial institutions. This includes families, neighbours and neighbourhoods, third sector organisations, social enterprises and cooperatives, faith-based organisations, community and other associative groups, and social networks. These are the kinds of free association that Alex de Tocqueville marvelled at when he visited post-revolutionary America.¹⁷⁷

It seems to be a perpetual worry that the cohesion of civil society is being eroded and that goodwill between citizens and neighbours is evaporating (although in the UK volunteering rates are in fact comparatively high¹⁷⁸). Today, people cite many culprits as causes of this perceived erosion: an unbridled free market corroding the character of citizens; a sprawling welfare state sapping adults of motivation and personal responsibility; the decline of civility and ‘fraternity’ resulting from our highly mobile and relatively rootless society; and a social and cultural liberalisation that has led to the celebration of ‘immoral’ ways of life.

To address these fears, today’s politicians have developed new, aspirational terms for the kind of civil society they want to help create: David Cameron calls it the Big Society, Ed Miliband, the Good Society. Both philosophies emphasise the importance of renewing neighbourliness, free association and cooperation, but have different conceptions of what went wrong in the first place. The Big Society narrative focuses on the detrimental

effects of an over-zealous welfare state; the Good Society narrative puts more blame on markets and deregulation. Some, such as ‘Red Tory’ Phillip Blond, just blame everything: markets, welfare, cultural liberalisation, the list goes on. But regardless of what is blamed, politicians across the spectrum seem to agree today that there *is* such a thing as society, contrary to Margaret Thatcher’s famous claim that there was none (whether or not that is exactly what she meant). Moreover, it seems a necessity for any contemporary politician to value the mosaic of public goods that constitute civil society, and for policies to be in line with the development of such goods.

Within this context a focus on ‘character’ offers an alternative narrative, which helps to explain the ways in which the state and the market can and sometimes do erode civil society. Bigger and Better societies require citizens who are engaged with one another, pro-social, cooperative, creative and capable of taking the initiative, as Ed Mayo explains in this chapter. But the rhetorical resurgence of the importance of community, volunteering, sharing and cooperation has yet to translate into a coordinated policy vision: how do we create this type of society? And as Matt Grist discusses, creating citizens of character will require simultaneously *more* and *less* involvement of the state. He argues that the state can do harm both by constraining character through enforcing too much bureaucracy and by allowing it to wither through not nurturing community capacity. In the final contribution to this chapter, Terry Ryall argues that the right type of involvement from the state will foster the kinds of informal learning and socialising environments that will forge character in the young and sustain it in the old.

A thriving civil society requires citizens of character, but building this kind of society requires us to take a closer look at the environments that shape people’s everyday behaviour, habits and values. Before turning to the contributions to this chapter it is worth briefly exploring some of the central issues around how environments are shaped.

Self-interest and altruism

Evolutionary theory would suggest that human nature is inherently selfish. As Harvard professor Nicholas Christakis and University of California professor James Fowler point out: ‘If you are the most selfish person in your group, then presumably you would be most likely to survive.’¹⁷⁹ Economists adopted this view of humans as inherently selfish through the development of the concept of *homo economicus* or ‘rational man’. This definition of human beings describes narrowly self-interested creatures making decisions based on calculated, rational judgements (cost–benefit analyses). However, these narrow views of human nature miss out our natural propensity towards kindness and reciprocity. Much evidence from social psychology, network theory and game theory suggests, on the contrary, that the evolutionary roots of cooperation mean it was the survival technique *par excellence*: working together in groups was a better assurance of survival than striking out on your own.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, experiments by Christakis and Fowler revealed that people are just as likely to help each other as they are to help themselves.¹⁸¹

In reality, most of us, it seems, are more likely to approach life motivated by a sense of reciprocal altruism, in other words, to engage in behaviour that is both self-interested *and* interested in others (we tend to reciprocate altruism unthinkingly unless we feel too many people are benefitting from altruistic acts while not carrying them out themselves).¹⁸²

As we’ve seen in previous chapters, the foundations for reciprocity are set in the very earliest weeks and months of life, assuming that some basic conditions are in place.¹⁸³ Yet reciprocal behaviour will not happen as a matter of course – it requires an environment that supports and nurtures it, and various strategies to be adopted. For example, if you want someone to cooperate with you, one strategy for achieving this is to promise future cooperation with that person.¹⁸⁴ Working together with others, the giving of gifts, the sharing of insecurities between friends and so on are all acts that result in benefits, down the line, to the giver and receiver. It seems that reciprocal behaviour is good for us in the long run too. Studies show that regular volunteering and acts of generosity and

kindness tend to lead the giver to greater happiness and a longer and happier life.¹⁸⁵

Given that both selfishness and selflessness seem to be part of our nature, it is surprising that policy makers have historically given so little thought to the environments that will support our more altruistic sides. Traditionally, they have tended to revert to the narrow *homo economicus* model of human nature. There could be many benefits from using a broader conception of human nature when considering how to set up our social and economic institutions. For example, peer pressure – also known as social proof¹⁸⁶ or the herd effect¹⁸⁷ – has considerable consequences for altruistic acts. Studies of charitable giving among bank employees show that employees tend to donate more money when they work alongside generous colleagues.¹⁸⁸ According to Mark Earls, this is because ‘we do what we do because of other people and what they seem to be doing’.¹⁸⁹ Interestingly, in game theory experiments run by economists, students studying economics are less likely to be generous than their peers – another example of how cues in our environment (or in this case from academic textbooks) lead us to make different choices – this time making us more self-interested.¹⁹⁰

