

# Character Formation from a Psychological Point of View: Search for Values, Search for *Sinn*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself where your values come from, where your character stems from? The easy answer might be: from your parents and from the culture you are living in. However, this answer is a bit superficial and needs a more in-depth look.

From a psychological perspective, human development can be seen as a steady process from the moment of conception to the last moment at the hour of death. Developmental psychology analyzes how all human attributes unfold during the stream of life. Part of this psychological perspective is an analysis of the lifespan development of character. The special subdiscipline is called moral development, and it deals with questions like the following: How do moral values develop? Where do they come from? How can they be changed? This lifespan perspective on human development has become the standard paradigm in developmental psychology within the last eighty years. It started with the book *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem* (The human course of life as a psychological problem) by Charlotte Bühler (1933) and culminated in the book *Life-Span Developmental Psychology* by Paul Baltes, Hayne Reese, and John Nesselroade (1977).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Marlene Endepohls for her careful reading of and commenting on a draft of this chapter. The German word *Sinn* is often translated into English as “sense,” but it has richer connotations that suggest “meaning,” “consciousness,” “mind,” “preference,” and “taste.”

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Bühler, *Der Menschliche Lebenslauf Als Psychologisches Problem* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1933). Paul B. Baltes, Hayne W. Reese, and John R. Nesselroade, *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Introduction to Research Methods* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977).

## What Is Character?

Two potential understandings of what constitutes character are presented here: a narrow one, which connects character to moral attitudes and sees character formation as moral development, is compared to a broader view, which connects character formation to personality development.

The narrow view sees character formation as the construction of a kind of psychological "faculty" (like the faculties of cognition, emotion, motivation, language, and so on) that develops over time, with discrete levels. This view is represented mainly by the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg, who proposed a famous model of moral "stages" (levels) that are passed through from childhood through adolescence. Depending on the course of development, persons end up in one of six postulated levels. I present Kohlberg's approach in more detail below.

A broader view takes a different stance. In this view, character is embedded in a larger understanding of personality. According to Cornelia Wrzus and Brent Roberts, "personality constitutes characteristics that reflect relatively enduring patterns of typical cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior in which individuals differ from others of the same culture or subpopulation."<sup>3</sup>

Within research on personality, the term "character" sounds old-fashioned and represents a trait approach to personality. Modern views take an interactionist perspective: personality is a mixture of (more permanent, stable) *traits* that characterize a person and (more transient, variable) *states* that vary across situations.<sup>4</sup>

### Classical (Narrow) View: Progression through Stages

The classical (narrow) view on moral development was established by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and his American colleague Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–87). They saw the process of moral development as an ordered progression through developmental stages. During each stage, a specific rule describes the respective behavior. In the classical view, stages are connected to certain age periods.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelia Wrzus and Brent W. Roberts, "Processes of Personality Development in Adulthood: The TESSERA Framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 21, no. 3 (2017): 253–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868316652279>, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> Norman S. Endler and Jean M. Edwards, "Interactionism in Personality in the Twentieth Century," *Personality and Individual Differences* 7, no. 3 (1986): 379–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036598>; and David Magnusson, "Personality in an Interactional Paradigm of Research," *Zeitschrift Für Differentielle und Diagnostische Psychologie* 1, no. 1 (1980): 17–34.

To assess the actual stage of moral development, Kohlberg used vignettes like the famous "Heinz dilemma."<sup>5</sup> This dilemma presents a woman in Europe near death from a very bad disease, a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that doctors thought might save her, a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to manufacture. He paid two hundred dollars for the radium and charged two thousand dollars for a small dose. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about a thousand dollars, half of what the druggist was charging. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it more cheaply or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz, desperate, broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

Subjects were asked to read this vignette and write down their answers to these questions: Should the husband have done what he did? Was it right or wrong? Is your decision that it is right (or wrong) objectively correct, is it morally universal, or is it your personal opinion?

