

# THE LIBERAL CASE FOR CHARACTER IN A POPULIST AGE

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# Introduction

“The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.”  
John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859.

Questions of character are front and center in U.S. politics. The 2016 presidential election quickly became a referendum on the character of the respective candidates rather than a contest of ideas. Questions about the temperament of Donald Trump and the honesty of Hillary Clinton dominated coverage. Since President Trump took office, concerns about his capacities for self-regulation, reflection, and empathy have been frequently expressed. All this is understandable and important. Most of us want our leaders to not only have smart policies and sharp skills, but also a strong character.

But concerns about character should not be restricted to our political leaders. As John Stuart Mill understood well, the character of citizens matters, too. If you are a conservative, you will most likely nod your head in agreement. Today, it tends to be those on the conservative side of politics who emphasize character, especially in terms of individual responsibility, civic and community engagement, and self-restraint. But Mill was a liberal; and our argument here is that character matters just as much to liberals as to conservatives—perhaps even more so.

Liberalism rests ultimately upon individualism. This is, of course, both its great strength and principal weakness. Since liberal societies can only flourish when comprised of strong individuals, the character of those individuals matters a great deal. Mill’s enduring concern for character formation was consistent with his desire for a society of great individual freedoms—of thought, expression, and lifestyle. To determine and pursue one’s own version of the good requires strength of character.

Liberal democratic societies depend on the resilience of certain institutions, including the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a robust free press, democratic checks and balances, bureaucratic accountability and transparency, a range of civic institutions, and so on. Populist political movements and political leaders are likely to test the strength of these institutions. But in the end, the fate of liberal societies rests in the hands of the individuals who compose it; on their willingness to stand up for the institutions described above; their capacity to withstand peer pressure; their ability to tolerate and live in peace with other citizens with whom they disagree; and their ability to reason and reflect, as they determine their own path and when they play their part as good citizens. The content of *our* character, as individual citizens, and not just of our leaders, matters for the health of our society. A strong nation requires strong individuals.

Mill’s concern was that without people of strong character, individuals would end up living at

the mercy of external pressures, temptations, and norms. He lamented how many people fitted themselves into one of “the small number of molds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.”<sup>1</sup> He feared that passivity at an individual level could lead to demagoguery at a national one. Like many liberals of his day, he worried particularly about the impact of religion, which (he feared) turned people into unthinking vessels of orthodoxy. Today, liberals might be just as worried about the wholesale adoption of a consumerist, materialist ethos. In some secular societies, choosing religion may now require the same capacities of self-reflection, moral courage, and autonomy as choosing atheism did in the nineteenth century.

The elements of individual character that are especially important in liberal societies fall into two broad categories:

First, the **character attributes required to live autonomously**, according to one’s own considered conception of the good, and under your own steam. Since liberal societies offer such a wide range of possible paths, it is vitally important that individuals are able to decide which route to take, and to have the strength to follow it. These are the skills needed to, in that quintessentially American phrase, “make something of yourself.” Self-efficacy, self-propulsion, self-knowledge. In a word, power.

J.D. Vance’s recent memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, vividly describes an Appalachian culture in which social dysfunction and disorder lie around every corner. Among the many insights of Vance’s book is the sense of powerlessness that underpins much of the despair and decay. “There is a lack of agency here,” he writes “—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

Thoughtful conservatives worry that many of the institutions that provide guided pathways for people—workplaces, churches, unions, marriages—have collapsed, leaving individuals adrift. The collapse has been greatest in communities where people perhaps needed them most, because they are relatively low in human capital and self-efficacy. Marriage is helpful to affluent, highly-skilled, self-confident folks; arguably even more so to those without those attributes. There is a big difference between being autonomous and simply being alone.

Second, for individuals living in a pluralistic society, the **capacity to live with difference** is crucial. Without tolerance, liberal societies are doomed. If the first set of inwardly-oriented character attributes requires knowledge of self, this second, outward-looking set requires knowledge of others, and of the world. Being stronger in oneself may help in the task of being accepting of those on a different path; self-respect may be a precursor to respect for others. Either way, toleration is necessary. It is important, however, not to demand very much more than tolerance. The point of liberal pluralism, to use William Galston’s term, is that we will find much to disapprove of in the choices, values, and lives of others. But we let them be, in exchange for being left alone ourselves.

As Isaiah Berlin urged in 1994, “we must weigh and measure, bargain, compromise, and prevent the crushing of one form of life by its rivals.”<sup>3</sup> In recent years, the political left in the U.S. has arguably been more guilty of forcing one view of the good on others than the political right.

