A HISTORICAL & MODERN INVESTIGATION

What Is Wrong With People!?

A Historical & Modern Look Into Why People Are So Weird

We can speak to someone across the planet and avoid the person across the table. We praise independent thought, preferably when it reaches our conclusions. We want freedom, belonging, comfort, achievement, and a little peace. Ideally, without having to give anything up.

People are strange. The interesting question is how much of that strangeness is ancient human equipment, how much is learned, and how much is a reasonable response to an unreasonable arrangement.

Begin the investigation Explore the contents

VALUES / CONNECTION / PURPOSE / DIGITAL LIFE

CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE / 01 OF 03

A map of the investigation.

Read in order, or choose a chapter. Every entry and page number is clickable.

PRELUDE · THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

01 Opening: What Is Wrong With People!? 1

02 Table of contents 2

03 Living well, or just getting through? 5

04 The past is not a vacation destination. 6

05 The kids these days. 7

PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

06 Nobody raises themselves. 8

07 The ancient argument over the human being. 9

08 The child is not a small office worker. 10

09 More schooling. A harder question. 11

10 Culture teaches while pretending to entertain. 12

11 When shared authority becomes a choice. 13

12 Modern does not mean identical. 14

13 An education worth waking up for. 15

CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE / 02 OF 03

A map of the investigation.

Read in order, or choose a chapter. Every entry and page number is clickable.

PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

14 The family was never just a feeling. 16
15 One familiar household is less common. 18
16 More choice. A new negotiation. 19
17 Community is a practice, not a mood. 21
18 The trust problem has a measurement problem. 22
19 Alone, isolated, lonely: three different things. 23
20 Relationships need maintenance. 24

PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

21 Character is what gets repeated. 25
22 Freedom has a social pressure problem. 26
23 Independence rests on an enormous support system. 27
24 Responsibility without the fantasy. 28
25 Sometimes we escape from freedom. 29
26 Purpose is more demanding than a mood. 30
27 What does “better” actually mean? 31
28 So many options. Still a decision. 32

CHOOSE YOUR ROUTE / 03 OF 03

A map of the investigation.

Read in order, or choose a chapter. Every entry and page number is clickable.

PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

29 First we went online. Then online came with us. 33

30 Attention is a life with the minutes added up. 34

31 A small daily habit becomes a large annual decision. 35

32 The profile is real. It is also a selection. 36

33 Meeting online is a beginning, not an outcome. 37

34 The experiment is more interesting than the panic. 38

35 Connection is not the same as conversation. 39

AFTERWORD · THE SHARED HUMAN PROBLEM

36 We have gained freedoms. We have inherited work. 40

37 A private good life still needs a shared world. 41

38 The question comes home. 42

REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

39 Follow the argument back to its sources. 43

Chapter navigation works offline. Videos and external research links open online. The interactive calculator is available in the HTML edition.

03 / PRELUDE · THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

Living well, or just getting through?

Comfort has improved. The art of living still requires practice.

Picture an ordinary evening. The work is finished, or at least abandoned for the night. Food arrives. Entertainment arrives. Opinions arrive. Hours disappear. By bedtime you've been busy for six hours, and you'd be hard pressed to say doing what.

Spend that same evening fixing something you broke, learning an instrument, or sitting with someone who needs you. It might be a lousy evening in several respects. It might be the one you remember.

> A civilization can become better at keeping people comfortable without becoming equally good at helping them live deliberately.

We learn what matters from people we never chose. Then we spend the rest of our lives deciding which habits to keep, whom to show up for, and what to do with the hours nobody has claimed yet.

"What is wrong with people?" is a wonderfully satisfying question right up until you count yourself among them.

04 / PRELUDE · THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

The past is not a vacation destination.

Five historical windows, with the inconveniences left in.

Ancient worlds

Character & social order

Greek virtue, Confucian relationships, and Stoic self-command. Profound questions inside societies with profound exclusions.

1690s-1840s

Liberty & the citizen

Locke, Rousseau, and Tocqueville ask how people can become capable of freedom, rather than merely receive it.

1850s-1910s

Industry & interdependence

Mill defends individuality. Durkheim studies the bonds and disruptions of specialized modern life. Children work as well as learn.