Based on the answers to these questions, subjects were classified into one of three levels. Level 1, preconventional morality, contains no personal code of morality. Instead, the moral code follows the standards of adults. The consequences of following or breaking their rules are most important. Level 2, conventional morality, is the stage where the moral standards of valued adult role models are internalized. Authority is internalized but not questioned. Moral reasoning is based on the norms of the group to which the person belongs. Level 3, postconventional morality, is the stage where individual judgment of moral dilemmas relies on self-chosen principles. Moral reasoning is based on individual rights and justice. According to Kohlberg, this level of moral reasoning is as far as most people get.

Following Saul McLeod,<sup>6</sup> we can note some known problems with the Kohlberg approach to the development of moral reasoning. First, dilemmas lack ecological validity (that is, they are, in a sense, artificial). The Heinz dilemma (stealing a drug to save the life of his wife) does not reflect the life experience of the ten-to-sixteen-year-old subjects whom Kohlberg studied. Second, one might criticize the hypothetical settings: no real consequences will follow the decisions (low-stakes instead of high-stakes testing<sup>7</sup>). Third, there was biased sampling: accord-

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Saul McLeod, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," *Simply Psychology*, 2013, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/kohlberg.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Paul R. Sackett, Matthew J. Bornemann, and Brian S. Connelly, "High-Stakes Testing in Higher Education and Employment: Appraising the Evidence for Validity and Fairness," *American Psychologist* 63 (2008): 215–27.



## Moral Values: World Studies

How are moral values distributed on Earth? In an exciting study run by a group of anthropologists, Oliver Curry, Daniel Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse examined sixty societies around the world for the prevalence of seven forms of cooperative behaviors—helping kin, helping one's group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior possession.<sup>13</sup> The background idea was to test their theory of “morality-as-cooperation.” This theory is based on assumptions from evolutionary biology and game theory and asserts “that morality consists of a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life.”<sup>14</sup> The theory predicts cooperative behavior in seven domains and postulates that these seven moral values will be universal. To test their predictions, the three anthropologists made a “content analysis of the ethnographic record” of sixty societies distributed over the world (see Figure 2). Data come from the six regions of the globe: Sub-Saharan Africa, Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, Insular Pacific, North America, and South America.



Figure 2: The 60 societies analyzed in the study from Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Scott Curry, Daniel Austin Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse, “Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies,” *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 1 (2019): 47–69, <https://doi.org/10.1086/701478>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

They carefully rated data from a huge archive of twelve hundred selected pages from the digital version of the Human Relations Area Files. This archive contains thousands of full-text ethnographies. According to a codebook, the authors selected examples for the following seven areas of morality noted above. As a result of this analysis, 961 out of 962 relevant text paragraphs valued these cooperative behaviors positively. The one exception was a negative evaluation that came from the Chuuk, in Central America, and concerns property issues: “to steal openly from others is admirable in that it shows a person’s dominance and demonstrates that he is not intimidated by the aggressive powers of others.”<sup>16</sup> The authors conclude: “As such, these results provide strong support for the theory of morality-as-cooperation, and no support for the more extreme versions of moral relativism.”<sup>17</sup> The cross-cultural survey contains a lot of interesting points, but people in Western industrialized countries might follow different moral principles than people in foraging societies.

Similarly, Shalom Schwartz explored the universality of value systems by drawing samples from twenty countries, mostly consisting of school teachers and university students.<sup>18</sup> Schwartz based his work on the assumption that eleven basic value types can be found all over the world, within all cultural regions. These basic (“universal”) values are self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, spirituality, benevolence, and universalism (see Figure 3). Interestingly, he separates instrumental values (the “means” in a means-end relation) from terminal ones (the “end states”).

His approach follows the tradition of Hofstede<sup>19</sup> and does not contain a developmental perspective. Thus, it does not contribute much to the question of character formation.

## Character Formation and the Genesis of Wisdom

One of the long-term results of character formation can be seen in the development of wisdom. Barbara Tuchman defined wisdom as “the exercise of judgment

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Shalom H. Schwartz, “Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 25 (1992): 1–65, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60281-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6).