While the phenomenon of reciprocal altruism is now well recognised and widely discussed, studies of how it spreads are newer and provide exciting early findings. This evidence suggests that creating environments that support cooperation, kindness and the development of good character can have exponential returns. The work of leading social scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler is of particular interest because they point to the occurrence of ‘play-it-forwards’ altruism. In other words, when someone is treated well by another, they are more likely to go on to treat other people well into the future.¹⁹¹ In the words of Fowler: ‘One act of kindness can spread to dozens and in some cases hundreds of people we don’t know and have never met.’ Similar findings exist in other areas, for example, if an employee works in a trusting environment, she is more likely to trust others and to continue trusting others even in her future workplaces.¹⁹² Much research reveals that if people feel others will not return their altruistic

behaviour, they will go back to more selfish, self-interested behaviour.¹⁹³ But even this may not necessarily hold in all cases, for example, in the case of blood donation where the mass majority of people give blood for people they will never meet.¹⁹⁴

It is hard to construct a policy for altruism, but policy makers can at least start to think about how to create environments where it might flourish. Much of this will need to be at the local level. Councils should think about how to provide the means for people to do things for each other, through schemes like the Southwark Circle where older people provide support and comfort to one another.¹⁹⁵ But there may be a case for national franchises along the lines of Big Brother Big Sister in the USA and Germany. This is a national level network of mentoring programmes run by local people who want to support at-risk youth in their area through the education system. The National Civil Service is another example of a countrywide programme that has the potential to increase altruism. Once there is a strongly woven fabric of such civil society institutions we may reach a tipping point as a society where reciprocal altruism becomes the norm paving the way to that elusive 'Big' and 'Good' society that we yearn for.

Political economy

Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task!

EM Forster, *Howard's End*

Arguably, as we move towards an ever more globalised society, the importance of cooperative and reciprocally altruistic interactions becomes even more important. The dominant narrative of the twentieth century – at least in the West – was that markets and economic structures have their own efficient, rational nature, working mostly to the exclusion of any kind of central oversight or management. The idea is summed up by

Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', which creates a self-regulating market out of the hubbub of conflicting individual interests. But in fact the rise of modern markets came from the selling off of lands and resources that were once commonly owned. These shifts away from common ownership and towards private property were the result of human intervention, not something that arose directly out of some natural rite. It has both shaped our character – by rewarding competitive spirit, entrepreneurialism, self-reliance and even greed – and made character more important – in that the 'binding forces' of shared locale and shared ownership declined.

In a Templeton Foundation sponsored online conversation about whether the free market corrodes character, John Gray writes:

*A historical perspective is useful because it enables us to see that economic systems are living things. In real time, free markets rarely work according to the models constructed by economists. There are booms and bubbles, busts and crashes. It is only in economics textbooks that markets are self-regulating.*¹⁹⁶

The set-up of our market system shapes our actions but also leads to more deeply ingrained habits, and even values about what is important. For example, as Marilyn Waring pointed out in the 1980s, the things we choose *not* to count in our international system of national accounts does a huge amount to shape our conception of what is valuable.¹⁹⁷ She asked, why, for example, does a tree cut down and into planks have an economic value, but one standing rooted in the ground and producing oxygen and shade count for nothing? Why does a man sitting in a nuclear bomb control room with his hand hovering over a red button command a salary, but a woman walking miles every day to fetch water for her family receive nothing? How do these decisions shape our values and what are the consequences?

The fallout of the global financial crisis post-September 2008 prompted a period of worldwide reflection about the culture of risk that deregulated markets brought about and the irresponsible behaviour that resulted from the supreme ease of

borrowing. Much of the media response to the crisis focused on how the markets supported the side of our nature that makes decisions based on impulses like greed and fear. On 23 October 2008, the *Guardian* ran an article entitled ‘Fear is the new mindset in the irrational world of finance’ with journalist Julia Kollewe reporting that

*major stock market trends often begin and end with periods of frenzied buying or selling. They are thought to reflect herding behaviour that is often driven by emotion – greed in the bubbles, fear in the crashes.*¹⁹⁸

The fallout of the crisis marked the return of a language of responsibility, ethics and accountability. In mid-October, the *Sun* ran an article entitled ‘Brown wants more ethics’ where Brown wrote:

*I know that we do not live by markets alone. I have long understood that markets rely on values that they cannot generate themselves. Values as important as treating people fairly, acting responsibly, co-operating for the benefit of all.*¹⁹⁹

As soon-to-be President Obama’s chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel put it: ‘you never want a serious crisis to go to waste’, pointing out what a crucial time the financial crisis could be for genuine reform.²⁰⁰ What would a character-based approach to political economy look like, one that is based on enhancing the capabilities – internal and external – that support the values Gordon Brown talks about? Small steps are being taken in the direction of taking into account the value of ‘externalities’ – the non-economic effects of economic activity such as environmental and social harm. But surely it is time that markets and the state – the prime holders of economic power – operated under the rubric that everything must serve the nurturing of civil society? After all, it is within the context of such free association that our character is best nurtured and expressed. And as the MPs’ expenses scandal in the UK and the worldwide financial crash tell us, it is character that ultimately underpins a healthy state and a healthy market.

Collective character

This report has explored the concept of character as a set of skills that help individuals make a success of themselves and a set of guiding values that help them live ethical lives. But character is just as much about groups and institutions as it is about individuals. If we want to build a big or good society, nurturing the free association of group activity will be a crucial aspect. Far from achieving this through the withdrawal of the state, smart intervention will be required to create the kinds of structured environments – whether in relation to the economy or social institutions – that support cooperation and responsibility.

Are we naturally cooperative?

Ed Mayo

There is a case for saying that the ability to cooperate is the most basic and fundamental trait of character we have, as without it our shared line as a species on Darwin's tree of evolution would have been cut short many, many years ago.

From our early ancestors until today, think of being cooperative as being ready to scratch my back if I scratch yours. It is a good metaphor. For non-human primates, grooming is the number one social activity. One in every five minutes awake is spent scratching backs.