1940s-1990s

Mass culture & wider choices

Fromm examines conformity; television supplies shared stories; women’s economic roles and family expectations change.

2000s-present

Connection at scale

Online platforms expand access while making attention, identity, and relationships more measurable and more marketable.

A lesson in self-command once meant learning to rule a household. Later it might mean standing up to the village, keeping time at the factory, or getting through dinner with your phone face down. The furniture changes. The argument keeps coming back.

SOURCES [03] Confucius · [28] John Stuart Mill · [17] National Geographic · [18] Claudia Goldin · [14] World Values Survey

05 / PRELUDE · THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

The kids these days.

Every age has its own version of “kids these days.”

Every generation acquires the right to complain about the next one, usually around the time its own music starts turning up in grocery stores.

A twenty-year-old and a seventy-year-old have two different pasts. One may remember a childhood organized around the factory whistle, the other around the phone. They also have different lives today. One is trying to get a foothold, the other has spent decades finding out what was worth holding on to. In fifty years the younger one will have complaints of their own. The grocery store will be ready.

06 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

Nobody raises themselves.

Before we choose our beliefs, we learn what earns a smile, a warning, or a place at the table.

The first curriculum is ordinary life: how adults handle frustration, whom they respect, what they excuse, what they joke about, and whether their promises survive inconvenience. Children encounter values before they can define the word.

In 1961, Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross let nursery-school children watch an adult attack an inflatable doll. Some of the children went on to imitate what they had just seen, right down to particular moves. The adults had given a demonstration. The children took notes in the way children do.

AB

A mind in context · 1925-2021

Albert Bandura

Psychologist · social learning

A Canadian-born Stanford psychologist whose research emphasized learning through observation and people’s capacity to influence their own behavior. The famous Bobo-doll experiment belongs to a larger account of human agency.

Pew finds that teenagers often share their parents’ religious and political affiliations. Some of that inheritance arrives in conversation. Plenty arrives through the people who come to dinner, the places a family goes on weekends, and the names that make everyone at the table groan.

SOURCES [09] Bandura, Ross & Ross · [10] Pew

07 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

The ancient argument over the human being.

Should education reveal truth, cultivate character, or teach us how to live with one another?

P

A mind in context · c. 428-348 BCE

Plato

Greek philosopher · education and political order

A student of Socrates and author of the Republic. His cave allegory challenges inherited appearances; his ideal city also gives rulers extensive control over education and stories.

Plato understood that a society’s stories help form its citizens. That insight creates an uncomfortable question: who should decide which stories are safe? A project that begins by liberating the mind can end by appointing someone to supervise it.

Confucius approached moral life through relationships, ritual, learning, and example. In the Analects, a ruler teaches through his conduct. People watch authority before they believe its slogans.

C

A mind in context · 551-479 BCE

Confucius

Chinese teacher · moral example and reciprocal obligations

Teaching during the late Zhou period, he treated ethical cultivation and responsible relationships as foundations of social order. His legacy is larger and more varied than the stereotype of unquestioning obedience.

> “Think for yourself” is an educational aim. Deciding what counts as good thinking is already a cultural choice.

SOURCES [02] Plato · [03] Confucius

08 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

The child is not a small office worker.

Enlightenment education was already an argument about discipline and independence.

John Locke · 1632-1704

The English philosopher emphasized habits, self-command, and education suited to developing judgment. Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693) addressed a gentleman’s upbringing, not universal schooling.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau · 1712-1778

The Genevan thinker’s Émile (1762) asked how education could follow a child’s development rather than simply impose adult conventions. His account of girls’ education also shows how unequally he distributed that freedom.

Locke wanted a child to acquire the habits that make judgment possible. Rousseau wanted enough room for the child to discover things without an adult supplying every answer. Try putting both men in charge of bedtime.

Leave too little room and the child gets good at asking permission. Leave too much and a difficult task can become an afternoon spent discovering that nobody is coming to help.

The historical surprise is that arguments about natural development, discipline, practical experience, and overmanaged childhood are centuries older than the parenting podcast. The microphones are new. The disagreement has excellent seniority.

SOURCES [04] John Locke · [05] Jean-Jacques Rousseau

09 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

More schooling. A harder question.

More Americans got a seat in the classroom. What happened once they sat down?