<sup>19</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001).

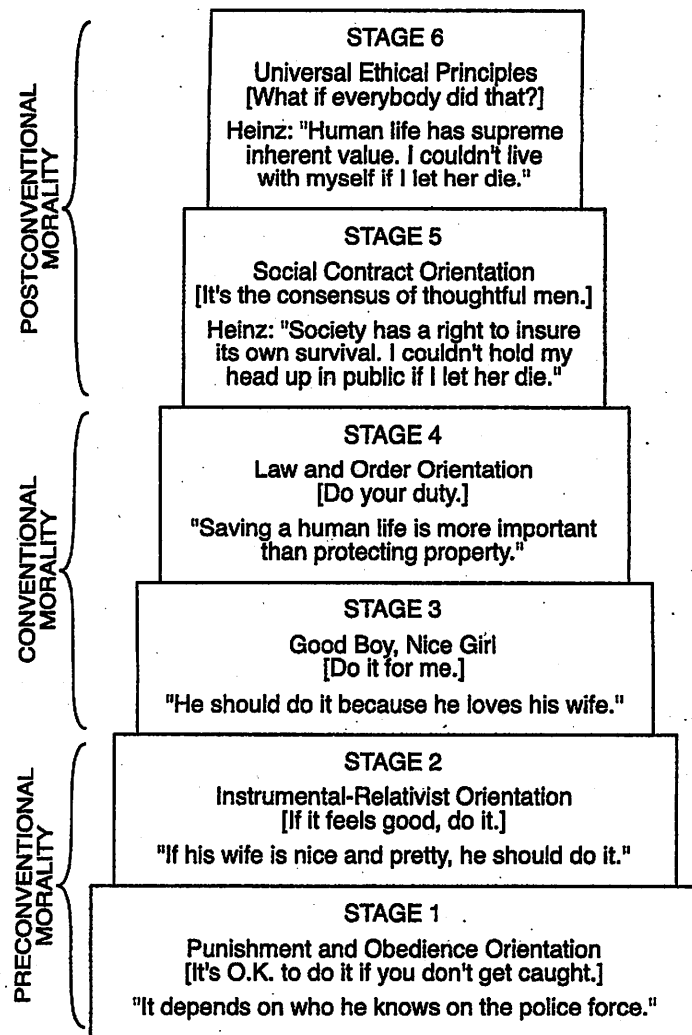


Figure 1: The six stages of moral development, according to Lawrence Kohlberg. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kohlberg\\_Model\\_of\\_Moral\\_Development.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kohlberg_Model_of_Moral_Development.png).

ing to Carol Gilligan, Kohlberg's samples were all male subjects and represented an "androcentric" definition of morality (most important are the principles of law and justice rather than compassion and care).<sup>8</sup> Fourth, a cross-sectional study design was used instead of longitudinal designs, which would better reflect the de-

<sup>8</sup> Carol Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality," *Har-*

velopmental process. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's model serves as a reference in many approaches and should be seen as a starting point for improvements.