Berlin concluded his “short credo” on an optimistic note: “Rationality, tolerance, rare enough in human history, are not despised. Liberal democracy, despite everything, despite the greatest modern scourge of fanatical, fundamentalist nationalism, is spreading.”

In 2017, it is hard to agree. Rationality and reason are too often extinguished by fake news and fear. Support for democratic institutions is weakening. Nationalism is on the rise again. There is a slow-burn crisis of authority, as deference to expertise has eroded and civic institutions have lost purchase.

Our argument, in summary, is as follows:

- 1. Liberals are wary of a focus on character for two main reasons.** First, the promotion of a particular model of character is seen as paternalistic, with elites or the state dictating a particular version of a good life to everyone else when, in fact, individuals ought to be free to determine for themselves the nature of a good life. Second, it can be used to blame the poor for their plight (“they just need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps!”) and possibly, then, to justify withdrawing welfare support. Partly for these reasons, it is conservatives who typically urge greater attention to character formation.
- 2. But liberals should in fact care deeply about character formation because it is vital for mobility and opportunity.** Gaps in the development of character skills lead to gaps in important outcomes. Human capital includes character attributes, or “non-cognitive skills,” which are demanded and rewarded in today’s labor market. Thus, there is an important instrumental liberal argument for the importance character.
- 3. The distinction between performance/“résumé” and moral/“eulogy” is unhelpful in two senses.** First, it understates how far performance character virtues underpin the maintenance of moral commitments. The character skills of a successful employee and of a good parent or partners overlap to a large extent: they both require the ability to work hard, defer gratification, engage with others, stay on task, etc. The character skills valued in the labor market are, to a very large extent, the same as the ones that are valuable in life.
- 4. A modern, liberal conception of character will be focused on the skills or attributes required for individuals to live under their own steam, and by their own lights, and to tolerate others doing the same.** Thus, there is a liberal defense of character formation on not merely instrumental grounds, but also on substantively moral ones. At a fundamental level, a liberalism founded on individuality relies heavily on character formation.
- 5. A challenge for liberals is that while it is vital fuel for individual flourishing, character is often formed within strong social institutions, such as the family or church.** The

conservative critique that liberalism, at least in this sense, draws on the resources created by conservatism is one that must be taken seriously by liberals. A liberal political order may well rely on pre-liberal institutions. This is one reason why family stability is so important, for instance. A stable, loving, committed family helps children develop their character, which in turn allows them to lead self-propelled lives.

- 6. Liberal societies need strong individuals as well as strong institutions, especially in a populist moment.** A liberal, autonomy-based formulation will not satisfy conservatives, who will argue for a fuller concept of the good. But we hope most conservatives will at least agree that the liberal conception is necessary, even if not, in their eyes, sufficient.

## 1. Liberals worry that a focus on character is regressive...

As a topic, character has been unpopular among liberal political thinkers for at least a century. Echoing H.G. Wells' memorable dismissal of all that "cant about character," contemporary liberals largely restrict themselves to questions of institution design and distributive justice. As a result, political discussions of character formation and virtue are typically dominated by conservatives.

Liberals have two main reasons to chafe at a politics of character formation. The first stems from the doctrine of liberal neutrality, a particular conception of liberal political philosophy which insists that the state ought to remain neutral with respect to competing conceptions of the good. The worry here is that a focus on character formation could lead the state to impose a particular vision of morality on others. A second argument is rooted in a fear that a focus on character formation justifies an unhelpful blaming of the disadvantaged for their disadvantage. The roots of poverty and marginalization, most liberals insist, lie not in personal failure or character deficiency, but in structural political inequalities and unfair economic institutions. An emphasis on grit, prudence or personal fortitude might imply that the poor deserve their poverty, distracting us from the true sources of social inequity. Insofar as there is a connection between qualities of character and poverty, liberals insist, the causality runs as much in the other direction: poverty creates poor character, as much as the other way around.

While liberals have mostly stayed away from character, on the intellectual right there has been a flourishing philosophical literature on the topic. Beginning in its contemporary form with such thinkers as Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre, there has been a renaissance in the philosophic tradition of "virtue ethics."<sup>4</sup> Most virtue ethicists return to Aristotle in arguing that the cultivation of character is the central object of both moral and political thinking. The state is therefore charged with forthrightly endorsing and promoting a comprehensive vision of human flourishing, constrained only by the limits of prudence.