Frances Benjamin Johnston, Washington, D.C., circa 1899-1900. A classroom already using practical activity alongside formal instruction. Library of Congress. Image record ↗

In 1940, 24.5% of U.S. adults age 25 and over had finished high school or gone further, according to the NCES historical series. The graduates who left us books and speeches were a select group. Plenty of their neighbors had already gone to work.

As schooling expanded, more people had time to study before earning a living. The diploma became both a record of years spent in school and a ticket to the next place that expected one.

Schools face several demands at once: teach knowledge, prepare workers, develop citizens, maintain order, and accommodate different abilities. Those goals sometimes reinforce one another and sometimes collide. A student may learn the approved answer while remaining uncertain how to investigate an unfamiliar question.

> Can a student explain an idea, test it against a hard case, and change their mind when it falls apart?

SOURCES [06] NCES · [07] Frances Benjamin Johnston

10 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

Culture teaches while pretending to entertain.

A story can tell us what is normal without issuing a single command.

In Leave It to Beaver, family life happens around small decisions with consequences everybody can see by the end of the episode. The Television Academy traces much of the show’s appeal to that household. Week after week, it gave viewers a picture of home they could recognize, aspire to, or roll their eyes at.

A comedy has its own ways of handing out rewards. One character gets the laugh, another gets the last word, and a third is invited back next week to be wrong again. Watch a few seasons and you’ll know who the show expects you to root for.

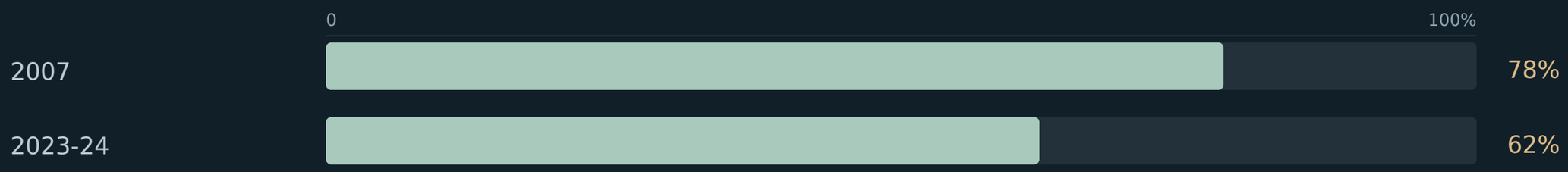
SOURCES [13] Television Academy · [09] Bandura, Ross & Ross

11 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

When shared authority becomes a choice.

What happens when inherited institutions must compete for attention?

U.S. adults identifying as Christian



Pew Religious Landscape Study, U.S. adults, 2007 and 2023-24.

A church could give you a calendar, a meal after a funeral, a room full of people who knew your family, and a standing obligation to help when it was somebody else’s turn. In Pew’s surveys, the share of U.S. adults identifying as Christian fell from 78% in 2007 to 62% in 2023-24.

Pew’s 2025 report also found that the decline had slowed. The affiliation numbers can move in a generation. The habits people built around a congregation can take longer to replace.

Schools, families, political movements, and online groups all have something to say about who you are. The harder job is finding one that will show up with a casserole.

SOURCES [11] Pew · [12] Pew

12 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

Modern does not mean identical.

Security changes priorities. History keeps leaving fingerprints.

The World Values Survey compares societies along broad dimensions including traditional versus secular-rational values and survival versus self-expression values. Its researchers associate greater existential security with shifts in what people emphasize.

Freedom sounds different to someone trying to get through a bad month and someone deciding what to do with a good year. One wants room to breathe. The other already has it and wants room to roam.

> Security buys room to experiment. History has a say in what people do with it.

Affection for a country can move people to serve it, argue with its leaders, or spend a Saturday doing something about the town they live in. The Saturday part tends to get less airtime.

SOURCES [14] World Values Survey

13 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

An education worth waking up for.

A challenge to narrow definitions of ability, followed by a harder test.



TED / YouTube - click the image to watch online

WATCH & THINK

Ken Robinson · Do schools kill creativity?