## Broader View: Character Formation as Personality Development

To change moral values, we have to change the core of a person. That means that we have to change her or his personality. To change personality is not easy, but it occurs. One simple way is aging: whereas younger people—according to Wrzus and Roberts—increase their "Big Five" scores in the four dimensions of agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and social dominance,<sup>9</sup> older people show a reversed pattern, with longitudinal decreases in agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness.<sup>10</sup> Other opportunities for trait changes often occur together with significant life events (life transitions, changes in personal relationships, work experiences). However, a direct influence on these types of events is not possible. In this broader view of character formation, education seems to be most important.<sup>11</sup> No wonder that in modern times, even computer games are seen as training instruments for moral sensitivity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Lucas and M. Brent Donnellan, "Personality Development across the Life Span: Longitudinal Analyses with a National Sample from Germany," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 4 (2011): 847–61, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024298>; Brent W. Roberts, Kate E. Walton, and Wolfgang Viechtbauer, "Patterns of Mean-Level Change in Personality Traits across the Life Course: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies," *Psychological Bulletin* 132, no. 1 (2006): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.132.1.1>; Brent W. Roberts and Daniel K. Mroczek, "Personality Trait Change in Adulthood," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17 (2008): 31–35.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Ingeborg Berg and Boo Johansson, "Personality Change in the Oldest-Old: Is It a Matter of Compromised Health and Functioning?" *Journal of Personality* 82, no. 1 (2014): 25–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12030>; Christian Kandler et al., "Patterns and Sources of Personality Development in Old Age," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 109, no. 1 (2015): 175–91, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000028>; Lucas and Donnellan; René Möttus et al., "Correlates of Personality Trait Levels and Their Changes in Very Old Age: The Lothian Birth Cohort 1921," *Journal of Research in Personality* 46, no. 3 (2012): 271–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2012.02.004>.

<sup>11</sup> Bart Engelen et al., "Exemplars and Nudges: Combining Two Strategies for Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 47, no. 3 (2018): 346–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1396966>.

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Katsarov et al., "Training Moral Sensitivity through Video Games: A Review of Suitable Game Mechanisms," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2019): 344–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332542.2019.1644444>.

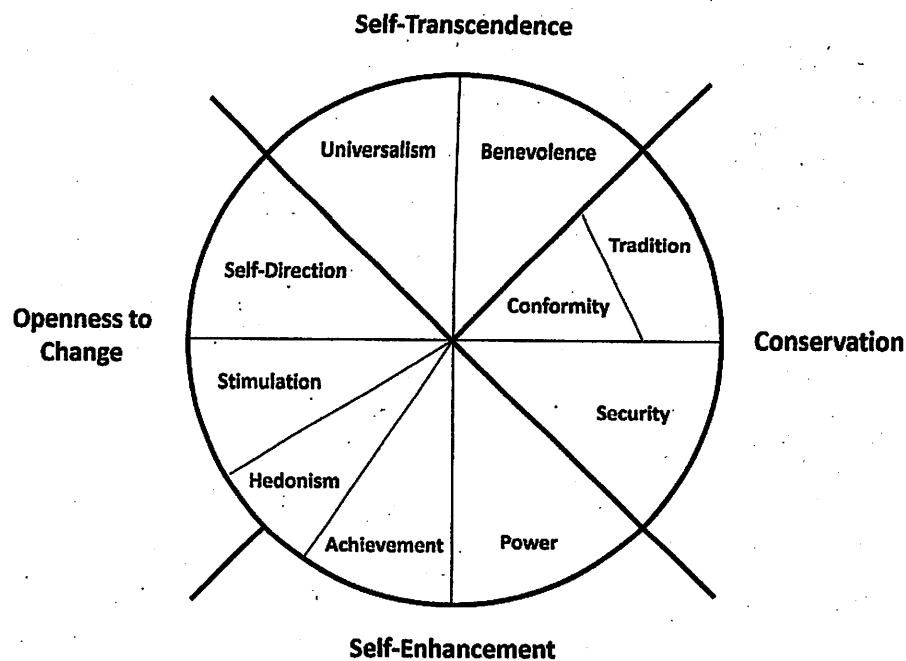


Figure 3: The basic values, according to Schwartz, sorted into four main classes (Source: <https://medium.com/bits-and-behavior/measuring-values-and-culture-264205035c87>).

acting on experience, common sense and available information.<sup>20</sup> Is wisdom the result of successful character formation? What do we know about the connection?

In a recent article, Judith Glück presents twelve definitions of wisdom.<sup>21</sup> Only one of them mentions “values” explicitly, namely the “balance theory of wisdom” presented by Robert Sternberg.<sup>22</sup> According to that theory, wise people know—besides having other competencies—that different people can have different values. This idea of “value relativism” in wise persons is also one of the five criteria for wisdom within the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm.<sup>23</sup> However, to know that there are

<sup>20</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Judith Glück, “Wisdom,” in *The Psychology of Human Thought*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Joachim Funke, 307–26 (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2019), <https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/heiup/catalog/book/470>, p. 310, table 16.1.