On the liberal side of the aisle, a few perfectionist liberals like Joseph Raz have argued that autonomy is itself a constitutive element of the human good. Likewise, Stephen Macedo and William Galston argue for “liberal virtues,” such as tolerance and respect, as part and parcel of a distinctively liberal conception of the good.<sup>5</sup> Peter Berkowitz argues persuasively that unlike many of their disciples in the contemporary academy, the great makers of liberalism were acutely aware of the integral role moral and intellectual virtues play in undergirding and legitimizing the liberal political order.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, political theorists like Philip Pettit have generated a resurgence in republicanism—a close cousin of liberalism—which emphasizes the importance of civic virtues needed to sustain community and political life.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have broadened debates over distributive justice by focusing not on resources or welfarist outcomes, but on human capabilities and the functionings they enable.<sup>8</sup>

The broader relationship between liberalism and character formation is too large to be adequately dealt with in this paper. We make the narrower argument that a certain kind of character formation must return to the center of liberal political thinking. In particular, we advance a liberal, moral defense of the qualities of character often derided as merely “résumé” or “performance” virtues. Typically associated with worldly, material accomplishment, such virtues tend to be criticized as excessively individualistic and insufficiently oriented towards civic or communal ends. In reality, however, these “résumé” virtues matter a great deal for the health of social and civic institutions, too. But for liberals, the association between these virtues and individual success, even as merely an instrumental matter, is an argument in their favor. Upward mobility, stable employment, a decent wage, financial security—these are all important goals for liberals, and they rely as heavily on individual character as much as the technocratic virtuosity of policymakers.

## 2. ...But liberals really should care about character

The empirical scholarship on what are often labeled “non-cognitive skills” is still in a relatively early stage. With contributions from many different disciplines, it is also something of a mess. Even the terminology is confusing. On the one hand, certain terms, such as “non-cognitive skills,” are used to mean a multiplicity of quite different things—a problem known as the “jingle fallacy.” The term lumps together a vast range of skills, traits, and attributes: essentially, as the term implies, anything that is not cognitively based. This could include social manners or personal confidence, but it may also refer to the capacity to defer gratification, focus on a task, weather difficult times, or empathize with the troubles of another person. On the other hand, we have to watch out for the “jangle fallacy,” which occurs when people use different terms to describe the same concept. A particular attribute may be labeled a “skill” by an economist, a “personality trait” by a psychologist, a certain kind of “learning” by an educationalist, or a “virtue” by a moral philosopher. Each may have the same concept in mind, but can easily miss one another’s work or meaning because of the confusion of terms.

When discussing character, we have to be wary of both of these fallacies. It is important not to throw so much into an account of character so as to render the concept next to useless; but it is important also to learn and share knowledge across disciplinary lines. In particular, recent work in social science has emphasized an important array of non-cognitive “soft skills” that are important predictors of upward mobility and economic opportunity. Sociologists and economists are most comfortable using formal, scientific jargon to describe these traits, but any close inspection reveals them to fit neatly under the umbrella of what is commonly called “character.”

In this section, we briefly describe a few emerging conclusions from that robust, ongoing research and comment on their relevance for a politics of character formation.

The modern empirical literature on non-cognitive skills begins in many respects with the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. Heckman studied the outcomes of individuals who attended certain preschool programs in the 1960s and 1970s and found that the non-cognitive skills they acquired from those programs explained significant improvements in long-term socioeconomic wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> His initial results proved enormously influential and ushered in a wide range of research across disciplines on the importance of such skills as perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, and leadership ability for opportunity and mobility. Similarly, a growing literature on “peer effects” documents how classmates can substantially alter a student’s behavior and success in life without directly improving test scores or other measures of academic ability. More recently, research from Angela Duckworth on “grit” has brought renewed public attention to the importance of non-cognitive skills.<sup>10</sup>

