

A question of character

by Richard Reeves

The idea of "good character" sounds old-fashioned and patronising, but it may be the key to some of our most entrenched social problems. Politicians across the spectrum are starting to realise this

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The first headmaster of Stowe school, JF Roxburgh, declared his goal to be turning out young men who would be "acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck." A mixture of courtesy and courage used to be essential to the idea of a British citizen's character. Brits were the sort of people who knew both how to survive a Blitz and queue politely. Similarly, Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the scout movement, aimed to induce in his young charges "some of the spirit of self-negation, self-discipline, sense of humour, responsibility, helpfulness to others, loyalty and patriotism which go to make 'character.'" He described his movement as nothing less than a "character factory."

But in the postwar shift towards a less constrained and judgemental society--"character-talk" in Stefan Collini's phrase--dropped out of public discourse, except when considering someone's suitability for high office. The idea of good character came to sound old-fashioned and patronising.

"The reason we find the concept of character difficult is because of class conflict in British society," says Matthew Taylor, former head of strategy for Tony Blair, in an interview for my recent Radio 4 Analysis programme "Character Factories." "There was a sense that good character was handed down from a patrician class to the great unwashed."

But thinkers and politicians across the political spectrum are now trying to revive "character-talk." Taylor is pushing the idea of "pro-social behaviour"--recognising, he says, that changes in personal behaviour are essential to successful policy in everything from climate change to obesity. David Cameron called in July for politicians to tackle issues of "public morality." Against the backdrop of the impoverished east end of Glasgow, he insisted that politicians had to drop "moral neutrality." He criticised the political classes for "a refusal to make judgments about what is good and bad behaviour, right and wrong." Some people on the left are also starting to argue that character might matter as much as resources in improving life chances.

Bestselling books like Lynne Truss's *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life* speak to a generalised

anxiety about the breakdown of positive social norms of behaviour. But it is important to keep this in perspective. There is some evidence of a weakening of certain norms--more littering, public profanity, drunkenness and selfishness on the roads and public transport. But most of the time, most people are perfectly pleasant. British society as a whole is not "broken" in any meaningful sense.

Of course, it is notoriously hard for politicians to get traction in the area of behaviour. They often fall into the trap described by philosopher Jon Elster of "willing what cannot be willed." And Cameron is certainly taking some risks with his incursions into morality. By insisting that individuals should take a share of responsibility for their obesity or poverty, he ensured headlines such as "Cameron tells fat people it's their fault" and revived fears of a war against the undeserving poor. Behind the headlines, though, Cameron is thinking his way towards an integration of his ideas on responsibility, morality and "broken Britain," which may lead him towards a consideration of character formation.

Conservatism and character seem like natural political bedfellows given traditional right-wing concerns with social order and reducing state dependency. What is more surprising is the number of people on the centre-left who can also see the point of a new focus on character. For them, the concern is less with general social interaction--although they worry about that too--than with the character of a small, influential and expensive group who Tony Blair once labelled the "deeply excluded."

Since character is an unfashionable concept, it is important to be clear what it means in this public policy context. The three key ingredients of a good character are: a sense of personal agency or self-direction; an acceptance of personal responsibility; and effective regulation of one's own emotions, in particular the ability to resist temptation or at least defer gratification. Progressives are realising that, thus defined, character is intimately linked to many of their social goals--and also that it is unevenly distributed. Indeed, inequality of character may now be as important as inequality of economic resources.

The specific concerns of progressives can be divided into three connected themes: the link between character attributes and life chances; the life chances "penalty" being paid by the children who do not develop a good character; and the growing demand for good character in the labour market.

Recent claims about social mobility in Britain grinding to a halt are exaggerated. But it does seem that the likelihood of a person being upwardly mobile is increasingly influenced by personal qualities such as confidence and self-control. Julia Margo, associate director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, has assembled an impressive body of evidence linking character to life chances. Her work, which draws on that by Leon Feinstein at the Institute of Education, shows that measured levels of "application"--defined as dedication and a capacity for concentration--at the age of ten have a bigger impact on earnings by the age of 30 than ability in maths. Similarly, what psychologists call an "internal locus of control"--a sense of personal agency--at the age of ten has a bigger impact than reading ability on earnings.