Ken Robinson’s 2006 talk asks what schools lose when creativity gets squeezed out of the timetable.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

A mind in context · 1950-2020

Ken Robinson

British educator · creativity and education

Led the United Kingdom’s 1998 advisory committee on creative and cultural education. His accessible public arguments challenged narrow measures of talent and educational success.

Creativity needs material. A musician puts in hours learning what the instrument can do before trying something nobody has heard. Knowledge without curiosity can become very well organized furniture.

> School is one place we learn how to live with other people. Home is the one that keeps going after the bell.

SOURCES [15] Ken Robinson

14 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

The family was never just a feeling.

Love has always lived alongside work, obligation, survival, and power.

Industrialization moved work out of many homes and drew people toward factories and cities. The change reached households on different schedules. A family that had once worked alongside one another might now have to fit its life around the hours an employer bought.

Earlier households could provide continuity, practical skills, and dependable obligations. They could also demand labor and obedience from people with little bargaining power. “The family used to be stronger” needs a follow-up: stronger at doing what, and for whom?

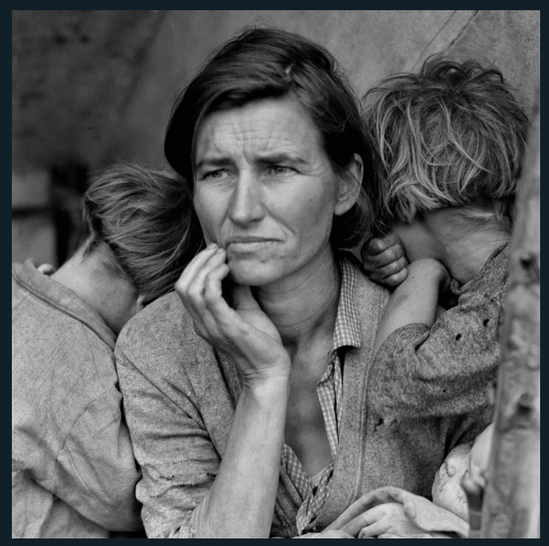


Lewis Hine, Ten-Year-Old Spinner in North Carolina Cotton Mill, 1908. Historical print reproduced by Artsy. A reminder that responsibility and exploitation can occupy the same vocabulary. Image record ↗

Asking children to pitch in can teach competence and care. Treating their hardship as proof of an earlier generation’s superior character turns necessity into a motivational poster.

14 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

The family was never just a feeling. / continued



Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, 1936. Florence Owens Thompson and her children during the Great Depression. Reproduction via Musei di Bassano del Grappa. Image record ↗

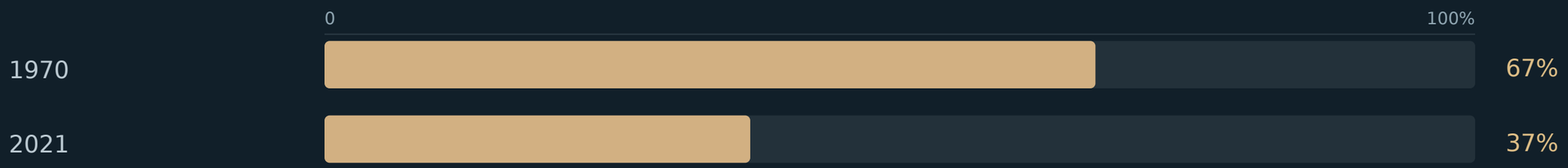
SOURCES [17] National Geographic · [08] Lewis Hine

15 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

One familiar household is less common.

A household that once described a majority now describes a minority.

Living with a spouse and children under 18



U.S. adults ages 25-49. Pew analysis of census and ACS data, published 2023.

Americans marry later, fewer marry at all, and children grow up in a wider range of households. The arrangement in the chart went from a clear majority of Americans ages 25-49 in 1970 to a minority by 2021.

Care, money, time, and reliable adults have to come from somewhere. When commitments dissolve or never form, their practical work stays on the calendar. Someone performs it, pays for it, or goes without it.

A child still needs to get home at three. An older parent still needs a ride on Thursday. Family arrangements change who gets the call and who can afford to answer it.

SOURCES [16] Pew

16 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

More choice. A new negotiation.

Changing roles solved some old restrictions and exposed new coordination problems.