<sup>22</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, “A Balance Theory of Wisdom” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 4 (1998): 347–65.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger, “Wisdom: A Metaheuristic (Pragmatic) to Orchestrate Mind and Virtue toward Excellence,” *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 122–36.

different perspectives on dilemmas does not imply that one has clear moral values—it is a kind of metaknowledge, free of any special content.

Similarly, Andreas Fischer argues for a context-free view of wisdom and sees it as “independent of one’s values and context.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand: Fischer has collected twelve propositions that were commonly attributed to wise men from four different cultures (Socrates, Jesus, Confucius, and the Buddha). Those four wise persons show significant parallels concerning certain wise content (for example, Proposition 10: “Good people (and children) make good company”). Once again, however, there is no idea about how to acquire these pieces of wisdom. We all know that simply reading those “wise” propositions will not make us a wise person instantly.

## Measuring Character and Moral Values

Psychologists are known for their expertise in measuring dispositions.<sup>25</sup> So they also develop ideas on how to measure morality and character.

Based on the narrow perspective, the Heinz dilemma presented earlier represents an item from the Moral Judgments Scale (MJS) developed and used by Kohlberg. It allows subjects to write open answers. A bit more standardized is the Defining Issues Test (DIT) that also presents moral dilemmas but requires a categorical answer instead of free text. As Erica Giammarco reports,<sup>26</sup> there are also dilemma-free assessments—such as the Ethics Position Questionnaire,<sup>27</sup> the Visions of Morality Scale<sup>28</sup>—and self-reports, such as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire,<sup>29</sup> the Moral Justification Scale,<sup>30</sup> the Measure of Moral Orientation,<sup>31</sup> and the Moral Orientation Scale.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Andreas Fischer, “Wisdom—The Answer to All the Questions Really Worth Asking,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5, no. 9 (2015): 73–83.

<sup>25</sup> For a critical view, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. expanded ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Erica A. Giammarco, “The Measurement of Individual Differences in Morality,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 88 (Jan. 2016): 26–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.08.039>.

<sup>27</sup> Donelson R. Forsyth, “A Taxonomy of Ethical Ideologies,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39, no. 1 (1980): 175–84.

<sup>28</sup> Charles M. Shelton and Dan P. McAdams, “In Search of an Everyday Morality: The Development of a Measure,” *Adolescence* 25 (1990): 923–43.

<sup>29</sup> Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek, “Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 1029–46, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015141>.

Coming from the broader view (presented above), the measurement of character implies the measurement of personality. The “Big Five” inventories (for example, BFI, HEXACO-PI-R, and NEO-PI-R<sup>33</sup>) measure the following personality attributes (character) via questionnaires: (1) extroversion (the degree to which one is active, assertive, talkative); (2) neuroticism (the degree to which one is anxious, depressed, irritable); (3) agreeableness (whether one is generous, gentle, kind); (4) conscientiousness (whether one is dutiful, organized, reliable); and (5) openness to experience (whether one is creative, imaginative, introspective). The current state of affairs concerning this trait approach can be found in a recent review by Paul Costa, Robert McCrae, and Corinna Löckenhoff.<sup>34</sup>

## Moral Dilemmas in Experimental Research: Trolley Experiments

In recent years, the analysis of moral dilemmas has shown interesting results in moral decision-making. Dries Bostyn and colleagues describe the trolley-style dilemmas as follows:

In their archetypal formulation, these dilemmas require participants to imagine a runaway trolley train on a deadly collision course with a group of unsuspecting victims. Participants are asked whether they would consider it morally appropriate to save the group but sacrifice a single innocent bystander by pulling a lever to divert the trolley to another track, where it would kill only the single bystander.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Linda S. Gump, Richard C. Baker, and Samuel Roll, “The Moral Justification Scale: Reliability and Validity of a New Measure of Care and Justice Orientations,” *Adolescence* 35 (2000): 67–76.