For us, it extends more widely through tools of language and social institutions of family and community. It takes 13 million calories to rear a modern human from birth to maturity and, as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy puts it, the capacity of our line of apes to develop patterns of 'cooperative parenting' has been essential for success.²⁰¹

Being cooperative, of course, does not mean being a wuss. Our cooperation is typically contingent, as most of us stop collaborating if we are being taken for a ride and we may hit back. Punishing those who cheat us is typically helpful in sustaining patterns of cooperation as studies have shown.

Most often, we cooperate in order to achieve something that we can't do alone. If evolution and football have anything in common, it is that fitness counts and competition is played out between different models of cooperation.

However, football is a 'zero sum game', where one person's gain is another person's loss – one nil and you have a winner and a loser. In non zero sum games, both parties can do better working together than if they are at each other's throats. In his book *Nonzero*, Robert Wright argues that societies that are better able to organise themselves will socially, economically and militarily dominate societies that are less capable at creating

cooperative structures. Throughout history, ‘it is the competition to co-operate that drives social innovation’.²⁰²

Some take this idea one step further. If a propensity to cooperate is successful in evolutionary terms and innate to human character, then perhaps it is reciprocity that underpins our moral codes. Chomsky, after all, asserts that children have a natural capacity to embrace grammar and language. Marc Hauser extends this by suggesting that we are born with a capacity to understand the world through an ethical lens – what Adam Smith termed ‘sympathy’.²⁰³

Michael Tomasello has put this to the test with very young children, to see if it holds for our nature and not just our nurture. Drop something in front of a two-year-old, he finds, and she is likely to pick it up for you. This is not just learned behaviour, he argues. Young children are naturally cooperative.²⁰⁴

So what is cooperative character? And do you have it?

According to Elinor Ostrom, economics Nobel Prize winner, cooperative behaviour involves:

- learning from interactions with others about the extent to which other people will cooperate with you
- learning to recognise those who are trustworthy in cooperation and those who are not
- cooperating with others that you trust
- building a reputation for being trustworthy (including resisting the temptation for short-term gain over opportunities for long-term benefit)
- punishing those who have cheated or not reciprocated in the past
- using a time frame that extends beyond the immediate present²⁰⁵

If that sounds like being fair, perhaps it is no surprise. As Geoff Mulgan points out, these characteristics

are intimately bound up with morality and with our fundamental relationships with the world around us. Seen through this lens, the morality of cooperation is about both what we do and what we don't do. On the plus side, it involves the ability to empathise with others, putting our egos in their

*proper place, and feeling a sense of connectedness and responsibility to others. The converse is that to be a good co-operator you have to avoid many of the deadly sins – like pride and greed – and learn the self-discipline that’s needed to restrain impulsive behaviour, anger and violence, and the tendency we all have to be oversensitive to criticism or neglect.*²⁰⁶

We are all born, Mulgan says, with the ability to cooperate, just as we are all (or nearly all) born with the ability to sing or to run. And, as with singing or running, our innate abilities need to be cultivated and trained if we are to become good cooperators. Cooperation requires the formation, through various forms of socialisation, of associative character.

The challenge is that this is not quite how character has been understood in recent times. For the past 40 years, it has all been seen as, well... too 1960s. Getting on has meant getting ahead of those around you. We now live in what is euphemistically called a ‘winner takes all’ economy – in other words outright inequality justified as incentives for progress.

It is not just in economic thinking that competition has won out, but in educational practice too – with tests, qualifications, selection and rewards oriented towards individual achievement. Employers complain that young people are coming into the labour market lacking the soft skills of team work and emotional resilience they need.

The other curriculum young people pick up is the world of commercial culture. As Agnes Nairn and I chart in our book *Consumer Kids*, children spend over twice the time in front of screens than they do in the classroom, and many of the commercial values of ‘the winner takes all’ culture are subtly imbibed and spill over into the relationships they have with friends and family.²⁰⁷ As Lily Tomlin once said, ‘The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat.’

It is not enough therefore to talk about character as if we can simply mould the individual to improve the world around them. Cooperation is a quintessentially social characteristic. We have to create cultures of cooperation that can encourage and support such characteristics. For example, SUMA Wholefoods in Yorkshire represents one of the most radical experiments in

workplace democracy anywhere in Europe. For SUMA, a cooperative culture is about behaviour. By focusing on peer feedback and staff (or members in their structure) development, they can avoid some of the costly performance and management oversight systems that other businesses carry. For SUMA members cooperation is about the 'habits of the heart', as Robert Bellah put it.

The UK can learn from other countries, not least Asia, which practises extensive economic cooperation. Almost one in four workers in the UK (23 per cent) say they are not engaged in their workplace – a figure that is one-third higher than in comparable countries such as Canada, USA, Germany and the Netherlands. The result, proven time after time in research, is that these businesses lose out because they are less productive and less competitive. The annual economic cost of low cooperation in the UK now stands at £36 billion.

While some fear that we are turning over our healthcare to American-style enterprises, in Japan 120 healthcare cooperatives have emerged with three million members, running hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation centres. The model turns healthcare on its head. The cooperatives serve small groups of ten to 20 people, the Han, who support each other on issues of health and wellbeing, turning to caregivers and health professionals where they need support to turn their commitments to action. There is a different economic mindset too – focusing on cost prevention rather than income maximisation.

The way that our national income is going, there is little future for Britain anyway in low cooperation. The new sources of value relate to knowledge, innovation and connectivity. In his recent economics and business bestseller *The Origin of Wealth*, Eric Beinhocker made five times as many references to cooperation as he did to competition. The new views of economics, he noted, see that 'cooperation is as vital an ingredient in economic development as "survival of the fittest" to individualism'.²⁰⁸

There are 800 million people worldwide who are members of cooperative enterprises. In turn, they employ over 100 million people. That is more than all multinational companies put

together. They range from helping with everyday needs, such as food and shelter, through to people banding together for savings and loans. It is no surprise perhaps that the cooperative business sector, born in early nineteenth century Rochdale (or Fenwick, for Scots), is also making a comeback here.

