



The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil

James Davison Hunter

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The Death of Character is a broad historical, sociological, and cultural inquiry into the moral life and moral education of young Americans based upon a huge empirical study of the children themselves. The children's thoughts and concerns-expressed here in their own words-shed a whole new light on what we can expect from moral education. Targeting new theories of education and the prominence of psychology over moral instruction, Hunter analyzes the making of a new cultural narcissism.

The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil Details

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Leonardo says

...Hunter traces out how America lost its older ideas about virtue and character. Before the Industrial Revolution, Americans honored the virtues of ‘producers’—hard work, self-restraint, sacrifice for the future, and sacrifice for the common good. But during the twentieth century, as people became wealthier and the producer society turned gradually into the mass consumption society, an alternative vision of the self arose—a vision centered on the idea of individual preferences and personal fulfillment. The intrinsically moral term “character” fell out of favor and was replaced by the amoral term “personality.”

The Happiness Hypothesis Pág.176

Kevin M. says

I found this book to be a chore to read. There were a few gems of insight regarding the loss of character, but this book appears to be targeted for sociologists and not for the lay reader. I was hoping to gain some noteworthy explanations for the decline of character in the U.S., but this book on the whole did not provide it for me.

Dawn says

Hunter presents an interesting history of the driving forces behind American moral education and an evidence-driven skewering of the vacuous character training which public institutions currently serve up. Today's creed of tolerance deems it unacceptable to teach anything of the traditional moral frameworks societies have relied on to inspire selfless morality. Modern, psychology-based character training has failed. The reader is left here - contemplating the appearance of a dead-end. What emerging path can be found both capable and agreeable of leading a multicultural society beyond moral anarchy?

I rated this highly because I enjoyed the early history chapters. The second half of the book gets three stars.

Jean says

Hunter has written a thorough explanation of the progression of the death of character. His detailed work helps the reader understand the difficulties the teacher will face in schools and the required character programs for which teachers are inevitably being held accountable for in the classroom. This is both a work of stunning proportions and a vital call to understand the ramifications for society.

Chris J says

I mean, it's not a bad book. I just wouldn't tell anyone they needed to read it. I can't really recall how it got on my reading list, to be honest.

Tony says

Hunter rightly eviscerates the self-esteem fetish in American schools, and shows how modern character education programs are abject failures at positively influencing long-term behavior. His Protestant worldview, however, predisposes him to conclude that positive reinforcement -- teaching children that virtue should be pursued at least in part because it makes us feel good and whole -- is inherently flawed. In reality, it is entirely consistent with Christian dogma rightly understood, and with an understanding that children are crafted in the image and likeness of God, and hence happiest when they live virtuously.

Brad says

Art of Manliness - jeremiad rec

Holli says

Statistical and investigative data showing how moral education among children in America does not work. Read for a philosophy class.

Frank Roberts says

There is a broad consensus that having good character is important, though we rarely use that term anymore. We all desire our children (and ourselves) to be honest, responsible, compassionate, and prudent. But is that even possible in an age where our desire to be tolerant and inclusive has driven out all notions of evil?

We don't even speak of "character" anymore (good or bad); today the term is personality, and those are either attractive or unattractive, boring or interesting, but never something so judgmental as good or bad. Without the creeds, rituals, and driving narratives of a common religion, American society has reduced its moral universe to a simple list of platitudes: Don't Do Drugs, Be Honest, Play Nice, Be Fair, and especially Don't Judge! When we look for a WHY behind this list of "values", all we have to offer is that living that way will make you feel good, will help you get ahead, and will build your relationships with other people. In other words, the basis for our modern morality is utilitarian and based purely on feelings. This is a weak foundation for morality, as it provides neither true inspiration to be moral, nor true shame when one fails.

Furthermore, Hunter's book provides evidence from actual studies that show that children whose moral compass is based purely on the self are more likely to cheat, have sex, commit suicide, and drink than their peers whose moral compasses are based in theology or the authority of adults.

There is much more in this challenging and important book. Hunter provides no solutions, and indeed displays the flaws in the solutions most on offer from the Left and the Right. Highly recommended.

Daniel says

Hunter did a great job giving a brief history of moral education in America. He pointed out the philosophical underpinnings of the various approaches to moral education from the Puritans to modern day pedagogy. There are many things I learned in this book; the first being that the decline of moral education is not a recent phenomenon of the last sixty years, but rather a much deeper problem originating nearly at the birth of this nation. Secondly, it is pluralism and inclusiveness that have been the titanic forces behind the erosion of character. Sadly, Hunter does not offer many solutions after giving the reader this grim prognosis.