Gordon Parks, a family saying grace in the Frederick Douglass Housing Project, Anacostia, Washington, D.C., June 1942. A particular household, not a universal picture of the era. Reproduction via Forbes. Image record ↗

CG

A mind in context · Born 1946

Claudia Goldin

Economic historian · women, work, and family

Her research traces how employment, education, and expectations reshaped women’s lives. The “quiet revolution” directs attention to changing horizons, not just a single policy or cultural slogan.

16 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

More choice. A new negotiation. / continued

Claudia Goldin traces how women’s work changed over the twentieth century. Marriage bars once made marriage a reason to refuse a woman a job or take away the one she had.

An income of one’s own can make it possible to choose a partner freely or leave a bad arrangement. Inside a household, two careers can also mean two schedules, two sets of ambitions, and one sick child waiting to be picked up.

Among adults who did household activities in the 2024 American Time Use Survey, women spent more time on them than men. The arguments about fairness still have a practical destination. Somebody has to do the work.

> A relationship can have equal dignity and still need a brutally practical conversation about Thursday.

SOURCES [18] Claudia Goldin · [19] Claudia Goldin · [37] BLS

17 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

Community is a practice, not a mood.

The people who say “someone should do something” are often standing in the same room.



A mind in context · 1805-1859

Alexis de Tocqueville

French observer · Democracy in America

Visited the United States in 1831-32 and examined democratic life in volumes published in 1835 and 1840. Voluntary associations helped explain how private people could become effective together.

Portrait: Chassériau · via MIT News ↗

Tocqueville watched Americans form associations to do things they could barely begin alone. Cooperation was something people learned by running meetings, collecting money, and turning up for the next job.

Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone tracked the weakening of American civic networks before smartphones entered the picture. Television, work, long commutes, and generational turnover had already changed what people did with their evenings. The phone arrived late to a party that was already thinning out.

RP

A mind in context · Born 1941

Robert Putnam

Political scientist · social capital

The Harvard scholar uses social capital to describe the value of social networks and norms of reciprocity. Close internal bonds and connections across different groups can do different civic work.

SOURCES [20] Alexis de Tocqueville · [21] Robert D. Putnam

18 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

The trust problem has a measurement problem.

What do we mean when we say we trust people?

In Pew’s 2023-24 survey, 34% of Americans said most people could be trusted.

Pew also tracks trust with a differently worded question. On that measure, the figure was 52% in 2018 and 55% in February 2025. Even the language of the question changes which experiences come to mind.

Interpersonal trust

Expectations about other people. It may differ between strangers, neighbors, friends, and family.

Institutional trust

Confidence in an organization or authority. Distrusting a government is not the same as distrusting a neighbor.

A community needs both willingness to cooperate and sensible ways to limit betrayal. Blind trust makes exploitation easier. Universal suspicion makes cooperation expensive. The useful ambition is trust supported by repeated conduct, transparent rules, and consequences.

SOURCES [22] Pew · [23] Pew

19 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

Alone, isolated, lonely: three different things.

A crowded room is not a guarantee of company. An empty room is not a diagnosis.

Solitude

Time alone that may be chosen and restorative. Its value depends partly on whether connection remains available.

Social isolation

An objective shortage of relationships or interaction. A person may or may not describe it as distressing.

Loneliness

A painful gap between the connection someone wants and what they experience. Contact counts cannot measure all of it.

The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 advisory connects social ties with health and tracks changes in how much time people spend together. An empty Saturday can feel like relief when you’ve been wanted all week. It can feel very different when you can’t think of anyone to call.

Earlier generations left us fewer ways to count loneliness. They left us plenty of novels about it. People have been feeling alone in crowded houses for a long time.

A dependable friend can change the feel of a whole week. It helps to have somewhere you can show up often enough to become one.

SOURCES [24] U.S. Surgeon General

20 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

Relationships need maintenance.

The strongest connection is rarely the one that asks absolutely nothing of us.



TED / YouTube - click the image to watch online

WATCH & THINK

Robert Waldinger · What makes a good life?

Robert Waldinger follows the Harvard Study of Adult Development through decades of work, family life, and friendship.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

A mind in context · Born 1951

RW

Robert Waldinger

Psychiatrist · adult development

A Harvard psychiatrist and director of the long-running Study of Adult Development. The original cohorts were men from particular Boston-area backgrounds; later research broadened the study’s reach.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development followed people through decades of ordinary decisions, illness, work, and family life. Robert Waldinger’s talk puts the quality of their relationships at the center of the story.