In fact, cooperative ethical values are as good a checklist of cooperative character as you can find: being open, being honest, taking responsibility and caring for others. These values are now in use in over 100 schools in the UK that have converted over the last four years to cooperative status – wanting an institutional form that mirrors the individual and group character they are trying to foster.

Looking forward, many of the key issues we face as a society are ‘non-zero’ challenges, in which the characteristics of hyper-competitive materialism are not going to be much help – if indeed they ever were. As Oliver James argued in *The Psychology of Co-operation*:

*with the ever-increasing threat of ecological catastrophe and the growing risks to the world economy posed by deregulated globalisation, the need for cooperation has never been greater. But quite apart from our desire to avoid destroying the planet or economic meltdown, I offer another reason to position cooperation at the heart of our political economy: it will mean we are more likely to live sane, fruitful lives.*²⁰⁹

Woody Allen once decried the culture of relentless competition as not just ‘dog eat dog’, but worse too – ‘dog doesn’t return dog’s answerphone message’.

And if we return to our starting point in evolution, the idea that dogs just want to eat dogs is poor natural science in the first place. If anything dogs, in common with other social carnivores such as lions and wolves, and eusocial insects (bees, ants, termites), will cooperate with their own kind. In terms of character and in terms of culture, it is good to remember that the world around us is not, as a default, dog eat dog. It is, instead, a dog helps dog world.²¹⁰

How do we build character in our communities?

Matt Grist

Anyone who works in social policy will recognise the following concerns, which often bubble to the surface in conversation: that the institutions of society – families, schools, community groups – are too weak; that some people have become excluded from ‘mainstream society’ and in the process too dependent on the state for support; and that people need to become better equipped to sort problems out within their own communities – communities must become more ‘resilient’.

One might see the solution to this cluster of concerns as ‘building the Big Society’, although I would rather avoid that term. What we really need to do is develop supportive environments that will build the character of our communities, and of the individuals within them.

Out and about, one also hears another set of concerns: that no one has any common sense any more; that there is too much bureaucracy and an erosion of people’s ability to use their own judgement (that we have a ‘tick-box’ culture where ‘computer says no’ is a standard reply); and that many professions have become mired in impenetrable jargon and mechanical processes.

One might see the solution to these concerns as ‘building the post-bureaucratic age’, although I would, also, prefer not to use that term. I would prefer to say that we need to make sure bureaucratic processes don’t corrode people’s and institutions’ character.

I have chosen two themes from David Cameron’s 2011 election campaign not to belittle them – I actually think they identify areas of British life that require attention, even though I disagree with some of his policies aimed at tackling the problems they encapsulate. Rather, my concern is to show how focusing on character can yield a productive and coherent approach to these connected issues. It is also to tell a positive story about Britain –

that as a nation we have a great wealth of historical examples of character to draw on – but also plenty of character in the here and now.

I want to talk about character in terms of the following concepts – *responsibility*, *trust* and *commitment*:

- *Responsibility* – A person of character will take it upon herself to tackle the problems she faces and adapt to new situations. She will be able to exercise judgement across a diversity of situations but will also be unafraid to correct herself when wrong. In short, a person of character takes responsibility for using her initiative and for her obligations to others, but also for her mistakes.
- *Trust* – A person of character can be trusted to do the right thing, to the best of her ability, whenever situations test her out. Someone of character can be trusted to be a good friend, to be honest, generous and just when the going gets tough.
- *Commitment* – Someone of character will wherever possible stay the course and apply themselves to a task until it is completed. Where other people are concerned someone of character will commit herself to relationships and not jump ship without good reason. She will, to the best of her ability, put the long-term wellbeing of others and herself above transitory desire and whim.

I do not propose these as replacing the character capabilities outlined in the introduction to this report. Rather, these concepts identify qualities that manifest in and between people who develop such capabilities and are of great importance to building the character of communities. Just to be clear: the qualities that underpin these concepts are learned and honed through experience and dependent on an immense amount of support from others. They are not some kind of purely innate traits handed out by nature. They are very largely the result of the kind of lives we lead. In addition, I would like to stress that good character is in a way an ideal – something we aspire to but don't always fully achieve.

These qualities can belong not only to individuals but also to institutions and communities. The character of both of the latter will be expressed in an 'ethos' – the implicit norms that

bind people in groups together. A strong community, for example, can take responsibility for its decisions and mistakes; can be trusted to ensure the right collective objectives are prioritised; and can commit itself to supporting the unfortunate, unwell and struggling within its midst.

With individuals, communities and institutions of character, we can see how David Cameron's themes of the Big Society and 'post-bureaucracy' might become reality. With high levels of responsibility, trust and commitment, people can take more responsibility for themselves, and be trusted to use their own judgement wherever possible.

But is all this talk about character hopelessly naive? Don't we live in 'broken Britain'? I don't want to gloss over many of the entrenched social problems found in British society, but it seems to me that we don't. It appears to me that Britain's got character, and in all sorts of hidden places. So Cameron's analysis is right in so far as it identifies impediments to letting character flourish – too much dependency and too much bureaucracy do hold back individuals and communities. But the point is not to focus too heavily on what is broken, but on where barriers could be removed so that Britain's character can shine through. I now offer a concrete example to this end.

The example comes from some fieldwork we did for this inquiry. We visited a pilot scheme in Southend run by the charity Youth at Risk and Southend Council. The scheme was called Motivate the Estate.²¹¹ It involved volunteers from the local area who underwent a few days training with Youth at Risk to become personal coaches, and who were then assigned a young person from their community. This young person – the 'coachee' – was someone experiencing difficulties who would benefit from advice, guidance and support from an adult. However, before being assigned to a volunteer coach, the young people went away for a week on a residential break. The break offered activities designed to bring about moments of self-reflection and self-realisation. This kind of 'activity break' is often scoffed at as treating undeserving tearaways to holidays. But from what I can gather it was effective as a spur to personal change.