<sup>31</sup> D. L. Liddell, C. Halpin, and W. G. Halpin, “The Measure of Moral Orientation: Measuring the Ethics of Care and Justice,” *Journal of College Student Development* 33 (1992): 325–30.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Yacker and Sharon L. Weinberg, “Care and Justice Moral Orientation: A Scale for Its Assessment,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 55, nos. 1–2 (1990): 18–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.1990.9674043>.

<sup>33</sup> BFI = Big Five Inventory; HEXACO-PI-R = HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised, HEXACO being the acronym for the six dimensions of Honesty-Humility (H), Emotionality (E), Extroversion (X), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness to Experience (O); NEO-PI-R = Revised NEO Personality Inventory.

<sup>34</sup> Paul T. Costa, Robert R. McCrae, and Corinna E. Löckenhoff, “Personality across the Life Span,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 423–48, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-103244>.

<sup>35</sup> Dries H. Bostyn, Sybren Sevenhant, and Arne Roets, “Of Mice, Men, and Trolleys: Hypothetical Judgment versus Real-Life Behavior in Trolley-Style Moral Dilemmas,” *Psychological Science* 29, no. 7 (2018): 1084–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617752640>.

For some time, it was an open question whether these hypothetical moral judgments have anything to do with real-life moral decision-making. Nevertheless, with the advent of self-driving autonomous cars, these hypothetical situations have become very realistic. Artificial moral agents have already been developed by computer scientists.<sup>36</sup>

What are the fundamental insights from experiments with trolley-style dilemmas? It seems that subjects follow a utilitarian perspective to save the most lives possible.<sup>37</sup> What can we learn about character formation from these studies? Due to the highly artificial (that is, not real) situation that has to be imagined, I have doubts about the validity of these studies. I do not believe that we can learn a lot about human character from these highly unnatural settings. It is a bit like insights from Milgram’s famous experiment on obedience, in which volunteer teacher subjects had to electrically shock learner subjects for their errors on a memory task with increasing degrees of shock until reaching deadly intensities. Recent interpretations of the experimental situation argue that the experimental setup says more about the willingness of the subjects to fulfill the requests of a demanding experimenter (“engaged followership”) than about obedience.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, trolley dilemmas might tell us about something other than moral decisions.

## Conclusion

Character formation is a complex process that is not easily accessible to psychological measurement. One thing seems to be sure: “Moral reasoning is developmental.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, humans are always searching for sense and meaning—even in senseless written words, we try to find a message. We see things that are not present (visual illusion); we hear things that are not spoken (phonological

<sup>36</sup> For a review of these developments, see José-Antonio Cervantes et al., “Artificial Moral Agents: A Survey of the Current Status,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26, no. 2 (2020): 501–32, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-019-00151-x>.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Joshua D. Greene et al., “Cognitive Load Selectively Interferes with Utilitarian Moral Judgment,” *Cognition* 107, no. 3 (2008): 1144–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2007.11.004>.

<sup>38</sup> S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Megan E. Birney, “Questioning Authority: New Perspectives on Milgram’s ‘Obedience’ Research and Its Implications for Intergroup Relations,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (Oct. 2016): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.03.007>.

<sup>39</sup> Melanie Killen and Kelly Lynn Mulvey, “Challenging a Dual-Process Approach to Moral Reasoning: Adolescents and Adults Evaluations of Trolley Car Situations,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 83, no. 3 (2018): 110–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12380>, at 112.

gap); we feel things that are not there (rubber hand illusion); we remember stories that were not told.<sup>40</sup>

We, as human beings, are not robots that require error-free programming and need perfect input; we construct the world around us in such a way that it makes sense to us, even if the input is ambiguous. It has been argued that humans develop “cargo cults” when they do not understand the deeper meaning of certain rituals.<sup>41</sup> Richard Feynman used this term to describe puzzling rituals that rely on a misunderstanding of otherwise meaningful actions. Humans search for sense, but at the same time, humans search for values: what action is right and should be done more often, what actions are wrong and should be reduced in their frequency? It will be an endless story—but one that sharply discriminates humans from machines. The search for values and the search for *Sinn*: it makes us human.