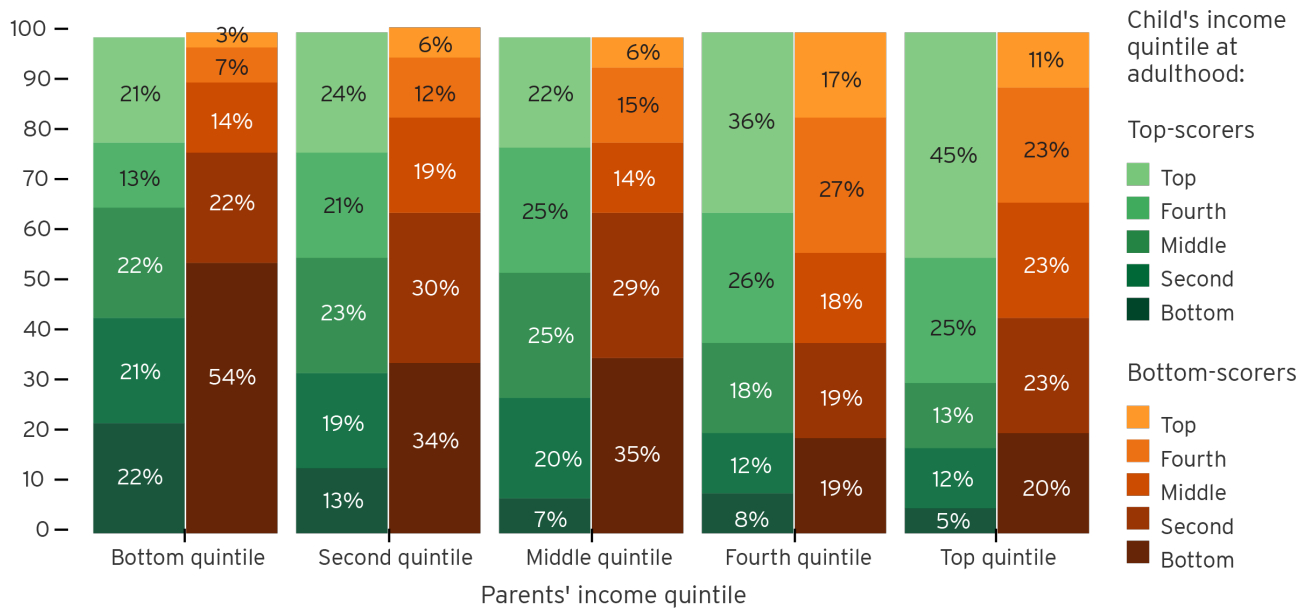
The research on these soft skills is far from settled, and important debates continue over which non-cognitive skills actually matter and to what degree their impacts can be disentangled from cognitive skills. For instance, Duckworth’s “grit” scale has its critics, with many insisting that the effects of grit are small, that the measure offers little new insight, and that grit is not a skill to be developed, but a highly heritable personality trait. Our goal here is not to adjudicate these complicated debates. It is instead to point out that widespread empirical consensus can be obfuscated by ongoing scholarly disagreement. While much more research is needed to understand the role and character of these skills, two important conclusions have emerged to guide policy thinking: (1) non-cognitive skills do improve labor market and social outcomes, and (2) these skills can be developed.<sup>11</sup>

On the first conclusion, a recent paper by the Brookings Institution’s Hamilton Project surveys the growing evidence on the important role of non-cognitive skills in predicting both educational and labor market outcomes.<sup>12</sup> They find that today’s labor market increasingly demands and rewards non-cognitive skills, in many cases more than cognitive ability. What this means is that high test scores and cognitive ability early in life does not guarantee labor market success. Likewise, relatively low cognitive ability does not lock students into a lifetime of poor outcomes. While

cognitive and non-cognitive skills are correlated, they remain distinct, robust individual predictors of welfare. With a labor market that increasingly requires service and social-oriented capabilities, soft skills that manifest themselves in the form of extracurricular participation, for example, are increasingly predictive of stable employment and high earnings.

In our own earlier work, summarized in “The Character Factor,”<sup>13</sup> we produced descriptive data for relative mobility rates for adolescents at different income levels, based on their score in a “coding speed” test, widely used as a measure of perseverance (the test is absurdly easy but spine-crackingly dull):

**Percent chance of moving up or down the family income ladder, by parents' income quintile and non-cognitive skills**



Source: Richard V. Reeves and Kimberly Howard, “The Glass Floor: Education, Downward Mobility, and Opportunity Hoarding” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2013), figure 4b.

Demonstrating that character strengths contribute to better socioeconomic outcomes is only half the story. For policymakers, it must further be shown that these are in fact malleable skills, rather than simply heritable traits. This tension is built into the very word “character,” which refers both to behavioral qualities that can be developed through discipline and education, as well as to relatively unchangeable personality traits. Much more research is needed to disentangle these two aspects of non-cognitive ability. Nonetheless, the research is clear enough that a great many valuable soft skills, including persistence, attentive listening, and social competence, can indeed be shaped and nurtured by parents, teachers, and others. Reforming education evaluations and investing to further develop these skills may well be one of the most valuable social interventions available to us.

This is difficult territory, however, and policymakers need to tread carefully. We are a long way from



having measures of character skill that are robust enough to support accountability mechanisms, as our colleague Russ Whitehurst has pointed out in recent papers.<sup>14</sup> There is a danger that, as so often, K-12 institutions are expected to bear most of the weight. There is a good deal of work to be done on crafting an approach to policy that builds character. But this work will go more easily if liberals and conservatives can agree on its importance.

### 3. The problem with distinguishing between “résumé” and “eulogy” character virtues

One obstacle to greater consensus is the tendency of conservatives to downgrade those character virtues which are associated with individuality, as opposed to those associated with community and institutions. In practice, the distinction is not very sharp, and by putting so much weight on the so-called “moral character virtues,” conservatives tend to deter liberals.

