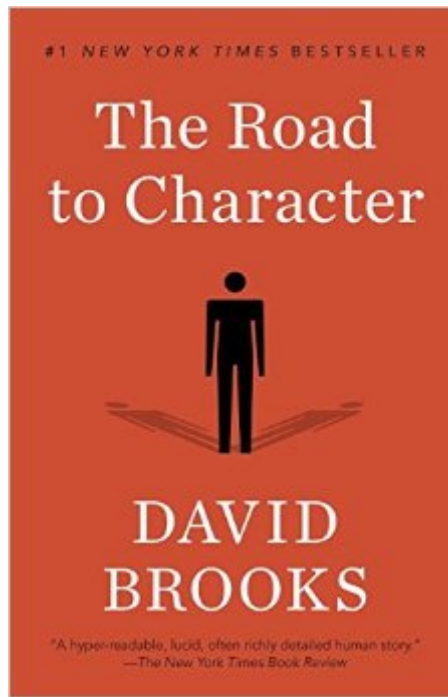


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# The Road To Character



## Synopsis

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE ECONOMIST • 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. • "David Brooks With the wisdom, humor, curiosity, and sharp insights that have brought millions of readers to his New York Times column and his previous bestsellers, David Brooks has consistently illuminated our daily lives in surprising and original ways. In *The Social Animal*, he explored the neuroscience of human connection and how we can flourish together. Now, in *The Road to Character*, he focuses on the deeper values that should inform our lives. Responding to what he calls the culture of the Big Me, which emphasizes external success, Brooks challenges us, and himself, to rebalance the scales between our "achieving virtues" — achieving wealth, fame, and status — and our "eulogy virtues," those that exist at the core of our being: kindness, bravery, honesty, or faithfulness, focusing on what kind of relationships we have formed. Looking to some of the world's greatest thinkers and inspiring leaders, Brooks explores how, through internal struggle and a sense of their own limitations, they have built a strong inner character. Labor activist Frances Perkins understood the need to suppress parts of herself so that she could be an instrument in a larger cause. Dwight Eisenhower organized his life not around impulsive self-expression but considered self-restraint. Dorothy Day, a devout Catholic convert and champion of the poor, learned as a young woman the vocabulary of simplicity and surrender. Civil rights pioneers A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin learned reticence and the logic of self-discipline, the need to distrust oneself even while waging a noble crusade. Blending psychology, politics, spirituality, and confession, *The Road to Character* provides an opportunity for us to rethink our priorities, and strive to build rich inner lives marked by humility and moral depth. • Joy, • David Brooks writes, "is a byproduct experienced by people who are aiming for something else. But it comes." • Praise for *The Road to Character* • A hyper-readable, lucid, often richly detailed human story. • "The New York Times Book Review • David Brooks" the New York Times columnist and PBS commentator whose measured calm gives punditry a good name • "offers the building blocks of a meaningful life." • "Washingtonian • This profound and eloquent book is written with moral urgency and philosophical elegance." • "Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from the Tree* and *The Noonday Demon* • The voice of the book is calm, fair and humane. The highlight of the material is the quality of the author's moral and spiritual judgments." • "The Washington Post • A powerful, haunting book that works its way beneath your skin." • "The Guardian (U.K.) • This learned and engaging book brims with pleasures." • "Newsday • Original and

eye-opening . . . At his best, Brooks is a normative version of Malcolm Gladwell, culling from a wide array of scientists and thinkers to weave an idea bigger than the sum of its parts.ââ"USA TodayâThere is something affecting in the diligence with which Brooks seeks a cure for his self-diagnosed shallowness by plumbing the depths of others.ââ"Rebecca Mead, *The New Yorker* From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I have read David Brooks' column in my local paper for many years and have watched him on Meet the Press. He is a thoughtful and intelligent man. His new book, *The Road to Character*, is a brave, if not always successful, attempt to discover what is important and meaningful in a life well lived. Brooks tells us in his introduction that his book is about "how some people have cultivated strong character. It's about one mindset that people through the centuries have adopted to put iron in their core and to cultivate a wise heart. I wrote it to save my soul." What is best about this book is Brooks' willingness to share with us his search for meaning and purpose in his life. Unfortunately, I was sometimes disappointed by the unevenness of the text. Brooks starts out strong. His first chapter is called "The Shift." Brooks thinks that the American people have become self-centered. He tells us that this "leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to everybody else." Brooks recommends a more humble approach to life and living and reminds us that we are all built from "crooked timber." He quotes Immanuel Kant's famous line, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." Our character must be built from the flaws which are an integral