<sup>40</sup> Sir Frederick Bartlett was the first to show that human memory is schematic in the sense of adding elements to a “nonsense” story in order to make it understandable; see Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Feynman, “Cargo Cult Science,” *Engineering and Science* 37, no. 7 (1974): 10–13.

# Civic Norms and Distinctive Convictions: Finding the Right Balance

Charles L. Glenn

## Introduction

A quarter century ago, Mary Ann Glendon warned that the “deteriorating circumstances of child-raising households in the United States amount to a major national crisis,” which she associated with the pressing “problem of politics—how to foster in the nation’s citizens the skills and virtues that are essential to the maintenance of our democratic regime.”<sup>1</sup> Recent experience around the 2020 U.S. presidential election shows how prescient she was, and how urgent it is to answer her question satisfactorily.

Is the fostering of civic skills and virtues a task for the state or for families and the civil society institutions in which they participate? Are social order and political compromise threatened if parents choose to entrust their children to faith-based schools, schools that in some or many respects offer an alternative understanding of the requirements of faithful citizenship?

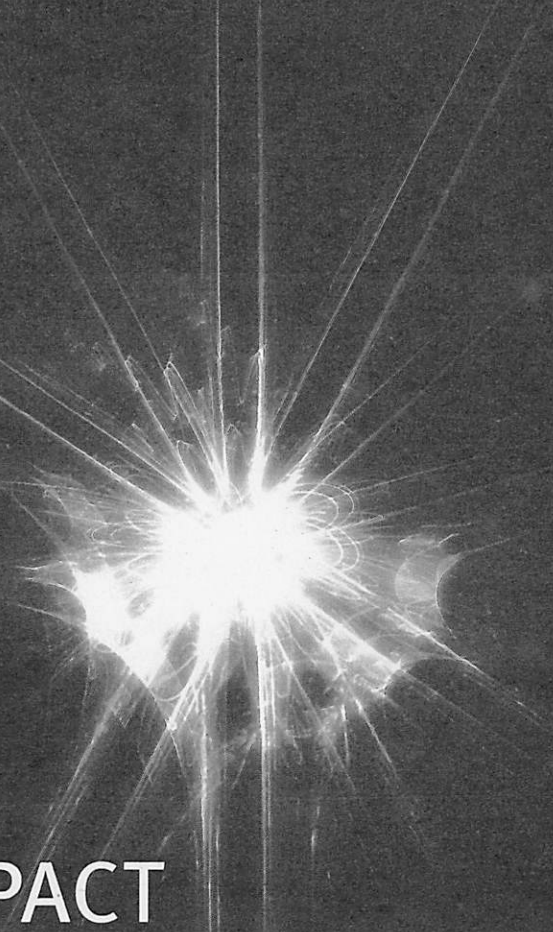
Apart from such outliers as Cuba and North Korea, almost every country in the world allows parents to send their children to nonstate schools; in many cases, government provides full or partial funding in support of these choices.<sup>2</sup> The opportunity to select a nongovernment school is generally based on the right of parents “to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral

<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, “Forgotten Questions,” in *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character, and Citizenship in American Society*, ed. Mary Ann Glendon and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1995), 1 f.

<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Glenn and Jan De Groof, eds., *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education*, vols. 1–4 (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishing, 2012). Available also at <https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/global-pluralism/>.



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John Witte, Jr.  
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THE IMPACT  
of EDUCATION

on Character Formation, Ethics,  
and the Communication of Values  
in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies

*Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Leipzig 2022*

