



The Road to Character

David Brooks | Random House Business, 2015

Curious about *The Road to Character*? Read our review below. While we're awaiting the copyright holder's go-ahead to summarize this book in our usual summary format, we hope you'll find our review just as helpful.

Review

David Brooks, PBS commentator and *New York Times* op-ed columnist, is the best-selling author of *Bobos In Paradise* and *The Social Animal*. Here he vests deeply in traditional wisdom as he attempts to describe a life path that combines ambition with personal, moral and spiritual growth. In seeking to illustrate a sound moral life, he presents an updated version of the great man theory of social, moral and political history. Brooks's prose is accessible and flows smoothly, though his thinking and writing are grounded in the familiar. Seeking examples and inspiration, he doesn't stray into new or startling ideas in this collection of tales of the lives of historical figures who exemplify his central theme: the quest to live a life of character.

Brooks begins his discussion of the vast dissonance between the greatness of people's accomplishments and the difficulties of their private, sexual or moral life by citing 1965's *A Lonely Man of Faith* by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. The great rabbinical scholar describes two kinds of people: Adam I is external, a maker and doer, living by a "utilitarian calculus." In contrast, Adam II favors internal growth over external ambition; he's driven to be morally sound and to make a difference. Using this rubric, Brooks searches for Adam II as he details the lives of various significant figures, each under a different heading, including "Self-Conquest," "Ordered Love," "Dignity," "Struggle" and "Self-Examination."

Brooks's ideas are simultaneously timeless and regressive, best suited those who need to learn and those who are ready to reflect. Someone well read in existentialism or more contemporary philosophies that embrace the role of doubt, uncertainty and psychology in modern life may find Brooks too traditional. His cultural history and ethical examples will support readers seeking moral guidance, illuminating tales from the past and a grounding in ethical thinking. As he advocates humility, so he proceeds, saying, "I wrote this book not sure I could follow the road to character, but I wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how other people have trodden it."

Personal crisis leads to moral growth.

Brooks argues that every person he offers as an avatar of moral growth had to recover from a devastating personal crisis. How they responded defined their lives – no matter how great their accomplishments. Brooks's examples of people who grew amid interior and exterior struggles cross barriers of time and place. His diverse cast includes philosopher Saint Augustine, novelist George Eliot, President Dwight Eisenhower, US General George Marshall, gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, and the author of *Man's Quest for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl. Brooks offers an array of folksy advice, moral truths and gentle admonitions.

The "Humility Code" encapsulates sound moral practice.

Brooks explains his concept of sound moral practice in the form of his Humility Code, which essentially holds that grace can save you and pride will always fuel your downfall. The 15 tenets of the Code provide a working blueprint for attempting to build a life framework that embraces spirituality, recognizes your flaws, builds your character and takes you toward your goals. Brooks suggests that happiness alone can't satisfy any aware person. You must also attain "holiness." He believes that the knowledge that you've behaved morally generates "moral joy" and brings an inner peace that happiness can't match. These inspiring sentiments evoke cherished standards that are out of kilter (clearly, that's Brooks' point) with today's business, social and political climate in which prideful self-promotion and me-first behavior seem to be requisites for success. Brooks says to walk a better path.

No one is perfect.

You aren't perfect, and neither is anyone else. But you – like all people – want to be perfect, so you strive to cover your imperfections. You want to be good, but your behavior will usually be bad. Your vanity leads you to fail in your attempts to improve yourself. You try to soothe your damaged soul with possessions and status. Yet despite your flaws, you contain limitless potential. You may

do bad things, but you understand they're wrong. If you seek forgiveness and struggle against your demons, Brooks says, choose "inner victory" over "worldly success."

Nothing gives you more strength or better aligns your moral compass than humility. "People who are humble about their own nature are moral realists" and correctly gauge their "own nature" and their tiny place in the grand scheme of life. Nothing diminishes your strength like pride, which Brooks – never a moral relativist – calls a "vice." He believes in an ethical hierarchy and clear demarcations between good and evil, vice and virtue. He attacks pride, which "blinds" you; it encourages you to indulge in destructive certainty, makes you "cold-hearted" and fuels the illusion that you control your life and destiny.

Your struggle between "sin" and "virtue" determines your character.

Brooks regards personal ambition as entirely secondary to the personal "struggle against sin and for virtue." He cautions that nothing you accomplish in life will matter as much as how you conduct this fight. Brooks makes the legitimate point that when you're fighting your "weakness," you must pick your battles. What determines your worth isn't your earnings or status. Your value as a person stems only from how you fight this ongoing battle in the "central drama of life."

Character arises from who and what you become as a result of your fight against sin. The nature of your battle – your bravery or cowardice, your honesty or self-delusion – marks you indelibly. If you choose "disciplined" and "caring" options, you become one sort of a person. If your choices are "selfish, cruel or disorganized," you become another. Just as even "ignoble thoughts" damage your character, so a worthy "act of restraint" improves it. Once again, Brooks drives home his thesis that externals – money, status and power – mean nothing; the internal struggle is all. If you don't consciously acquire character, your desires will rule you. "Habitual self-discipline" is the only tool that can save you from yourself.

Your foundational values build your character and give life meaning.

Your passions can drive you off the path toward building your character. But your "courage, honesty" and "humility" will keep you on the right course. Character stems from your "attachment" to fundamental principles such as "unconditional love" and to worthwhile goals such as doing charitable work or educating your children. These goals continue throughout your life and create a legacy after you're gone. To sustain these character-defining attachments, you need "redemptive assistance," which can come from religion, relationships, community, or "rules, traditions, institutions and exemplars." Turn to the history of your people or your field, or your moral values to see the effort those who came before you put into coping with similar questions and issues. Draw on history for support. You can't walk the path to character alone.

When life forces you to retreat, you need grace.

Suffering setbacks and then fighting to return to where you once were is the nature of life. Brooks calls this “advance-retreat-advance.” Grace in enduring trouble and emerging from it can come in the form of love or help from people you don’t know or, Brooks believes, from some form of heavenly intervention. Grace delivers the crucial and enduring message that you aren’t facing your difficulties alone. No matter how much shame you might feel at your reversals of fortune, “you are accepted...by that which is greater than you.” An evolved person will come to feel grateful and to embrace the need to give back in the same way that he or she received help.

Use “self-effacement” to “quiet the self.”

To escape your weaknesses, listen less to your ego and give it less power to control your thoughts, emotions and actions. To dampen your ego, embrace the habits of self-effacement. These include reserve, humility, deference to something greater than yourself, veneration and respect. You and your ego aren’t the center of the world or even a force within it. A “complex web of causes” you can’t perceive surrounds you. Given that your consciousness is beyond your understanding, beware of “abstract reasoning” or “universal rules.” None apply. Yet if you listen to your forebears in philosophy, religion and common sense, you can gain a true sense of your place in the world. This brings humility accompanied by wisdom.

About the Author

New York Times op-ed columnist **David Brooks** is a regular on *PBS Newshour* and *Meet the Press*. His best-selling books include: *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*; *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*; and *On Paradise Drives: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*.