More than anyone, David Brooks has brought character back to the center of the political conversation in the U.S. His most recent book, *The Road to Character*, reformulates a dichotomy laid out by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik between “Adam I” and “Adam II.”<sup>15</sup> Adam I is the Adam who attains worldly success through the sorts of virtues proudly displayed on a résumé. Adam II makes sacrifices for others and finds inner peace through the virtues that would be celebrated at a eulogy. All of us are a mixture of each Adam, of course. But Brooks worries that Adam I has come to dominate Adam II. We have abandoned the traditional, moral qualities of character for self-interested, modern ones. As Brooks puts it, our meritocratic, utilitarian culture has redefined the meaning of character: “It is used less to describe traits like selflessness, generosity, self-sacrifice, and other qualities that sometimes make worldly success less likely. It is instead used to describe traits like self-control, grit, resilience, and tenacity, qualities that make worldly success more likely.”

Having outlined the philosophical contrast between Adam I and Adam II, Brooks proceeds through a series of evocative portraits of figures ranging from Montaigne and Samuel Johnson to Frances Perkins and A. Philip Randolph. These highlight the complexities of a rich, well-lived humane life. But they also bring out the limitations of the résumé virtues/eulogy virtues dichotomy. Each of these figures, exemplars of the moral character Brooks celebrates, also embodies the fortitude, prudence, and self-drive that make worldly success possible, but which he dismisses as mere “résumé” virtues.

In real life, very few people are utility-maximizing egoists, jumping through hoop after hoop in pursuit of material success. That caricature of a modern *Homo economicus* does not do justice to the complexity of human motivation and human life. Instead, your typical “Adam I” men and women work not for selfish gain, but for the sake of their children and their families.

The liberal conception of character includes qualities of prudence, self-control, and personal fortitude, which strongly influence an individual's capacity to direct their own life projects. These virtues are self-oriented, in that they are essentially concerned with improving oneself, unlike the sorts of altruistic virtues typically promoted by communitarians. And they are indeed résumé virtues, in that they are rewarded by the market economy and necessary for worldly material success.

But these character strengths are not *only* deployed for self-interest. They are also necessary for the nurturing of loving relationships and the maintenance of social institutions. The norms most associated with the acquisition of worldly success are the very norms needed to sustain family and communal life. This is not a new observation. As Teddy Roosevelt put it in 1900, "as a rule, the man who is slack in his studies will be slack in his football work; it is character that counts in both."<sup>16</sup> Virtues in human life go together, and the people who most excel in their résumé virtues are also, by and large, the very people most likely to lead the sorts of lives celebrated by communitarians.

Marriage and family life are good examples. Those worried about the rise of résumé virtues see the family as increasingly distorted by a meritocratic and utilitarian cultural ethos. Brooks, for instance, describes the dangers of "merit-tangled love," a phenomenon by which children come to understand their parents' love as conditional on a certain GPA. Marriage, too, we are often told, has suffered from our excessively individualistic culture, which allegedly leaves no room for the emotional quiet and loving sacrifice need to sustain the institution.

There is, of course, some truth in this. But the sweeping critique often presented goes much too far. A growing body of evidence suggests that so-called résumé virtues are important for maintaining stable families. The huge class divide in marriage documented by Charles Murray, Isabel Sawhill, and others makes it difficult to believe that résumé-oriented norms are to blame for the decline in marriage. After all, high academic achievement and greater economic independence—two symptoms of a résumé virtue-based individualistic culture—are now strongly associated with marriage.

To those of us who have been married or had children, it is reasonably clear why résumé virtues and flourishing family life go hand in hand: marriage and family require work. Our popular culture's romanticized, fairy-tale conception of marriage as the cosmic matching of soul mates often obscures this unromantic truth. Building a successful marriage requires skills not unlike those needed for employment. Spouses must be able to delay gratification, to negotiate and compromise, and to exercise emotional self-control. In much the same way, good parenting requires more than loving commitment, it requires concrete skills, ideally internalized as core character traits.<sup>17</sup> Family life, a domain integral to securing the conditions of personal flourishing, is not inhibited by the character traits needed for material success. Again, as the example of marriage makes clear, work skills *are* life skills. Likewise, communities dominated by bourgeois, self-efficacious norms are the

most likely to be rich in social capital, a measure of communitarian welfare.<sup>18</sup> Churches rely on volunteers who turn up on time, work hard, persist in their tasks, organize their time, work well in teams, and so on.

In short: the person with a moving eulogy likely had impressive résumé.