One young woman described climbing up to a death slide

and standing there before descending thinking: ‘This is the first time I’ve done something hard and dangerous all on my own.’ Another young man described how at the time he detested the activity break. But he said that afterwards he realised he had learned something important about himself – that he could get on with others and succeed in tasks. As well as adventure activities the young people also took part in group discussions. After one such discussion, they scratched on to a piece of wood what they most wanted to change about their lives, before throwing the wood on the fire and watching it burn. One young woman described thinking this ‘ritual’ was stupid at the time, but then went on to describe how it played on her mind more and more as time passed, slowly taking on greater meaning.

These examples tell us several important things about interventions with young people aimed at building character. First, that practical experience is important. It is *doing things*, like climbing to the top of a death slide, that often makes people realise what they are capable of. Second, that change does not occur immediately and often works away beyond the ken of consciousness – so that at first, throwing a piece of wood into a fire seemed stupid to a young woman’s conscious mind. But over time, the act took on meaning not originally foreseen. Finally, things that one doesn’t like at first can come to play a positive role as time passes, so that building character is about being challenged as well as supported. Such was the example of the young man who detested the adventure week but came to appreciate it later.

After the young people on the Motivate the Estate pilot returned from their week away they were assigned to volunteer coaches. The main theme of the relationships of the young people we met on this programme with their coaches was one of character – not only their own, but of the adults in their lives. These young people were, to varying degrees, unable to benefit properly from relationships with *committed, responsible and trusted* adults.

The volunteer coaches we met were all absolutely committed to their coachees, all going over and above the call of duty. According to the guidelines of the programme, meeting

more than once a week with a coachee was not to be expected. Yet the coaches told us how they often met their coachees every day. One coach told us that for a month or so her coachee had phoned her at all times of day and night:

I wanted to show that I was committed to her, that I would always be there. I knew she was testing me to see if I was committed, and I wanted to show that I was. Everyone else in her life had failed her.

The coachee in question had been truanting from school for three years and while her life was far from perfect when we met her, she was back in school and determined to turn her life around. Her coach described how difficult things had been for both of them, but how important it had been not to give up.

Another coach had invited his coachee to spend time with his family – even though this was against guidelines. It was summer and the coachee in question spoke of how he had played basketball with the coach's son and generally 'hung out' with his family. He said that he had noticed, after a week or so, how he had started to say please and thank you, and to be 'nice' to people. He said he had just 'picked this up' from being at his coach's house, and that now, reflecting back, he realised he'd never been around people acting 'nicely' before.

These examples are heartening in that they illustrate how communities are capable of exercising and building character. But it is worth bringing out several principles that are at work here, some of which speak to David Cameron's thinking on building the Big Society and the 'post-bureaucratic age'.

First of all, the Motivate the Estate pilot we visited worked so well because it was based on harnessing people's 'natural talents'. So many of the interactions between young people at risk and professionals are based on language and gestures that are deliberately emptied of emotion. Such deliberate professionalism has good reasons behind it but does tend to alienate young people. The coaches in Southend had avoided such alienation by acting with the kind of character they might show to a friend or relative – one based on personal trust, commitment and responsibility, but above all human warmth.

The coaches were not applying some technical procedure such as cognitive behavioural therapy or motivational interviewing. Rather, they were adapting the way they would naturally act in the general run of things. Trusted to be responsible and committed in this natural way, they were all expert at knowing when to be warm and affectionate, and when to be more stern and distant – they were expert at exercising their own characters and the young people really responded to this.

The second principle at work here is to do with the way character is expressed and learned. Knowledge of character is practical rather than theoretical.²¹² Practical knowledge is passed on through social norms and habits that are absorbed largely non-consciously, as shown by the example of the coachee simply ‘picking up being nice to people’ after ‘hanging out’ with his coach’s family. One cannot teach the habits and dispositions through which character is expressed by didactic method, although self-reflection can help guide behaviour. Rather, *character is learned through doing things with other people over extended periods of time*. Youth at Risk’s whole practice recognises the principle of the primacy of practical knowledge: it is based on repeated activity that makes actual goals that come from self-reflection.²¹³

The final principle at work in the Motivate the Estate programme was that of the state as ‘facilitator not agent of change’. I would not want to naively suggest that communities can sort out all their own problems if left to themselves. In this regard, the Motivate the Estate programme involved small amounts of funding for lunches, day trips and expenses and it is not realistic to expect people to give up their time without such small-scale financial support. But facilitation is not only about the state providing funding for volunteers. It is also about how the state interacts with volunteers, and to its credit Southend Council took an admirably hands-off approach to working with coaches. The council did its best to let them improvise and innovate their own solutions by not sticking stubbornly to rules and regulations. In other words, the council provided a flexible framework of support through which the character of the community could be expressed, but it did not interfere beyond facilitating such expression.

These principles – the harnessing of natural talents, the primacy of practical knowledge, and the state as facilitator, not agent of change – should be at the heart of David Cameron’s ideas of ‘building the Big Society’ and moving to a ‘post-bureaucratic age’. Or, for that matter, at the heart of any political movement that seeks to reinvigorate civil society in the UK. These principles embody how the character of Britain’s communities could be harnessed to build the character of the next generation. What more urgent task is there for social policy than finding out where these principles could be applied in practice?

What environments support young people's character development?