Avner Offer, professor of economic history at Oxford, likewise describes how "commitment devices" can help individuals to manage their own desires. In his book *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (OUP), Offer provides a vignette of a familiar self-control challenge: "A young student ponders whether to

spend the evening revising at her desk or to go out with friends... Better marks mean better prospects, but dancing and drink are attractive too. How much to sacrifice tonight for a remote future? When to stop having fun, but also, when to stop being serious?... Conventions, expectations and institutions have built up gradually over decades and centuries to form a stock of equipment available to deal with her problem... sources and strategies of self-control, both cognitive and social, take time to develop." Offer argues that "personal capacity for commitment" is inculcated in institutions such as the family along what Margo calls "paths to socialisation." Character is made, not born.

Offer argues that consumer capitalism, by providing a constant flow of novelty, undermines these sources and strategies. It is harder for us to stick to our commitments in a society bombarded with advertising temptations and saturated with the idea of individual consumer choice. This seems implausible: after all, as Margo's work shows, plenty of people do end up with good character traits--and if anything, it is the more affluent who do so. Nonetheless, Offer is surely right to argue that the "stock of equipment" which makes up character is of vital importance in the construction of a successful life.

The second concern is that children who fail to develop positive character traits are less likely to succeed--and these children come overwhelmingly from low-income homes. The political right used to argue that poverty is caused by weakness of character; the left is now realising it may be the other way around. "Over time, poverty has become more associated with differences in character development," Margo told me. "So while in the past a poor, deprived child would have about the same chance of developing a good character as a more affluent one, our research suggests that children who were born into deprivation in the 1970s as opposed to the late 1950s were much less likely to develop good character than more affluent groups." The family is the main "character factory"--and Margo's work shows that some families are now much more effective manufacturers than others.

We need a better understanding of what is going on in these failing families. Some evolutionary biologists point to genetic inheritance, and it is clear that some character traits are inherited. Traditional left-wing analyses, on the other hand, highlight material deprivation. But the weight of evidence is that good parents provide good insulation against inherited negative traits--and that being a good parent has little to do with having a good income.

Stephen Scott, professor of child health and behaviour at King's College London, has conducted a range of studies showing how the behaviour of parents influences the life trajectories of their children, even when genetic predispositions are taken into account. "There's an interaction between your genetic predisposition and the way you turn out according to the way you're raised," says Scott. "When it comes to being antisocial, aggressive, stealing and lying, the interaction is a big one. If you have poor self-control and a rather twitchy, irritable temperament and you're brought up in a harsh way, it's bad news. For that group, the rate of criminality aged 17 is about 40 per cent. But if you have that twitchy character and you're brought up in a reasonably calm, soothing way--your parents don't overreact, they let you run around in the park after school--you will do well."

If low-income parents are doing less well on this front--as it seems they are--the question of how poverty interacts with parenting becomes important. Scott is emphatic here: "Financial poverty is a factor, but not a central one," he says. "I am fond of saying poverty of what? And actually it seems to be poverty of the parent-child experience... that leads to poor child outcomes rather than poverty of a material kind." Consistent parental love and discipline is the motor of the character production line, and not all children are lucky enough to receive it.

A poor start in life, in terms of character development, reduces educational performance, which obviously lessens labour market opportunities. But--and this is the third concern--lack of good character has a more direct influence on job opportunities too. In *Aesthetic Labour and the Policy-Making Agenda: Time for a Reappraisal of Skills*, Chris Warhurst and his colleagues at Strathclyde University show that an increasing number of employers are following the advice of Rocco Forte, who, when asked the secret of providing great service in hotels, replied: "Hire nice people." As the economy shifts towards service jobs, the person increasingly becomes part of the product. This means that "soft skills" such as social confidence, patience and kindness grow in importance. Ironically, it is often the children of the middle classes who make the best servants. In Glasgow, studied in detail by Warhurst and his colleagues, 80 per cent of jobs are in the service sector, but the people living in nearby places like Easterhouse aren't getting them. "The danger is that many people in deprived areas are being denied work because of a lack of cultural capital," says Warhurst. "In Glasgow, 50 per cent of jobs are now filled by commuters from the middle-class suburbs."

