

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Social Animal

The Road to Character



DAVID
BROOKS

do is okay for me and doesn't affect anybody else, including the girls I go out with. Look, man, I live and let live. I like everybody."²

Namath heralded a new mode for being a professional athlete—a mode of personal branding, lavish endorsements, in which the star expressed his own vibrant personality and outshone the team.

Cultural Change

Cultures change in ways that are both superficial and profound. When the essayist Joseph Epstein was young, he observed that when you went into the drugstore the cigarettes were in the open shelves and the condoms were behind the counter. But now when you go to the drugstore, the condoms are in the open shelves and the cigarettes are behind the counter.

The conventional view of the shift from the humility of Unitas to the brash flamboyance of Namath is that it happened in the late 1960s. The conventional story goes something like this. First there was the Greatest Generation, whose members were self-sacrificing, self-effacing, and community-minded. Then along came the 1960s and the Baby Boomers, who were narcissistic, self-expressive, selfish, and morally lax.

But this story doesn't fit the facts. What really happened goes like this: Starting in biblical times there was a tradition of moral realism, the "crooked-timber" school of humanity. This tradition, or worldview, put tremendous emphasis on sin and human weakness. This view of humanity was captured in the figure of Moses, the meekest of men who nonetheless led a people, and by biblical figures like David, who were great heroes, but deeply flawed. This biblical metaphysic was later expressed by Christian thinkers such as Augustine, with his emphasis on sin, his rejection of worldly success, his belief in the necessity of grace, of surrendering oneself to God's unmerited love. This moral realism then found expression in humanists like Samuel Johnson, Michel de Montaigne, and George Eliot, who emphasized how little we can know, how hard it is to know ourselves, and how hard we have to work on the long road to virtue. "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves," Eliot wrote.³ It was also embodied, in different ways and at different times, in the thought of Dante, Hume, Burke, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Isaiah Berlin. All of these thinkers take a limited view of our individual powers of reason. They are suspicious of abstract thinking and pride. They emphasize the limitations in our individual natures.

Some of these limitations are epistemological: reason is weak and the world is complex. We cannot really grasp the complexity of the

world or the full truth about ourselves. Some of these limitations are moral: There are bugs in our souls that lead us toward selfishness and pride, that tempt us to put lower loves over higher loves. Some of the limitations are psychological: We are divided within ourselves, and many of the most urgent motions of our minds are unconscious and only dimly recognized by ourselves. Some of them are social: We are not self-completing creatures. To thrive we have to throw ourselves into a state of dependence—on others, on institutions, on the divine. The place that limitation occupies in the "crooked timber" school is immense.

Around the eighteenth century, moral realism found a rival in moral romanticism. While moral realists placed emphasis on inner weakness, moral romantics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed emphasis on our inner goodness. The realists distrusted the self and trusted institutions and customs outside the self; the romantics trusted the self and distrusted the conventions of the outer world. The realists believed in cultivation, civilization, and artifice; the romantics believed in nature, the individual, and sincerity.

For a while, these two traditions lived side by side in society, in creative tension and conversation. Except in artistic circles, realism had the upper hand. If you grew up in early twentieth century America, you grew up with the vocabulary and categories of moral realism, translated into a practical secular or religious idiom. Perkins grew up with the vocabulary of vocation, the need to suppress parts of yourself so you can be an instrument in a larger cause. Eisenhower grew up with the vocabulary of self-defeat. Day learned as a young woman the vocabulary of simplicity, poverty, and surrender. Marshall learned institutional thinking, the need to give oneself to organizations that transcend a lifetime. Randolph and Rustin learned reticence and the logic of self-discipline, the need to distrust oneself even while waging a noble crusade. These people didn't know they were exemplifying parts of the realist tradition. This ethos was just in the air they breathed and the way they were raised.

But then moral realism collapsed. Its vocabulary and ways of thinking were forgotten or shoved off into the margins of society. Realism and romanticism slipped out of balance. A moral vocabulary was lost, and along with it a methodology for the formation of souls. This shift did not happen during the 1960s and 1970s, though that period was a great romantic flowering. It happened earlier, in the late 1940s and 1950s. It was the Greatest Generation that abandoned realism.

By the fall of 1945, people around the world had endured sixteen years of deprivation—first during the Depression, then during the war. They were ready to let loose, to relax, to enjoy. Consumption and advertising took off as people rushed to the stores to buy things that would make life easier and more fun. People in the postwar years

SOURCE DOCUMENT FOR SEVEN PAGE "IDEAGRAM" REGARDING THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW OF THE CULTURAL SHIFT AND DAVID BROOKS' COGENT SUMMARY OF THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHIES

IF THE "IDEAGRAM" WAS PRESENTED IN SERIAL FORMAT, WOULD THE AUDIENCE WANT TO SEE MORE ?