

# The New Politics of Character

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In August 2011, there was panic on the streets of London. Riots broke out in Tottenham, fueled in part by community anger about a police shooting. Other neighborhoods and then other English cities followed suit. The transfixing images of urban hordes looting storefronts and setting cars and buses ablaze played over and over again on television screens worldwide. When the police were finally able to tame the riots, the property damage was in the hundreds of millions of pounds, 3,000 Britons were in handcuffs, and five men were dead.

Political reactions to the saga followed predictable party lines. The left blamed the government's austerity program and cuts in youth services, although very few cuts had in fact been made. The right viewed the disorder as evidence of simple immorality. Prime Minister David Cameron, reprising his pre-election theme of "broken Britain," lamented the "slow-motion moral collapse" of society.

My old boss, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, was more measured. Condemning the violence and crime, he insisted we should seek evidence about what had sparked and sustained the riots, rather than leaping to "knee-jerk" (and self-satisfying) conclusions. Of course he was attacked by much of the tabloid press and opposed within the administration. As one senior Conservative aide fumed to me, "We know what happened. Bad kids with bad parents did bad things. We don't need any f---ing research."

Nonetheless, at Clegg's insistence a Riots Communities and Victims Panel was established. The members gathered evidence, visited affected neighborhoods, and then offered advice to the government. The panel's conclusion was that the decisive factor behind the riots was not lack of money or even morality, but lack of character.

The panel spoke not only to young people who had taken part in the disturbances, but also, crucially, to hundreds who could have but did not. "In asking what it was that made young people make the right choice in the heat of the moment, the Panel heard of the importance of character," the nonpartisan group concluded. "A number of attributes together form character, including self-discipline, application, the ability to defer gratification and resilience in recovering from setbacks. Young people who develop character will be best placed to make the most of their lives." And, of course, will be less likely to riot, loot, and burn. Character, like oxygen, is most noticeable when it is missing.

The conclusion about character is obviously very different from the Labour partisans' instinct that rioters lacked money in austerity-age Britain. But it also differs from the Conservatives' broad-brush focus on morality. Character, as we will see, is not synonymous with morality. Character combines qualities like drive and prudence that could — but might not — serve moral ends. It's much more prosaic, but it may be more important.

The development of character is perhaps the central task of any civilized society and every individual within it. Its absence is felt not only when communities collapse into a brief, riotous war of all against all, but in many long-standing areas that are vital for human flourishing and constitute many of the abiding concerns of policymakers and the everyday issues of American politics. This is perhaps most true of the current debates about inequality and social mobility. Gaps in character development closely correlate to gaps in income, family functioning, education, and employment. The character gap fuels the opportunity gap, and vice versa.

If we want a better, freer, fairer society, we will have to complement the 20<sup>th</sup>-century focus on strong institutions with a new (if also ancient) concern for strong individuals. The quality of our policies is a vital concern. But so is the quality of our people.

### Thinking About Character

Character is a protean word. Discussions of character, civics, values, virtues, morals, and citizenship can easily veer into vacuity. The range of traits that plausibly fall under the umbrella of character include kindness, generosity, wisdom, courage, trustworthiness, love, zeal, faith, resilience, and honesty. But when we think about someone “of character” or seek a “character reference” for a potential employee, we usually have more specific virtues in mind.

There is an important distinction, as the non-partisan advocacy group Character Education Partnership points out, between “moral character” — kindness, humility, and the like — and “performance character,” comprising the traits or skills most strongly related to the chances of doing well in life, such as industriousness or prudence.

It is this latter group of performance-character virtues that reinforces many of the inequalities in wealth, safety, employment, and education. Of course most of us would rather live in a society peopled by kind, loving, generous folk. But the development of these moral-character traits is less clearly related to our biggest public problems. Lack of compassion does not, in general, hold people back from making it in life, but a lack of planning for the future or persistence certainly can.

More than a decade ago, James Heckman, who won the Nobel Prize for his work in the complex field of econometrics, noted a study showing that graduates of a flagship pre-kindergarten program, Perry Preschool, were more likely to graduate high school, stay off welfare and out of trouble, and earn a decent wage by middle age. But there was a puzzle: The study also showed that the effects of Perry on cognitive ability (as measured by IQ tests) had worn off by third grade.

