

Social & cultural studies

Desires of others

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IN THIS REVIEW

THE ROAD TO CHARACTER

320pp. Allen Lane. £17.99.978 0 241 18672 5

David Brooks

David Brooks, a columnist at the *New York Times*, has written a book about humility. This would not be an easy task for anyone. That his publishers have chosen - perhaps with his approval - to describe this as a book “On how to build a rich inner life by ‘one of the most prominent intellectuals of our time’” does nothing to make the challenge any easier. The situation is ripe with comic potential, which Brooks - playing to his strengths - has decided to ignore.

“Truly humble people”, writes Brooks, “are engaged in a great effort to magnify what is best in themselves and defeat what is worst, to become strong in the weak places.” That is one way to think about humility. Another way, perhaps, might be to reflect that truly humble people do not necessarily think that the most important thing in life is their own character. Their character emerges in a life that is predominantly devoted to caring about other things and other people. It is a by-product of their moral focus and not its object.

This paradoxical nature of many important human virtues - the difficulty of achieving them by directly trying - has been central to a certain strand of thinking in Western ethics for a long time, certainly since Nietzsche and arguably since Aristotle. It has been important to many types of Eastern philosophy, notably to Zen Buddhism. The only direct reference to this rich current of ideas in *The Road to Character* is to a remark by C. S. Lewis that “if you enter a party consciously trying to make a good impression, you probably won’t end up making one”. There is, surely, more to be said.

This is a pity because, if you care about character (as Brooks is right to do), difficult questions arise as to whether and how this concern should motivate action. Right at the start of his book, he contrasts what he calls “the résumé virtues” with “the eulogy virtues”. The former are the qualities that contribute to professional success, while the latter “are deeper. They’re the ones that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being”. He believes we should spend more time thinking about the latter and less time thinking about the former.

Absorption in the question of what people will say at your funeral is not a virtue; it is an affliction. And funerals are hardly the places at which we can expect the real truth about the character of the departed to emerge. The very word “eulogy”, with its Greek origins meaning praise, reminds us otherwise. Bathing in grief has no better an effect on our moral lucidity than bathing in champagne. Encouraging your readers to think about the eulogy to be delivered at their funerals is a very strange place to start a book about humility.

Strategies for achieving character may exist - the different ethical traditions are divided on this, with Nietzsche, who is not mentioned here, at the deeply pessimistic end of the scale, and Bernard Williams, who wrote illuminatingly about this in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), fairly downbeat as well. But even for the optimists, like Aristotle or some of the Zen mystics, such strategies are subtle and elusive and involve an unavoidable element of moral luck. What Brooks has chosen to do is to give us a series of character sketches of famous individuals who were pretty mixed up psychologically but who managed to achieve a kind of resolution, through maturity, finding true love, or surrender to God. It would have been good to have some accounts of less famous people too.

It is not clear what we are supposed to learn from these sketches. Brooks’s subjects (who range from Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall to Dorothy Day and George Eliot) usually have some highly admirable traits, along with quite a few others you would not wish on your children or on anyone else whose character you might be able to influence. About the only point in common is that they are deeply concerned with sin and come to feel redeemed only when someone - a lover, perhaps, or more often God - offers them unconditional love in spite of their sinfulness. You can see where this is leading. Some readers will undoubtedly find all this inspiring. None of these characters makes much time in their life for fun.

In a final chapter, Brooks draws together the threads of his reflections with some more general remarks about what he sees as the regrettable decline of a culture that privileged duty and service, and its replacement by a culture of authenticity and self-centredness. He cites, for instance, the shift in the tone of the Girl Scout handbooks from “an ethic of self-sacrifice and self-effacement” to one that told girls “to pay more attention to themselves”. He has some perceptive things to say about, for instance, the way in which the tendency of parents to praise their children in order to develop their self-esteem can encourage instead an implicit form of conditionality. The very extravagance of parental praise can produce a subterranean anxiety in the children about whether their behaviour can ever match the expectations.

But though the last chapter is often interesting, the character sketches in earlier chapters are too often used as a foil for Brooks's casual observations about the decline of contemporary moral culture. In the doubtless sincere desire to offer a text relatively uncluttered by bibliographical namedropping, he develops these observations largely from introspection rather than by testing them against what others have previously said and written (his references tend to be to like-minded writers such as Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr and C. S. Lewis, who express better than he does what he is trying to say).

Sometimes the result of this process is very convincing. Sometimes it overlooks important subtleties. For instance, his accounts of "the Big Me" culture focus mainly on the encouragement of selfish desires, and miss the fact that encouraging young people to develop their own authentic values can lead them to accord a better balance between their own desires and those of others. He might also have talked about the paradoxical nature of attachment - the work of John Bowlby, for instance, showed how developing secure attachment in children (which can look superficially like encouraging the Big Me) can help them to become more outwardly focused and to engage more with others.

Sometimes Brooks's casual generalizations are startling: "We in post-romantic times tend to regard the imagination as a childlike faculty that provides us with creativity and sweet visions. [Samuel] Johnson saw the imagination to be feared as much as treasured". Who are the "we" in this sentence and what is the evidence that we believe anything so simplistic? David Brooks inveighs often and with reason against our celebrity-obsessed culture. But reading sentences such as these prompts the reflection that if he had not been a columnist with the *New York Times*, his publisher would surely have suggested undertaking another serious reworking of this pleasantly written, often perceptive but very uneven book.

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