Terry Ryall

I'm a great fan of 'character'. With a colourful background rooted in rural Ireland it's hard not to be! To be known as 'a great character altogether' one had to have a stoical outlook on life, have faced multiple traumas, come through serious adversity and have a brilliant sense of humour. It also did your character rating no harm at all if you were a stonking drunk or, at the other end of the spectrum, a lifelong Pioneer (pledging complete abstinence from the demon drink). All of this was underpinned by the wonderful art of storytelling, carried out in the informal settings of pubs, kitchens, post offices, parish halls and village shops. Thus, the folklore of the great Irish character was perpetuated.

Reflecting on all this now it strikes me that the character capabilities identified in this report are very relevant to the 'great character' identity: self-regulation, self-analysis, empathy and social skills, all of which enable independent living and getting on with others. What is striking is the importance of informal social spaces to help define the aspects of one's character that appeal to others: that develop empathy so as to entertain your peers; and that lead one to analyse and reflect on one's experience so that reactions and actions may be regulated accordingly.

As a youth worker for most of my life the development of character capabilities in the young through social education settings has been a major focus for me. This kind of education is so important particularly for those young people who might have missed out on the opportunities to develop capabilities through formal education, training or employment. Sometimes social education has been misinterpreted as requiring unstructured settings in which the young do as they please or

where they simply absorb a host of activities that are there to amuse them without any thoughtful intervention. The informal settings of my youth that built 'great character' might seem to have been loose and unstructured like this. But they were not. They were finely honed communal environments where young people found and forged their individuality in the subtleties of interaction, and in reinterpreting the stories they heard for themselves.

Research shows that unstructured environments for young people can in fact do more damage than good.²¹⁴ Good social education takes place in a structured environment, where considerable thought has been given to the stimuli for personal and social development: the posters, the topics of conversation, the relationships, the campaigns, the visitors, the constructive but challenging interventions in verbal exchanges as they happen and much more. I fear the loss of such essential services in the character formation of the young, especially in the current economic climate and with the complete lack of any comprehensive national policy focus on youth. Not every community possesses the structure and vitality that yields the informal settings in which I was lucky enough to form my own character. Where they do not, creative, imaginative, but above all committed and structured youth work can go some way to compensating.

The co-creation of character

Although formal education is usually carried out in a formal setting with predetermined outcomes relating to qualifications and technical skills, informal education, although still providing such opportunities, harnesses the interests and leisure time of the young in order to develop the 'softer' skills and capabilities such as empathy, communication and anger control. Within informal educational settings Heckman found that peer relations and interactions were fundamental to the development of character capabilities in the young, and that they can act for good and for bad.²¹⁵ From my experience, the more young people are seen as co-creators of their characters and their experiences the greater

their sense of self in relation to others, and the greater their buy-in to the need for change, and the greater their sense of control over their emotional reactions and behaviour.

Take the example of Jess.

Jess was in a children's home for many years, coming from a very dysfunctional home and having suffered physical and sexual abuse. She was labelled 'sexually promiscuous' from the age of nine. Can you believe that? The age of nine! And by the social workers! The home had a system of 'specials' where a member of staff was assigned to have a special relationship with a child that focused on him or her as an individual, and on the child's behaviour and in particular socialisation. The latter was particularly pertinent where an individual was violent in their behaviour and seemingly incapable of self-regulation.

I was assigned as Jess's 'special'.

After spending quality time with her, with her being sometimes reluctant and suspicious, what I found was a young woman lost in the expectations of others, with very low self-esteem, yet seemingly brimming over with confidence, while constantly railing at the world and desperate for adult attention to affirm her as a worthy being. Over time I got to know her likes and dislikes, her fears and ambitions, her barriers and feelings. This was not always in one-to-one sessions, but in group settings, at the dinner table, at club and so on. We planned and executed together a programme of activities and development opportunities including volunteering in an animal shelter and around the children's home to enable her to experience the feeling of helping those unable to help themselves. Jess developed friendships through these activities that incorporated 'acceptance' and her tantrums and physical outbursts began to diminish. Reflection played a big part in helping her learn the lessons from these social interactions and reactions. Such cooperative analysis was leading to behaviour change and management.

Then came a big revelation. During an unguarded moment one day Jess told me that there was one thing she really wanted to change in her life but she felt it was impossible and she started to cry. Tears have always, and always will, move me. My mind

went into turmoil. What on earth was this thing so hideous that she hadn't talked about it before? It turned out that the hideous thing preventing her from really feeling good about herself and her future prospects was the fact that she had an extra thumb on her left hand. She really, really, really did not want an extra thumb! It was this that she got ribbed about at school and elsewhere and it affected her deeply. The formal education setting was serving to reinforce feelings of hopelessness and 'difference' exacerbated by the bullying of her by peers.

As a gullible, bright-eyed, trusting new youth worker I had assumed that Jess's condition had been assessed and was being taken care of by her 'corporate parent'. After all, this is what would happen in 'normal' circumstances. I was absolutely appalled that it had never even entered their consciousness to do something about it. And so, together, and with parental consent, we plotted a course of action and drove it until the extra thumb was removed.

That day was transformational for that young woman as was the planned social development programme. She learned that she could trust others, that sharing deep feelings can be cathartic, that on deciding a course of action she could see it through, that she didn't have to put up with her lot and that she could take charge of her own destiny. Through planning her informal education programme with me she learned about self-direction. Through her conscious attempts to control her outbursts she learned self-regulation. And through her reflection she developed empathy. Eventually dealing with her thumb was the result of applying herself not only to regular commitments that helped others, but to a course of action that addressed a key barrier to her self-determination.

The injustice of capability deprivation

There are many, many case studies in my experience where the power of 'offline' interventions and relationships have helped transform the character capabilities of young people. In all of these interventions quality and personalisation are exceptionally important. In their absence more damage than good can be

done. The best chance of developing character capabilities lies in the mix of support available to the young. As identified by Amartya Sen, such capabilities are crucial in young people for successful study and employment, for forming good relationships and for being active members of society. Since such capabilities are crucial for life chances, their deprivation in the young is an injustice in itself.