Heckman went back through the original Perry data and discovered that some elementary-school teacher reports on personal and learning behavior had never been analyzed. Teachers noted whether students were late, how often they got into trouble for lying or cursing, and how much appetite they had for work. Heckman labeled these “non-cognitive skills” and ran the numbers. He estimated that up to two-thirds of the benefits of Perry stemmed from improvements in these skills, rather than in math and reading. Almost overnight, a new branch of social science was born.

Along with scholars such as Robert Putnam, of *Bowling Alone* fame, and journalists like Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, Heckman is bringing questions of character into debates about inequality, social mobility, and opportunity. In studying character and its role, most social scientists and psychologists agree that two character strengths in particular have an impact on social, educational, and economic outcomes: drive and prudence.

### Driving Ourselves

My son has a t-shirt with the message: “Quitters never win. Winners never quit.” That’s what drive is about: perseverance, grit, determination. It’s the ability to stick with a task, especially an intrinsically unrewarding one. The label “quitter” is naturally applied to someone who lacks the character strength of drive.

Psychologists have probed the significance of being a sticker rather than a quitter. Carmit Segal, now a professor at the University of Zurich, compared scores from two tests: a standard cognitive-skills test measuring academic ability and a coding-speed exam used to measure basic clerical skills. The coding-speed test first provides a long list of words and associated numbers like “game = 6456, chin = 8930, house = 2859.” Then the words are listed again, each with a choice of five possible numeric answers. For example, a test question might read “‘house’ a) 1117 b) 2859 c) 6227 d) 7150 e) 7489.” The test is absurdly easy but spine-crackingly dull.

Segal found that people who really cared about the results (military applicants, for instance) did much better than bored high-school students. But she also discovered — using a data set of 12,000 people — that the coding test, when taken with no incentive to do well, powerfully predicted future earnings for the general population. Indeed, for those without a college degree, the no-stakes coding-test score predicted adult earnings just as well as the cognitive-test results.

This was not because the high earners were better coders or because this kind of task is common in the workplace. As Paul Tough puts it, “They did better for a simple reason: they tried harder. And what the labor market [values] is the kind of internal motivation required to try hard on a test even when there is no external reward for doing well. Without anyone realizing it, the coding test was measuring a critical non-cognitive skill that mattered a lot in the grown-up world.”

The test wasn't measuring coding; it was measuring character. Recent studies, including one by Collin Hitt and Julie Trivitt at the University of Arkansas, find that similar measures of drive predict rates of college attendance and especially college completion.

It turns out, too, that young adults have a good idea of their own level of drive or "stick-to-itiveness." Angela Duckworth, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania and a MacArthur Fellow, has developed a self-reported "grit scale," based on levels of agreement with statements like "New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones" and "I finish whatever I begin." Most striking, Duckworth found that her grit scale was a better predictor of whether trainees entering West Point would make it through the tough summer course than GPA, IQ, or the military's own readiness scale. Specifically, she reported, "cadets who were a standard deviation higher than average in grit were more than 60% more likely to complete summer training."

Drive has always been a predictor of personal success, of course, but it may be especially important today. Recent trends in the labor market have increased the salience of character skills in the workplace. Service-sector jobs like those of business managers, doctors, teachers, and lawyers require more independent working and rely on internal motivation as much as external measures of productivity.

Character counts for unpaid work, too. Personal, familial, and communal successes require drive. Marriage vows include "for better or for worse" for a reason: Couples will often need to persevere through the worse to reach the better. Likewise, raising a child well is slow, hard work. Like all jobs, parenting can be undertaken with energy and commitment or with the minimum effort necessary. As every parent will tell you, it is almost always easier to stick the kids in front of a television than it is to engage with them — easier, but not better. The children most likely to flourish are those whose parents are willing to persevere through the exhausting, patience-testing daily tasks of parenting. Beyond the work of rearing our offspring, hard workers are also needed for the crucial task of building and maintaining our communities. Social capital does not appear out of thin air; it requires people driven to serve and get involved in their communities.

The character strength of drive, then, underpins success in almost every dimension of life: school, work, relationships, family, and community. Of course, taken to an extreme, being "driven" can tip into negative territory. An Aristotelian sense of moderation is also required. We need hard workers, not Stakhanovites; engaged community members, not busybodies; committed fathers and mothers, not helicopter parents. A good life cannot be a driven one 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But without drive, a good life is nearly impossible.