Make the call, return the favor, show up again. Human beings have devoted considerable ingenuity to discovering alternatives. Most still require someone to show up.

> Relationships give us a place to become ourselves. Some make it very hard to become anyone else.

SOURCES [25] Robert Waldinger · [26] Harvard Gazette

Character is what gets repeated.

The person you intend to become has to survive your ordinary habits.



A mind in context · 384-322 BCE

Aristotle

Greek philosopher · virtue and flourishing

A student of Plato who developed a practical ethics centered on character and living well. His account also reflects the exclusions and social hierarchies of his time.

Portrait: Studenti · historical sculpture ↗

In Book II of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle puts practice at the beginning of character. You become the sort of person who keeps a promise by keeping promises, including the ones you wish you'd made to somebody less organized.

Honesty practiced only when convenient is a fragile skill. Patience endlessly admired but never exercised remains a decorative preference.

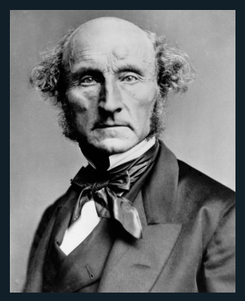
Practice gives judgment something to work with. Courage might mean speaking up, or it might mean resisting the urge to deliver the magnificent speech you've been composing since breakfast.

> An aspiration describes a direction. A habit reveals which way the feet keep going.

SOURCES [01] Aristotle

Freedom has a social pressure problem.

You can be legally free and still live on permission from the crowd.



A mind in context · 1806-1873

John Stuart Mill

English philosopher · individuality and liberty

On Liberty (1859) defends room for dissent and experiments in living. Mill worried about social conformity as well as coercive government. He treated independent judgment as something societies need, not merely something individuals enjoy.

Portrait: Treccani ↗

Mill’s defense of individuality treats variety as a public good as well as a private pleasure. People need room to discover ways of living that custom has not already approved.

Originality can produce discovery, foolishness, or a slightly different way to be fashionable. Every rebellion eventually has to decide what everybody will wear.

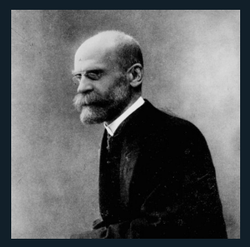
No faction has patented the desire to punish an inconvenient thought. The village, the office, the university, and the group chat all have their ways of letting you know whose side you’re expected to be on.

SOURCES [28] John Stuart Mill

23 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

Independence rests on an enormous support system.

Modern life makes us more specialized and more dependent on people we will never meet.



A mind in context · 1858-1917

Émile Durkheim

French sociologist · solidarity and social order

In The Division of Labor in Society (1893), he explored how increasingly differentiated people could remain bound together. Shared identity and specialized interdependence create different forms of solidarity.

Portrait: SozTheo · archival portrait ↗

A person can choose a career and work alone all day while depending on power networks, supply chains, standards, and strangers. Try manufacturing civilization in the garage.

Durkheim saw the division of labor turning strangers into people who depended on one another. His worry was what would hold them together when their jobs, neighborhoods, and daily experiences gave them less in common.

A skilled electrician can build a business because somebody else makes reliable wire, somebody teaches apprentices, and customers can expect a contract to mean something. Each of those arrangements can enlarge the electrician’s freedom or make it easy for someone to take advantage.

> Being capable means knowing what you can do, what others can do, and who can be counted on.

SOURCES [27] Émile Durkheim

24 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

Responsibility without the fantasy.

Circumstances shape the available moves. Choices still shape what happens next.

E

A mind in context · c. 50-135 CE

Epictetus

Stoic teacher · judgment and self-command

Born enslaved and later freed, he taught philosophy in the Roman world. The Enchiridion, compiled by his student Arrian, distinguishes what is up to us from what is not.

Epictetus puts judgment and action in our hands. Circumstances set the terms. You can decide to speak up at work and still have a boss with the power to fire you.

The same person can need help today and make a difficult decision tomorrow. Most lives contain quite a bit of both.