Character goes well beyond the rational response to economic and political incentives. Character relies on norms, not paternalistic nudges; it is cultivated through culture and role models, not directly engineered by technocratic government policy. While public policy plays an important role in building up the necessary norms for social capital formation and moral habituation, especially through education, the primary “schools for character” remain personal and familial relationships. A full treatment of the relationship between state-imposed incentives and social norms is complex and lies outside the scope of this paper. But as recent work by Samuel Bowles suggests, introducing incentives to shape behavior can actually *crowd out* existing social norms, undermining valuable altruistic motivations.

Brooks’ distinction between résumé and eulogy virtues does some useful work. We all know people who have not made the right tradeoff and who pursue worldly material success too effusively to the detriment of more fulfilling life plans. But we believe he is wrong to draw such a sharp line between the qualities of character that enable success in the labor market, and those needed to flourish in life.

## 4. A defense of character formation from liberal morality

So far, our liberal argument for character has focused on the instrumental connection between life chances and the development of performance virtues or soft skills; and on the observation that these skills are necessary for the maintenance of social institutions such as marriage, family, and community, within which many of these skills are nurtured.

But the liberal case for character is not merely instrumental. These virtues are intrinsically desirable moral goods, from a liberal perspective. Indeed, they have deep historical roots within the liberal tradition. A liberal politics of character formation stems from a commitment not merely to choice, *in vacuo*, but to a society in which individuals have the tools to choose well.

Most contemporary liberals of support the proposition that the state ought to remain neutral between competing conceptions of the human good. In John Rawls’ famous formulation, liberal political philosophy is committed to a conception of justice as “political not metaphysical,” eschewing any comprehensive vision of morality.<sup>19</sup> In Ronald Dworkin’s words, “the government

must be neutral on what might be called the questions of the good life.”<sup>20</sup> This doctrine of liberal neutrality is skeptical of any forthright discussion of character formation in politics. After all, endorsing a conception of what constitutes good character seems to inevitably entail some relatively thick assumptions about what constitutes the good life. Such a liberal stance is often traced back to John Stuart Mill, who famously insists in *On Liberty* that, “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way.”

But Mill cared about more than the brute fact of being able to choose one’s own good. Mill was obsessed with the intellectual and moral virtues needed to sustain a liberal political order. As he explains in *Considerations on Representative Government*, “The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.”<sup>21</sup> One of his arguments for local government was that engagement in decisionmaking and collective decisionmaking would cultivate individual character, even at the expense of some efficiency.

Mill’s great interest in cultivating individuality and liberty rested on a robust conception of character. Men and women have to learn to critically evaluate dominant external norms and must have the tools to judiciously decide for themselves how to live. As he famously puts it, “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.” Human lives must be lived from the inside-out. This does not mean crudely that men and women should be able to simply live as they please. It means that living well requires a sense of self-given purpose: “It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it.”

A similar argument in favor of character formation was advanced a century before Mill by his great liberal predecessor, Adam Smith. Smith argues at length in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that prudence and character are not only indispensable for social wellbeing, but for individual happiness as well.<sup>22</sup> Reflecting his Stoic influences, Smith argues that moral virtue does not merely consist in living according the rules of justice; it requires sturdy character and internal self-command. Smith’s conception of character underpins his much-neglected critique of the capitalist economy developed in *Wealth of Nations*. There he observes that the market economy and division of labor transform men into mere cogs in a machine of production, with the laborer “mutilated and deformed in a[n]... essential part of the character of human nature.”<sup>23</sup> That deformity consists in man’s inability to think and act for himself. Once again, the laborer is still capable of “choice” in the narrowest sense, but he has lost the qualities of character needed for thinking through and committing himself to his life’s projects.

Just because 18th and 19th century liberals were concerned with character does not, of course,

mean that their 21st successors need be. But it does strongly suggest that such considerations are deeply ingrained within the liberal tradition. The distinctively liberal conception of character reflects the distinctively liberal value of autonomy—literally, self-governance. But autonomy does not mean brute choice, it means securing the conditions in which individuals can choose well. This means ensuring that individuals develop the virtues of prudence, self-discipline, and delayed gratification, as well as the strength to resist dominant external temptations. These virtues of character are precisely those we defended in the previous section as instrumentally valuable, but which are more fundamentally valuable as integral aspects of living well.