### The Value of Prudence

Why study when you could be partying? Why run when you could be eating donuts? Why save for retirement when you could, right now, be behind the wheel of a gleaming new car? Why not give hard drugs a try? The answer to all of these questions is the same: We value our future as well as our present.

That is the meaning and value of prudence. We need to be able to run a cost-benefit analysis of an action that puts immediate benefits and distant costs in perspective. A prudent person chooses not to act for the small pleasure now if the cost is great pain later. This seems simple enough, but our species is naturally myopic, irrationally discounting the value of the future.

Our tradition's great political philosophers have understood the crucial importance of prudence. Adam Smith identified two qualities as those "most useful to ourselves" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

[F]irst of all, superior reason and understanding, by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of our actions... and secondly, self-command, by which we are enabled to abstain from present pleasure or to endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure or to avoid a greater pain in some future time. In the union of those two qualities consists the virtue of prudence, of all the virtues that which is most useful to the individual.

John Stuart Mill echoes this principle when he bemoans how "[m]en often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable." For both thinkers, the ability to make the correct cost-benefit calculation and then the willpower to live by it are fundamental to a flourishing life.

The struggle to place our long-term well-being above our short-term desires is the most potent expression of our humanity, of the battle between our animal flesh and reasoning mind. And, because it is a fundamental human challenge, acting prudentially is of interest to the whole of society. The value of prudence is especially clear when it comes to social problems relating to health, savings, and fertility.

A prudential view of the future is important for health, especially with the increasing prevalence of “lifestyle diseases” related to obesity, smoking, and drinking. There may be people who genuinely prefer running to drinking — but if so they are a tiny minority. For most of us, the task of remaining healthy requires balancing the desires of the moment against the needs of the future. Those with a strong “future-orientation” are, according to research by Ngina Chiteji, 7% less likely to drink alcohol and 17% more likely to exercise.

Prudence is essential, virtually by definition, for financial planning. The value of a day in the distant future is typically discounted very sharply in comparison to the present day. Unsurprisingly, those who discount the future less are more likely to put money into a pension, and this is associated with the steady climb from poverty to plenty. A 2009 Pew study showed that the children of low-income parents who are above-average savers have a 70% chance of moving off the lowest rung of the income ladder, compared to 50% of those with similarly low-income parents who save little. The savings themselves may make a difference here, perhaps by helping to fund college. But it seems equally likely that the propensity to save is signaling an ethic of prudence within that family.

Last but not least, prudence is important in relation to sex and fertility. Unplanned pregnancies cause multiple social and economic problems, but control of fertility very often requires strong self-discipline and an ability to foresee long-run negative consequences, all while in the throes of passion. What some sociologists call “self-efficacy” — or prudence — is required.

Teenage pregnancy is in many ways the exemplar case of a failure to control fertility — but it also demonstrates the important two-way relationship between prudence and opportunity. Over the last few decades, rates of teen parenthood have declined sharply, and they are now down to levels last seen before World War II. But rates have proved stubbornly high among the least-educated, lowest-income groups. By the age of 17, just 1% of daughters of college-educated mothers have become mothers themselves, compared to 11% of those whose mothers did not complete high school.

It is easy to suggest that the poor teenagers who become parents are irrationally discounting the future and so failing to demonstrate the virtue of prudence. That suggestion is probably partly true. But the whole truth is more depressing. Teen pregnancy appears to have a limited impact on life chances for this group, because their life chances were so truncated in the first place. Broadly speaking, they are not sacrificing opportunities for wealth and security in the long term for short-term pleasures; their opportunities for future pleasures are few, so as a matter of calculation it makes more sense to pursue the short-term pleasures than it would for a teen from a wealthier family.

What looks like imprudent behavior to you and me — and would be imprudent behavior for our own children — turns out to be rational for those at the bottom of the income ladder. The key insight for policymakers is that the task is not simply to teach prudence, but to improve the future prospects of these young adults so they have brighter possible futures to measure the present against.

One of the plainest ways that policymakers can preserve and promote character, then, is to protect and expand opportunity. As with the teenage girls who become pregnant because they foresee no opportunities, a policy that builds opportunity is likely to build prudence. The opportunity agenda is a character agenda, and vice versa.