In the current rush to transform the character capabilities of the young it is important to recognise that through history some things change and some things don't. A quick browse through Olsen's 'Raising fathers, raising boys' reveals popular preoccupations surrounding masculinity (manliness), boyhood, adolescence and fatherhood in the context of widespread concerns about national efficiency, public vice and private morals at the end of the nineteenth century.²¹⁶ This thesis reveals the growing consensus at that time that children (especially boys) of all areas and social backgrounds were being failed by the various institutions of formal education (be they the elite public schools or the new schools springing up since the Education Act of 1870), and that certain moral imperatives were being inadequately met by the nation's parents. No change there then!

This look back to past worries highlights a perennial concern with how best to develop the character capabilities that the nation wants in its citizenry. Yet we still appear not to have found the right solution. What seems clear though is the failure of formal education to develop them alone. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said that talents are best nurtured in solitude, but character is best formed in the stormy billows of the world. I'm inclined to agree with him. Informal education then is a 'must have' part of the landscape for the development of character capabilities. Reflecting on my recent experience of youth volunteering, the place of the latter in this landscape is compelling, a brilliant platform for the young to experience the stormy billows of the world. At v we know it almost always provides greater gains than expected but in perhaps less well-documented ways.²¹⁷ For example, early findings from the Newton et al research on young people and volunteering shows

the greatest gains to be in contacts, integrity, planning and so forth, all of which are indicators of capabilities development.²¹⁸ This would suggest there is real benefit in exploring further volunteering outcomes through the lens of character capabilities.

I remember reading somewhere that the education process has now become an assembly line in which 'educate' means 'matriculate, inculcate and then graduate'. If you believe as does the Indian spiritual leader Sri Sathya Sai Baba that 'the end of education is character', then any narrowly focused, formal education system must be supported by an informal education framework founded on values that we hold dear such as love, truth, right action, peace, justice and so on. If we really expect citizens, as the Big Society vision would have us do, to 'up sticks' and do community action DIY style, taking more responsibility for ourselves and others, we need a well-rounded framework for learning (as exemplified through Jess's experience and my own) that develops character capabilities such as self-regulation, self-analysis, empathy and the social skills that enable effective living and relationships. In other words, the Big Society requires Big Citizens and they are made in part through the richness of informal educational opportunities. Only with the latter in place will we have an ever growing and endless abundance of 'great characters altogether'.

Conclusion: principles and practice

This report has explored the formation and development of character, and in doing so has brought to the fore the importance of character in contributing to a range of social and economic outcomes, and in helping to address a range of social and economic challenges. It is clear that character is a resource of interest to government and to the institutions of the state, but not so clear how the state might help to develop and sustain good character among citizens without overstepping its remit, or simply being ineffective. As many of the contributions to this report outline, the institutions that build character often fall into the realm outside the state, in civil society: families, communities, voluntary organisations, social enterprises, businesses, and the media. In many cases, the state can play an important role in setting out a vision for a character-building society and for developing policies and regulations that can help the institutions of civil society play a positive role. This chapter briefly sets out some guiding principles for this process:

- promote liberal values
- act as an enabler of change
- pay great attention to environments
- support structured transitions for young people
- develop new tools for measurement

Promote liberal values

Building character means building the capabilities that individuals need to pursue good and flourishing lives. In a modern, liberal society there will no doubt be different conceptions of what exactly ‘the good’ consists in, but this pluralism is something we should accept. It does not mean

accepting rampant relativism. There is much more agreement among people from different religions and cultures on shared values than is often credited by an intelligentsia obsessed by arguments for value relativism. Citizens of character will always possess large overlap in the values that correspond to their shared capabilities. One such value will be that of tolerance and mutual respect, based on a capability for empathy. So by emphasising the importance of character we are advocating a pluralistic society of independent citizens, capable of shaping their own lives, but also a cohesive society with many shared values.

In a liberal society, the state has no business dictating to citizens how they should be in their personal lives beyond a framework of laws. But as this inquiry clearly establishes, much of people's personal lives – for example, the way parents choose to raise their children or the way that cultural norms influence young people's gendered identities – clearly contributes to entrenched disadvantage and discrimination. Where these choices and attitudes add up to limiting the freedom of individuals to shape their lives – for example, the impact of parenting on social mobility, and the impact of gendered stereotypes on decisions around work and care and sexual violence – the state should certainly consider where and how to intervene. In many cases, it is voluntary and community organisations who are best placed to step in, but the funding and support structures that these organisations need to function must be made available.

In such cases of the personal intruding on matters of public concern, character is a good concept for thinking about what might be changed, and what it is legitimate to change. This is because character capabilities can be acquired (they are not genetically fixed), and because character consists of skills and virtues that enable a person to define her life effectively (rather than have her life defined for her).

Act as an enabler of change

It is not surprising that many sites of character building are very much outside the realm of the state. Government's role in many

respects is to enable families, communities and institutions to take on the work of building character themselves. The Coalition's vision of a Big Society is predicated on new, freeing legislation such as the Localism Bill with its powers of community right to buy, challenge, and hold referendums, as well as greater financial and seed support for social enterprise and community organisations. But increased localism can pave the way towards inconsistency and unfairness – greater postcode lotteries – as well as the capture of agendas and services by certain groups or classes. Strong communities can be both a good and bad thing depending on who is excluded and the norms that they perpetuate. In other cases, it can lead to financial mismanagement – the ability of citizens to hold referenda on council tax and other financial matters has led to disastrous consequences elsewhere, California's recent bankruptcy being a case in point. The state also plays a crucial role in ensuring that people and communities exist within a broader society that is open, diverse, efficient and fair. Doing so means striking a delicate balance.