To Mill, a truly autonomous character combines authenticity and application. Authenticity is demonstrated by our shaping of our own character—a reminder that an emphasis on character need not imply fatalism, since we are capable of improving ourselves. Application involves self-control and the capacity to plan for the long term while postponing present gain. Autonomous character of this sort, enriched by a sense of personal agency, discipline, and a thoughtful planning for the future, is more important today as society becomes increasingly fluid and uncertain. So important is character for individuality, and thus liberalism, that Mill believed each of us to be under a moral responsibility to seek to improve our own character. “The duty of man is the same in respect of his own nature as in respect to the nature of all other things,” he wrote, “namely not to follow but to amend it.”<sup>24</sup>

Some liberals will likely remain unconvinced with the defense of character we have advanced so far. One familiar charge may be that the endorsement of any character virtues constitutes a paternalistic and illicit preference for some moral worldviews over others. This critique falls on a spectrum, ranging from the contention that the state should remain absolutely neutral in such matters, to the stronger condemnation of the particular character virtues we endorse as a form of cultural imperialism. But there is a danger here of a particular version of what Murray describes as refusing to “preach what we practice.”<sup>25</sup>

Elite liberal commentators who often preach political agnosticism on questions of character formation are nonetheless committed to instilling in their own children the most exemplary résumé virtues. Their children are taught to be prudent, to delay gratification, to think in the long term, and to control their emotions in service of important objectives. Indeed, one of David Brooks’ great insights not only in *The Road to Character*, but throughout his career, is the extraordinary emphasis elite Americans put on cultivating their children’s Adam I, their résumé virtues.<sup>26</sup> Consider, for example, a *New Yorker* piece this past summer documenting what the magazine’s contributors are reading to their children.<sup>27</sup> The brief vignettes of parent-child reading projects don’t just show the loving commitment of family life, they provide insight into the focus on human capital formation taken as unquestionably vital by many elite Americans. One contributor even admits (facetiously) to reading academic journal articles to his nine-month-old.

It is curious that those who place such a focus on cultivating soft skills and résumé virtues for their own children so forthrightly critique as unduly paternalistic the very same focus when applied on a broader cultural level. Our case is fairly simple: if character formation of the sort we have described is important enough to dictate how the elite raise their own children, it should be a welcome part of a broader social commitment to expanding the opportunities of our most disadvantaged fellow citizens.

But conservatives may not be content with our argument either, with two objections in particular. First, the conception of character presented here is too thin to meaningfully direct individuals to human flourishing. Second, by placing such emphasis on moral autonomy, character as defended here could undermine important social and cultural authorities. Both objections have merit, but both can be answered.

It is true that the conception of character presented here is thinner than the more comprehensive accounts advanced by many virtue ethically-minded (and typically religious) conservatives. We have defended aspects of character that concern self-oriented résumé virtues, rather than a more ambitious account of the constitutive elements of *eudaimonia*. In formulating a defense of character we have gone further than many liberals are willing to go. But our defense of these virtues of character does not imply that character is nothing more than self-oriented qualities of discipline and self-command. Perhaps other virtues ought to be added to the list. Our claim is merely that these performance virtues ought to be promoted not only for the instrumental advantages they bring, but also as integral aspects of human flourishing. It may be true then that our account does not go far enough, but whatever thicker vision of the good conservatives wish to put forth, it will in all likelihood include our thinner one.

The second objection is more fundamental. It invokes a longstanding tension between liberty and individuality on the one hand, and community and individuality on the other. Conservatives point out that social norms and established institutions—inherited social scripts—embody deep truths about the requirements of a life well-lived, and so direct individuals towards a flourishing life. Elevating the individual's ability to question and challenge such scripts can correspondingly do harm as well as good. All true, up to a point. But endorsing autonomy as a central moral currency does not demand that we also embrace a radical vision of a gnostic self, liberated only through the necessary and continuous deconstruction of all custom and authority.

Liberals, including Mill, are often misunderstood on this point, so it is worth quoting a crucial passage from *On Liberty*:

It would be absurd to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience has as yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another...

But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to *use and interpret experience in his own way*.<sup>28</sup>

As it happens, conservatives may need these liberal character virtues, of using and interpreting experience, to sustain conservative communities. In *The Fractured Republic*, Yuval Levin points to the need to build conservative communities at a local level, given the fragmentation of national cultural life; the kinds of community that proponents of the so-called “Benedict Option” have in mind.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, traditional communities and norms now have to be consciously developed, rather than simply conserved.

If that’s true, a number of individuals will need to determine to be part of the enterprise, based on their individual assessment of what the good is and how to achieve it. Personal fortitude and the strength to challenge external temptations—in other words, autonomous character—is sorely needed for conservatives who wish to thrive as signs of contradiction in a culture they see as increasingly hostile to their way of life. Liberal conceptions of character may be essential for conservative communities, just as much as for as liberal ones.