A variation on the most famous experiment proving the value of prudence — the “marshmallow test” — provides further evidence for the link between prudent behavior and future opportunities. In the original marshmallow test, Stanford psychology professor Walter Mischel offered four-year-olds a marshmallow but told them they would get an extra one if they waited about 15 minutes. A decade later, the toddlers who waited had SAT scores 200 points higher than the ones who broke down and ate the marshmallow in under 30 seconds. The message is clear: Kids who can defer gratification do better at school and in life.

But it turns out that the reliability of the adult promising the extra marshmallow is important, too. Researchers from the University of Rochester re-ran the marshmallow test in 2012, but added a twist. Before the marshmallow trial, they gave the four-year-olds some old crayons and said if they could wait a few minutes, some new ones would be provided. Half of them got new crayons. The other half got an apology and a request to make do with the original ones. When it came to the marshmallows, unsurprisingly, the children who had earlier received the new crayons as promised waited, on average, four times as long (12 minutes) for a second marshmallow as those who had been let down.

It was a small study, but it casts a different and clarifying light on the original findings. Prudence is a character strength acquired in large part by learning that the payoffs from waiting are real. As we learn, through experience and repetition, that it is worth sacrificing the present for a payoff down the road, we get into the habit of waiting, delaying gratification, and investing in the future.

There are implications here for policy. Prudence is a vital piece of character equipment for those seeking to escape an impoverished community. But the promised rewards have to be reliably within reach. Kids who are constantly disappointed can hardly be blamed for living in the moment. And poverty also provides a poor environment for the development of character strengths. Opportunity builds character, as well as the other way around.

In the absence of prudence, there is a strong case for policies that “nudge” families and individuals in the right direction. Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, for instance, argue that firms should automatically enroll workers in retirement plans, a policy mandated by law in the United Kingdom. Indeed, in all of these areas where prudence reigns, there is a case for government to nudge individuals who do not otherwise act very prudently. Such nudges include the infamous portion limits for sodas and foods, “self-bans” from casinos, and seat-belt and motorcycle-helmet mandates.

The increasing acceptance of a government that nudges points to a deeper problem: a problem of character. The necessary strength of these nudges is inversely proportional to the strength of our character. A society of weak characters demands strong paternalism; a self-governing society does not. To the extent that we wish to avoid paternalism, then, we should attend to character development.

### Character and Inequality

Among the deepest worries of Americans and their politicians is that our society is pulling apart and falling far short of the ideal of equality of opportunity. The idea that the station one is born into need not be the station one dies in is intrinsic to the American identity, but social-mobility rates are low and stagnant. A child born into a family in the top two quintiles of the income distribution is four times more likely, as an adult, to end up in the top two quintiles compared to a child born into the bottom quintile. And of those born into the bottom quintile, 43% will remain there as adults.

Our partisan divisions reflect two different interpretations of why those born on the wrong side of the tracks stay there. Those on the left point to economic factors associated with the new global economy, like declining unionization and sluggish wage growth. Those on the right tend to point to cultural factors, especially family breakdown. The left therefore prescribes progressive economic reform while the right prescribes conservative re-moralization. Both sides agree on the need for better education in impoverished areas but disagree on how to get there.

There is at least a kernel of truth in the narratives of both the left and the right, but they too often overlook a major piece of the mobility puzzle: character. Just as there are gaps by class in academic attainment and physical health, there are gaps in levels of prudence and drive, as well as other “non-cognitive” skills such as empathy, openness, and self-esteem. These disparities in the development of character strengths are both a cause and consequence of inequality. Drive and prudence in particular improve an individual’s chance of success in life, and being raised among those with drive and prudence improves one’s chance of acquiring such traits. Character thus becomes a self-reinforcing quality that develops, in part, along class lines.

The character strength of drive is not equally distributed across the population: Some people are more driven than others. But the distribution is not random, either. The monotonous coding-speed test — the one that turned out to be a good proxy for drive — bears this out. Those raised in families in the top income quintile were two-and-a-half times more likely to achieve a good score on the coding-speed test than were those raised in the lowest quintile. There are also sizable class gaps among children in fifth grade in important non-cognitive skills, especially the ability to “work independently” and “persist in completing tasks.” The federal Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey combines these factors with measures of organization, eagerness, and attentiveness into a single “approaches to learning” scale that looks a lot like a measure of drive and shows strong ties to household income.