Wherever capacity already exists to build character, this should be nurtured by the state with as little interference in what people actually do as possible. For example, the Labour Government set up the New Deals for Communities programme. Where this programme simply involved building health or recreation centres, it was welcome and successful. But where it resulted in displacing existing community infrastructure with duplicate infrastructure, it often alienated residents and wasted resources. In New Cross in south London, a thriving volunteer community centre pre-existed and outlived the New Deal initiative. Rather than duplicating this centre, the state should have simply given it some funding to expand. On the other hand, some national franchises, such as Sure Start, often get the balance right between enabling local communities to do things for themselves and providing the benefits of professionalism, evidence-based policy and economies of scale. Enabling these society-wide qualities often takes more of an active role from government than is immediately obvious, although it is not always immediately obvious what government should do. We

only note here that focusing on character does not mean government is exempt from the difficult task of dealing with inequalities and injustices at the macro-level.

Pay great attention to environments

Taking an interest in character means taking an interest in what we have called ‘internal capabilities’ – the character traits that underpin good and flourishing lives. But as touched on in every chapter in this report, internal capabilities are often useless without external capabilities. Good character is not simply the result of a force of will on behalf of individuals; it is shaped by and responsive to environments, primarily during the earliest years of life, before notions of responsibility and morality are fully developed. An emphasis on personal responsibility is important, but for individuals to become responsible for their actions and their futures, they require nurturing, supportive environments to guide them. For example, as discussed in chapter 2, knowing a newborn’s epigenetic code could potentially tell us whether the child is already in ‘survival mode’ and therefore likely to be oversensitive or paranoid, leading to the need for different support or home environments. There may be other clues about the type of epigenetic states that help people to overcome adversity successfully, or the types of cultural institutions – family, schools, community groups and so on – that support people to buck the trend. A vivid example of the importance of environments comes from research showing that high levels of trust and communication between parents in neighbourhoods has a general effect of increasing positive parenting among individual households and a direct, positive influence on children’s development in the neighbourhood.²¹⁹

Environments are not only important for *building* character. They are also important for *sustaining* it. Nobody’s internal character can be expected to survive intact in continually corrosive environments. MPs’ expenses claims and financial services workers’ undue risk taking are good examples of where individual character can be corroded by bad environments.

Support structured transitions for young people

Building character in young people requires structured activity that supports and challenges them, so they can make the transition into full adulthood. The key is for structures to be available – such as an apprenticeship or a course of study – that have clear goals and stages, so young people develop character capabilities through repeated activity, feedback, guidance and self-assessment. But although the structured element of transitions is important, it should not stifle creativity and initiative.

It is important to remember that to build character effectively and impart other skills, structured transitions for young people should be relatively long term. One of the policy mistakes of the last decade or so has been treating the learning needs of some young people post-16 like those of adults, and thus offering them short discrete courses when what they need are longer arcs of learning. Sustainable funding that allows third sector organisations to plan ahead and deliver longer term programmes is essential.

But less obvious and more informal structured transitions are important too. In chapters 3 and 5, the character benefits of a well-funded and less risk-averse set of youth services were made clear, particularly for those young people who do not have the benefit of supportive families and neighbourhoods. With this in mind, the present government might want to rethink the proposed drastic cuts to the funds that pay for pastoral care and extracurricular activities in further education. The so-called entitlement fund will be reduced from 114 to 30 hours per student per year – when, arguably, it should be expanded to provide better informal educational environments for all young people.

Develop tools for measurement

We need to get better at measuring the development of character capabilities and the range of outcomes to which they lead. The ways that we measure children and young people's development (by constant examination and a narrow view of 'education' based on GCSEs and A levels) and the progress of our society

(measuring gross domestic product in narrowly defined economic terms) miss out most of the important things in life. The capabilities important to good and successful lives (empathy, resilience, creativity, application and so on) and the outcomes that embody those good and successful lives (happiness, health, trust, beauty, connectivity and so on) are woefully undervalued by policy makers, not because they aren't believed to be important, but because they are so hard to quantify and the tools we have to measure them are so rudimentary.

There is a multitude of ways to capture these different indicators of development. Take the example of parenting, an area where huge progress has been made in the past few years. There is a host of good evidence that the right kinds of parenting programmes can make a big difference to parenting and children's character development. Trials in the UK show that even 'hard end' antisocial children can be helped to regulate their emotions and behave better. However, for classes to be effective, it is crucial to use high-quality, proven programmes; less carefully developed ones, despite being well intentioned, typically have little or no effect. In an attempt to act on this knowledge for the good of the population as a whole, in 2007 the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners was set up in England to train leaders of parenting groups in these evidence-based approaches, and by 2010 had given the skills to over 4,000 practitioners who went on to benefit 100,000 children. Here then, is an example of a government policy encouraging the development of better character in a direct way using a proven technology – not just pious exhortations. However, to keep up this movement will require ongoing political will and vision – it remains to be seen if this will materialise.

Similar work is being done to measure the fuller list of outcomes to which character leads. While only one nation, Bhutan, currently uses a measure of gross national happiness as its main measure of progress,²²⁰ huge amounts of work are going on internationally to develop more sophisticated tools and to spread the use of such tools when calculating national accounts. A case in point is the Office of National Statistics' Measuring

National Wellbeing Project. Similarly, the New Economics Foundation is developing its tools for measuring wellbeing and campaigning for governments to use these tools systematically to measure their countries' wellbeing, and publish the accounts too.²²¹ While designing such tools is not an easy business – finding ways to capture data so they can be compared and manipulated, but without defining them out of existence – it is a worthy project and we have the expertise and vision to undertake it.

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In the policy world there is growing interest in the importance of a set of personal attributes that might be summarised as ‘character’. Capabilities such as empathy, resilience and application that describe aspects of our character are strongly related to a range of beneficial outcomes. This collection draws together emerging research from the social sciences about the formation and development of character across the life course, in order to inform debates around public policy and the role of civil society.

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