## 5. Schools of character: Liberalism and social institutions

In the movie *Boyhood*, the main character Mason complains while bowling that his father won’t let him use the bumpers. “You don’t want bumpers,” his father says. “Life doesn’t give you bumpers.” Social and civic institutions might be seen as bumpers, helping people to stay on track. But Mason’s father’s point applies reasonably well to life in liberal societies, where the regulatory power of social institutions tend be lessened. The bumpers get lowered. Conservatives, like the boy, want them back. Individuals are more exposed now; they are expected to be able to write their own script rather than reading off one that is provided to them.

There is a tension here. Character is largely formed within institutions, rather than as a result of isolated self-development.<sup>30</sup> But one result of the development of a strong individual character is that we may, later, be better able to navigate our way in the world with less reliance on those very institutions. This is one reason why liberals typically make sharp distinctions between children and adults. Mill, for instance, took what today would be considered a starkly conservative view about the responsibilities of parents, going so far as to propose that only couples who could prove that they had the resources to raise children should be permitted to marry.<sup>31</sup> Committed parenting of the kind likely to produce the strong individuals necessary for a flourishing liberal society also requires something that sounds distinctly conservative: sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

Liberals tend to support paternalism for children, but not for adults. Family life again provides

the most important example. As scholars like Isabel Sawhill, Brink Lindsey, and Andrew Cherlin have shown, family instability damages children's prospects, in large part by weakening human capital development.<sup>33</sup> The growing class gap in family stability—"Diverging Destinies" in Sara McLanahan's phrase—therefore reinforces the intergenerational transmission of inequality.<sup>34</sup>

Of course parents raise children, not governments, as Bill Clinton reminded us long ago. But when families struggle or fail, there is a strong case for public policy to step in, through programs such as home visiting or pre-K education, or even the provision of residential educational settings for the most disadvantaged.

The main message here for liberals is that freedom of choice as an adult is correctly constrained by the responsibilities of parenthood, including the commitment to raise our children in a stable environment, since this is what will provide those children with the character strengths necessary for them to lead autonomous, self-directed lives. In this regard at least, "family values" are quintessentially liberal ones. Most parents with higher levels of education seem to have taken these messages to heart, remaining strongly committed to marriage and family stability, even as they express liberal views on same-sex marriage and drug legalization.<sup>35</sup>

In the liberal framework outlined in this paper, the institution of marriage supports parents in their choice to commit to raising their kids together. This "co-parenting contract" model of marriage may in part explain the rise in "gray divorce," with rates doubling among the over 50s in the last 25 years. Couples may honor their commitment to raise their children together but then go their separate ways—less "until death us do part," than "until our last high schooler departs."<sup>36</sup>

Commitment is a key virtue underpinning successful relationships in all aspects of life. But a shared commitment to child-rearing is perhaps the most important. In liberal societies, where marriage is a choice, free increasingly even of economic necessity, commitment is a choice too. The liberal insistence on choice, and the conservative desire for commitment are not then necessarily in conflict. Chosen commitment is the goal.

## 6. The liberal case for character in a populist age

In an essay on character published in the *Public Interest* 30 years ago, James Q. Wilson defined modernity as the transition from a culture of self-control to a culture of self-expression.<sup>37</sup> This dichotomy reflects a common assessment of contemporary life by both the supporters and critics of modernity. For John Stuart Mill, the ancients' culture of self-abnegation and authority was hopefully to be overcome by a new, liberating ethos of individuality and self-command. David Brooks, on the other hand, laments what Charles Taylor termed our "culture of authenticity" and wishes to restore



an “older tradition of self-combat” as a corrective for our new tradition of “self-liberation and self-expression.”<sup>38</sup>

But character as we have described it here is not merely associated with self-control, but with self-expression properly understood. The robust, liberal conception we defend is not satisfied granting men and women the mere ability to make decisions about how they would like to live. Men and women must be given the tools to *choose well*. They must be able to think independently, to resist the easy acquiescence to a dominant culture, to consider their welfare holistically, not only in the short run, and to commit themselves fully to the life plans they choose. By “choosing well” we do not necessarily mean “choosing correctly,” as some conservatives with a thicker operative conception of the good life might insist on. Instead, we mean the qualities of personal character that allow individuals to thrive in our contemporary culture. Just as artistic genius requires mastery over the established rules of the craft, the fullest form of self-expression and self-direction necessitates the enabling constraints of self-control.

Character formation plays an important instrumental role in putting the disadvantaged on a path toward material success. But more than just that, self-efficacious character is a constitutive element of a flourishing human life. A humane, liberal society is one in which men and women possess the discipline, self-command, and personal autonomy needed to live with a sense of purpose and direction. Character is an indispensable condition of such a society.

# Endnotes

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