Jason Fletcher and Barbara Wolfe, both of whom are now professors at the University of Wisconsin, analyzed this data to provide an important insight that prompts both concern and hope. The gap in levels of drive between high- and low-income children increases over time, roughly doubling between kindergarten and fifth grade. That is bad news insofar as it widens the class gap, but it’s good news in that it demonstrates the malleability of character strengths.

Of course, it is very difficult to tease out cause and effect between character inequalities and other inequalities. It is true that a lack of prudence can result in an unplanned pregnancy or dropping out of high school, both of which would make getting out of poverty difficult. A lack of drive could lead one to languish in a low-level job or not seek a job at all. At the same time, living in poverty can force one’s focus to be oriented almost entirely on the present, stunting character development. If you aren’t sure where your next meal is coming from or whether you’ll be able to make rent next month, you aren’t going to be spending much time thinking about how to, say, position yourself for a promotion. Likewise, if many of a child’s most obvious role models in an impoverished community exhibit present-oriented behaviors, it’s harder for the

child to learn to defer gratification. And a growing body of evidence from neuroscientists shows that growing up in a poor, stressful environment slows the development of the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for self-regulation.

Poverty in itself, then, can undermine character formation. But there are buffers that can provide protection against many of the worst aspects of poverty, especially strong parenting and a vibrant community. Unfortunately, material poverty tends to be associated with weaker parenting and lower levels of civic engagement.

Parents are crucial tutors of drive and prudence, especially during the early-childhood years when the most important brain development takes place. The most important influence on character development is not poverty — it is parenting. Good parenting — close, attentive, nurturing — can often compensate for material poverty.

Unfortunately, poverty makes parenting harder, and parenting quality varies sharply by social class. Using a well-validated measure of parenting quality, my colleagues at the Brookings Institution and I find that just 3% of parents at the bottom of the income ladder are in the top third of the parenting distribution, while half are in the bottom third. For affluent parents, these ratios are essentially reversed. Good parenting can propel a child up the income ladder; it just isn't happening for the majority of America's poor. And the disparities are getting worse. Since 1975, college-educated parents have increased the amount of time they spend with their children by twice as much as less-educated parents, and the difference is most dramatic in the critical early years. This parenting gap is likely one cause of the character gap.

When parents struggle, communities often step into the breach, through both informal support and formal organizations like churches, youth groups, scout troops, and sports teams. Pastors, scoutmasters, and coaches often act as surrogate parents, providing structure, giving encouragement, and imposing discipline. Civic institutions can teach drive and prudence, but only when children participate. Harvard's Robert Putnam reports that affluent 12<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely than their lower-income peers to play on a sports team, go to church, do volunteer work, feel "connected" to their community, and take part in out-of-school art, dance, or music classes. As with inequalities in parenting, these inequalities in civic engagement are growing. "Family background is now more predictive of social capital and civic engagement than before," Putnam writes. "Thus, these data...presage an America heading towards a caste system where social standing and community involvement are inherited from generation to generation, a country cleaved along class lines."

Poor parenting and low levels of civic engagement are not inherent in poverty. These essential influences on character development, however, suffer from a large and seemingly growing class gap. If we are serious about attacking the causes of our social-mobility problem and preserving opportunity, we will need to address the problems in family and community life.

### Cultivating Character

It is clear that character matters a great deal both for individual success and the achievement of the collective goal of expanding opportunity. But this does not mean a straightforward policy agenda is at hand. Indeed, to modern ears the idea that the state has a responsibility to cultivate character in its citizens sounds like a radical, if not illiberal, notion. But approached properly, it is neither. A renewed focus on character would in fact echo classical liberal ideas about what government is for.

The ancient Greek and Roman republics that inspired the founding fathers saw character promotion as a central political task. Classical economists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, like Adam Smith, insisted that free markets were underpinned by people of good character. Nineteenth-century political liberals including John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were obsessed with character, because they were convinced that free men had to be good men if liberal democracies were to succeed. "[T]he most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess," wrote Mill, "is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves."

It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that character formation fell out of political fashion. H. G. Wells derided the previous two centuries for "all that cant about character." The 19<sup>th</sup>-century focus on character-craft was replaced by a bastardized utilitarianism, founded on systems, models, and ideologies. Rational-choice fantasies on the right and utopian welfare-ism on the left shared the fatal flaw of seeing individual people — citizens, workers, consumers, and parents — as abstractions.