So if there has been a corrosion of character--and the poor have been disproportionately hit--who is the villain of the piece? Historically, the left has blamed capitalism; Marx's exploration of "alienation" is an early example. But during the 20th century, concern has shifted from the labour market to the product market, with fears about the character-sapping effects of materialism and consumerism. The right, by contrast, points the finger at the loosening of social norms and constraints associated with the 1960s. Of course, there is some cross-dressing here, on both sides: Blair attacked some elements of 1960s liberalism and Cameron is a critic of corporate irresponsibility. But each side, in its own way, blames liberalism: for the right, the social liberalism symbolised by the 1960s; for the left, the market liberalism associated with the 1980s.

The shared claim is that liberal individualism has eaten away at the architecture of norms and morals which incubate and sustain good character and public virtue. If the claim were true, it would be a disaster for liberalism. More than most moral or political philosophies, liberalism relies upon character to prevent freedom tipping into excess. It is not a coincidence that the term "character" acquired the sense of personal qualities--rather than, as before, simply denoting a figure in a play or story--in the 18th century. British Enlightenment thinkers from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill placed a huge emphasis on character development. Smith and Mill knew that good character is about successful self-regulation--without which the case for a strong state or stifling religious guidance becomes harder to resist.

But it is not at all clear that market liberalism does corrode character through materialism, or at least that it is any worse than earlier phases of development. Elite commentators who worry that ordinary people are being coarsened by consumerism--that the desire for material goods has become the new opium of the people--do not usually take this view of their own consumption. It is nonetheless likely that some forms of consumption are more positive for character than others. The late Tibor Scitovsky, in *The Joyless Economy*, distinguished between "defensive consumption," which was aimed at mere comfort, and "stimulating consumption" which was novel, educative and enlarging. The point is not that consumption is bad in and of itself, but that certain kinds may in fact bring more value to the consumer than others; hence Scitovsky's call for "skilful consumption." It is reasonable to suggest that good character leads to "better" consumption in this sense. But there is little evidence that consumption itself is character-sapping.

Consumerism may in fact build character, by giving people the chance to make real choices and to exercise some power over companies and brands--power which they may lack in the labour market. This, at least, is the persuasive conclusion of the US author Robert Lane in his book *The Market Experience*.

If consumerism, then, is not obviously guilty of assassinating character, what about the labour market? Richard Sennett, in *The Corrosion of Character: Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, has suggested that workplace insecurity and inequality are undermining some of the core components of good character, especially loyalty and integrity. Again, the evidence refuses to stack up neatly. Most jobs are good for character, giving the holder a sense of purpose, status and camaraderie. But again, there is a distributional issue here. Jobs which allow for autonomy and stimulate pride and purpose--which enhance character--are often restricted to the fortunate and talented. We must then be attentive not only to the quantity of jobs, but also their quality. By and large, however, it is not work which kills character--but worklessness. Being out of paid work, especially for a long period of time, erodes not only skills but also confidence, discipline and general social engagement. It has an effect which some labour market economists call "scarring."

From a character perspective, it is better to have a large number of people being unemployed for a short period of time than a few being left out of work altogether. This points to light regulation of the labour market combined with heavy investment in preventing long-term unemployment.

If market liberalism cannot be convincingly blamed for corroding character, what about social liberalism? Has the loosening of laws on divorce, abortion, contraception and homosexuality undermined character? Here the liberal defence is weaker: principally because of the influence of greater individual freedom on some aspects of family life.

Liberals are on pretty strong grounds defending the relaxation of social attitudes and laws which previously inhibited the activities and life chances of particular groups--such as women, ethnic minorities, and gay men and women. Having your opportunities denied because of ethnicity, or forced into an unwanted role as a housewife or mother, or made to conduct a love life in secrecy and fear because of your sexuality, was not only unjust but destructive of the character of the individuals concerned. Shared morals and social norms are vital--but not ones based on discrimination.

Greater individual freedom to commit "sins" which harm only the sinner can also be cleared of doing too much damage to character. Certainly the ready availability of alcohol, pornography and (soon) gambling halls make for greater temptation; perhaps our "commitment strategies" have to be stronger as a result. Oscar Wilde said the only way to be rid of temptation was to yield to it. He was right, as usual. But if the temptations come thick and fast, you might end up spending your whole life yielding. So an increase in the supply of temptation does present a test of character--but it is hard to argue that it actually undermines it. Liberals should support tighter regulation of gambling or pornography or drinking if harm to others or corrosion of character can be proven. But we are some way from that point. Policy ought therefore to incline towards freedom.