part of all of our lives. From this good start, Brooks begins to give us historical examples of people who built exemplary lives from their "crooked timber," and he starts with Frances Perkins, who graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 1902 and who eventually became a trusted advisor to Franklin Roosevelt and his Secretary of Labor for twelve years. Perkins is exactly the kind of person Brooks respects. She is humble, highly competent, hardworking, and genuinely interested in the welfare of other people. He says about Perkins that "She is willing to surrender the things that are most dear, and by seeking to forget herself and submerge herself she finds a purpose that defines and fulfills herself." Frances Perkins is the kind of person that Brooks admires most and holds up as a model of behavior all of us would do well to imitate. Chapter Three on "Self-Conquest" was one of the weaker chapters in Brooks' book. If he had focused on Ida Eisenhower instead of her son Dwight, Brooks' main theme of humility and service to others would have been well supported. Unfortunately, the story of Dwight Eisenhower, at least as presented by Brooks, was not impressive and did little to move forward his thesis. Fortunately, Chapter Four, "Struggle," was one of the highlights of *The Road To Character* for me and a return to form for Brooks. Dorothy Day was a contemporary of Frances Perkins. On the surface of things, the two women appeared to be a study in contrasts. In her youth Day was something of a "wild child," that is, until she found religion, or more accurately, the Roman Catholic faith found her. Like St. Francis of Assisi, with whom she had much in common, Dorothy Day gave up a life of easy living and embraced poverty and devotion to the poor and down trodden. As the prime mover behind the paper *The Catholic Worker*, throughout her life Dorothy Day never ceased working for the least fortunate in our society. She was a truly extraordinary woman who was completely used up by her life in the service of others when she died in 1980 at the age of eighty-three. She wonderfully exemplified much that Brooks holds dear and would like to become. The next three chapters of the book devoted to George Marshall, A. Philip Randolph, and George Eliot were not of the same quality as the work on Dorothy Day or the next person described in Chapter 8, "Ordered Love," St. Augustine of Hippo. In this chapter all of Brooks' intellectual skills were marshalled to describe the extraordinary career of a person who became truly influential both in theology and philosophy. But it is the Augustine who is humbled by the knowledge of his own "crooked timber" that is the focus of Brooks chapter. As Brooks says, Augustine had to renounce the belief "that he could control his whole life.... He had to sink down into a posture of openness and surrender. Then, after that, he was open enough to receive grace, to feel gratitude and rise upward." I shall skip over Chapter 9 on Samuel Johnson, not one of Brooks most persuasive chapters, and move to his final summary of his work, Chapter 10, "The Big Me." I will briefly summarize Brooks' Humility Code, which gives the reader a review of many of the major

points Brooks has made in his text. 1. We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness. 2. We are flawed creatures. 3. We are weak and strong, bound and free, blind and far-seeing. 4. Humility is the greatest virtue. 5. Pride is the central vice. 6. The struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama of life. 7. Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation. 8. The things we call character endure over the long term - courage, honesty, humility. 9. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. 10. We are all ultimately saved by grace. 11. Defeating weakness often means quieting the self. 12. Wisdom starts with epistemological modesty. (Epistemology refers to the truth value of knowledge, or as Daniel Unger tells me in comments, simply the study of knowledge.) 13. No good life is possible unless it is organized around a vocation. 14. The best leader tries to lead along the grain of human nature rather than go against it. 15. The person who successfully struggles against weakness and sin may or may not become rich and famous, but that person will become mature. The reader of Brooks' book will find the items in this Humility Code used to explain the successes and failures of each of the individuals he describes in chapters two through nine. At the beginning of this long review, my apologies to the patient reader, I said that *The Road to Character* was uneven, and in my opinion it is. Having said that, I still give this book five stars because even when he is not on point, the text was genuinely interesting to me. David Brooks is a scholar who knows how to tell a story simply and well. His erudition is always in support of his subject and never to show off himself and his many gifts and talents. The chapters on Dorothy Day, Augustine, and the final chapter, *The Big Me*, including the Humility Code, were so good that they are reason enough to highly recommend this fine book which, when it is published, I hope rises to the top of the best seller lists.

As I read this book I kept thinking of my 84 year old grandfather. I kind of felt like he was sitting at the table talking to me about the way things used to be. These types of conversations are not a bad thing at all and most of the time they seem comforting. As I read this book I kept reflecting upon my own life and where I stacked up in comparison towards humble or the center of attention seeker. What kept the book interesting was the part history lesson part character lesson based upon the life events of the person being written about. This book starts out talking about what is valuable in society and where the focus lies today and where it was after WWII. There are some stark differences between today and yesteryear. Some of these changes like technology that make life easier but back then it seems that people were more humble, had manners and everything wasn't about them. Most of the people discussed in this book were brought up at the turn of the 1900s. Here are the people written about in the book Frances Perkins, Dwight

Eisenhower, Dorothy Day, George Marshal, A. Philip Randolph, Mary Anne Elliot, Augustine & Samuel Johnson, Here was the main theme of the book: The push for being the center of attention seems to have distorted the moral compass of society and their own sense of "good". The events, trials and struggles we face in life tend to shape up for the good or the bad depending upon the choices we make when at the crossroads of difficult decisions. At some point we gain the fortitude to stick with one type of decision based upon what has been learned in previous adverse situations. Character is built on the tough decisions to be made plus life's experiences. In the middle of the challenges it may be the sense of self resolve that keeps us from making the wrong decisions. The underpinning of religion does help people make decisions based upon the morals taught by the respective religions. The ability to be of service to those in need for non self-gratifying reasons does help build character. There are plenty of stories and examples spanning across time and places where people either decide to change or are pushed causing them to dig deep and decide what type of person they would become in the face of adversity, danger and questionable issues that could cause some sort of physical or moral harm. . It seems that as of today society has sacrificed much of character for justification of something else. I have to say I really liked this book and the saying of "do what is right even if nobody is looking" kept coming to mind. This book was written well and interesting enough for me to sit down and read it without getting up.

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