But a politics based on a "hollow man" philosophy is no longer sustainable. We need to recognize what we've learned: Many social problems cannot be solved by overlaying more bureaucratic systems on them. Some social goods are only available to societies of independent, self-governing individuals. If we want a better society, therefore, we need to promote the habits of character of such self-governing people.

There are, needless to say, strict limits on what public policy can achieve on the character front. But there is certainly scope for some progress, and a good place to start is in education.

Under Bill Clinton and in the early years of George W. Bush's presidency, the general idea of character education briefly became a bipartisan cause. But the project was short-lived and had little effect. Overtones of religious judgment alienated many Democrats, and there was also scant evidence linking school-wide "character education" initiatives with the desired academic improvements. Such programs were often a mess and conflated moral character and performance character in confusing ways. Rather than instilling habits of drive and prudence in their students, too many schools adopted a public-relations consultant's version of character education, sticking words like "trust" and "respect" on the walls.

Character education now comprises one strand within the Safe and Supportive Schools Group, a subdivision of the Office of Safe and Healthy Students, which sits within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, reporting to Deputy Secretary of Education Anthony Wilder Miller. And the political support for even this thin sliver of a program is tenuous.

The lesson to take from the failure of earlier character initiatives is not that nothing can be done, but rather that character education cannot be approached lightly. "It is no good doing this on the surface," says Linda McKay, who served as a senior advisor for character education in the Education Department under George W. Bush. "Character education has to have real depth, to be part of the philosophy of teachers, and be supported and led from the top by principals." Character education cannot be a top-down mandate that teachers resent and belittle; it needs to be part of their day-to-day mission.

Public efforts to advance this cause could therefore begin by promoting the examples of schools that do emphasize the right kind of character education — and particularly the many charter schools that have made character formation essential to their missions. Evaluations of school-based programs specifically designed to build character, including Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies and Tools of the Mind, have begun to yield some meaningful results. The work of schools like KIPP and the charter schools of the Harlem Children's Zone, plus a fresh crop of academic research, suggest that stronger character leads to higher grades and, importantly, college completion.

Some schools have experimented with a "character point average" to sit alongside GPA scores, and a handful of school districts, including ten districts in California collaborating under the banner of the California Office to Reform Education, are now integrating non-cognitive skills into their strategy and assessment models. In that accountability model, 20% of the school quality index will be based on social-emotional factors, including skills like self-management and self-efficacy: prudence and drive by another name.

We are still in the foothills, however. More experiments — and more data — are needed. A character agenda would therefore first promote the evaluation of existing character-development programs to gain a better sense of what might work and should be further encouraged. Following such evaluations, a more ambitious character agenda could also build assessments of character development into federal education funding allocations as part of the Race to the Top program.

### The Bipartisan Politics of Character

The United Kingdom's Riots Communities and Victims Panel showed the deep political importance of character. But by the time the panel reported, the political media-pundit caravan had moved on. Key recommendations, including one that schools be required to assess their impact on character development, were ignored. A big opportunity to begin to ameliorate pervasive social problems was lost. The U.S. should not make the same mistake. On these shores, at least, we might embrace the idea that freedom and opportunity are hard to sustain without character.

Any new emphasis on character will need bipartisan support. This will require liberals to get past their squeamishness about words like "character" and conservatives to get over their hostility to public policy. Liberals who are genuinely concerned about rising inequality cannot turn a blind eye to the deep character inequalities that track with class lines. They are understandably afraid of seeming to blame the poor for their plight. But as we work to provide opportunities, we need to ensure people are able to seize them.

Conservatives who are genuinely concerned about opportunity need to look beyond tropes about moral character to the more practicable cause of performance character. As James Q. Wilson urged in *The Public Interest's* 20<sup>th</sup>-anniversary issue: "For most social problems that deeply trouble us, the need is to explore, carefully and experimentally, ways of strengthening the formation of character among the very young." Step one is to harness education and put character development firmly on the school agenda; step two is to invest in parenting, especially in the very early years. More

broadly, the design of policies aimed at alleviating poverty or promoting opportunity ought to be sensitive to their impact on character development.

What is needed is a bipartisan policy push to help cultivate character in the name of opportunity. Given deepening concerns on both sides over barriers to upward mobility, there is an opportunity for a new coalition on character. Let us hope it is seized.