Nonetheless, the liberalisation of attitudes has done some damage. The "anything goes" mentality has sometimes translated into a reluctance to pass judgement on the actions of our peers, even when they are clearly wrong. Communitarian critics of liberalism such as Michael Sandel and Alasdair Macintyre argue that individualism has crowded out virtue and morality: the regulation of public behaviour is one area where they are right.

Moreover, the impact of social liberalism may have damaged character development in the most important place of all: the family. The necessary sacrifices of good parenting collide with the assumption that the individual is entitled to lead his or her life only by reference to their own desires. Parenting is a sacrificial, self-negating activity, and not all adults are up to the job. Finding the time, energy and commitment that needs to be spent over decades to raise a child well is tough. This has always been the case--and it should be noted that most parents now spend more time with their children than in previous generations. But the assumption that parents can have it all is entirely at odds with the reality of successful child-rearing. One of the most positive developments of the last half century is the entry of women into the labour market, but it has, of course, subtracted from the time and commitment to making homes and children, and men have seldom stepped in to fill the gap.

The liberal ambivalence about authority is also problematic in the family setting. "One of the key things about a family that works well is the in-built hierarchy," says Julia Margo. "The ideal sort of family for character development is two adult parents and older siblings who are well behaved. Then there are opportunities for purposeful activities: a family holiday with joint activities, or regularly playing football in the park. Family mealtimes, and having meaningful conversations with parents, are particularly important."

In other words, "traditional" families make the best character factories. Parental authority is important, especially when children are young. Taking part in traditional activities like Sunday lunch is not nostalgia, just good parenting. And of course, anyone concerned with character must be concerned with family breakdown. It is harder to be a good parent alone. Not impossible, of course. But it is a fact that divorce or separation is where individual freedom collides most dramatically with the collective need for our children to be well brought up. It is not obvious how public policy can help parents stay together. But at least some politicians are talking about it. Barack Obama has recently stressed the responsibilities of black fathers--a theme that was then echoed by David Cameron.

More immediately, there is a strong liberal case for much earlier and more decisive state intervention in families where the parents are failing. Each individual needs not only the freedom and resources but also the character traits to make something of their lives. So given the evidence linking early years' experience with the development of good character, the state should not leave children to the mercies of bad parents. Of course, difficult issues arise around who is to judge when parents have proved themselves sufficiently incompetent to require help. But compelling failing mothers and fathers to attend parenting classes is not in itself illiberal.

Stephen Scott, who is also director of research and development at the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners, believes that parenting classes work, even for those compelled to attend, and can point to substantial research evidence. He has just conducted a ten-year study, to be published in the *British Medical Journal*, which shows that between one third and one half of the improvements in parental performance after classes remain a decade after the intervention. Again, this is difficult political territory, but thoughtful politicians are entering it.

Beyond family, there are lesser but important character factories in the shape of school and other institutions for children and young people. The "social and emotional aspects of learning" element of the national curriculum is a step towards seeing educational institutions as factories for character rather than for the production of future units of human capital. But schools need to take their character-building responsibilities more seriously. In the US and Canada, substantial investment is made in "character education" programmes. We in Britain remain, for now, more squeamish about the concept.

Structured, purposeful out-of-school activities can help too, which means, of course, that most youth clubs do not. Margo says there are certain key ingredients that make for success. "It is regular time with the same adult over an extended period, so that you respect them and learn from them," she says. "Which is why things like the scout movement are so effective, because you're progressing, you're ageing through the institution. And there tends to be a very good staying-on rate for the adult workers, so you have a lot of interaction with the same adult over a long period of time." Baden-Powell, and all of us involved in the scout movement--I've recently "come out" as a scout leader--would agree.

Character is an old idea with contemporary relevance. A considerable number of pressing social problems--obesity, welfare reform, pensions, public disorder, educational failure, social immobility--are all, in part, questions of character. It is a treacherous political terrain, but one in which governments are increasingly entangled. Anyone who is interested in creating a successful liberal society is interested in character too, whether they admit it or not. Good societies need good people.

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