A fairer arrangement can give people more chances to act. Taking a chance is still something a person has to do.

SOURCES [29] Epictetus · [33] Ryan & Deci

25 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

Sometimes we escape from freedom.

Choosing for ourselves can be more frightening than following a script.

EF

A mind in context · 1900-1980

Erich Fromm

Social psychologist and psychoanalyst · conformity

Writing against the background of European authoritarianism, Fromm’s Escape from Freedom (1941) examined why insecurity could make submission and conformity attractive.

Fromm’s account of automaton conformity describes a person adopting expected patterns so thoroughly that an approved identity feels like a personal choice. The unsettling possibility is that a person may feel most authentic precisely when following a script.

The office rewards one personality. Friends reward another. After a while you can walk into a room, become exactly who belongs there, and call the experience being yourself.

Shared customs can make a home feel like home. The price goes up when belonging requires you to leave your judgment at the door.

> A person can spend years becoming exactly what an audience wants, then wonder where the person went.

SOURCES [30] Erich Fromm

26 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

Purpose is more demanding than a mood.

A meaningful life can include difficulty that is worth accepting.

VF

A mind in context · 1905-1997

Viktor Frankl

Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist · logotherapy

Developed a meaning-centered approach before his imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. His survival and later writing made questions of responsibility and meaning central to his public legacy.

Viktor Frankl starts with what a particular life asks of a person. There may be work to do, someone to love, or an unavoidable hardship to face.

Caring for a child, keeping faith with a friend, or mastering an uncertain craft can give a life direction. Some days the work is tiring and the satisfaction comes much later.

A life can begin again in small commitments. Feed the dog. Answer the call. Finish the thing you promised to do. The grand explanation can show up when it’s ready.

SOURCES [31] Viktor Frankl Institute · [32] Viktor E. Frankl Institute of America

27 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

What does “better” actually mean?

Money, freedom, competence, and connection answer different questions.

Autonomy

Experiencing your actions as chosen and endorsed, rather than constantly controlled.

Competence

Developing the ability to do things effectively and meet meaningful challenges.

Relatedness

Feeling connected to people who matter, with some sense that you matter to them.

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci put these three needs at the heart of motivation. Think of learning a skill you chose, getting good enough to help, and having people who are glad you showed up.

In 2023, Matthew Killingsworth, Daniel Kahneman, and Barbara Mellers found that the relationship between income and emotional well-being varied across levels of happiness. Money can buy a quieter apartment, time to recover, and a chance to turn down a bad job. The value of that room depends on the life you can make inside it.

Convenience can remove needless drudgery and make room for a better life. The room still needs furnishing.

SOURCES [33] Ryan & Deci · [34] Killingsworth, Kahneman & Mellers

28 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

So many options. Still a decision.

Freedom becomes a life only when some possibilities become commitments.



TED / YouTube - click the image to watch online

WATCH & THINK

Barry Schwartz · The paradox of choice

Barry Schwartz on the peculiar burden of standing in front of an entire shelf and still feeling you chose the wrong thing.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

A mind in context · Born 1946

BS

Barry Schwartz

Psychologist · choice and practical judgment

Known for The Paradox of Choice (2004) and public arguments about the costs of constant optimization. His account poses a useful question rather than a universal law that fewer options are always better.

Choosing is the first part. The next part is staying around long enough to discover what you chose. A friendship, vocation, or skill can’t be fully evaluated from its product page.

At some point, keeping every possibility open becomes its own closed way of living.

> There’s always another possibility on a screen. There are still only twenty-four hours in the day.

SOURCES [35] Barry Schwartz

29 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

First we went online. Then online came with us.

The internet moved from a place we visited to a place that could find us.

Early internet

A place to visit

Forums, email, and chat expanded access to people and specialized interests. Online identity and community already mattered.

Social networking

A profile to maintain

Relationships became visible through networks, posts, and feedback. Communication could also become public performance.

Mobile platforms

A continuous environment

The same device carries work, entertainment, friends, strangers, and a stream that does not naturally finish.

The early web let someone with an obscure hobby find the other six people who cared about it. A forum could become a circle of friends. The phone brought those friends closer and gave everything else a way to come along.

Now a conversation can follow you from the bus to the couch to bed. So can the argument you were happy to leave at work.

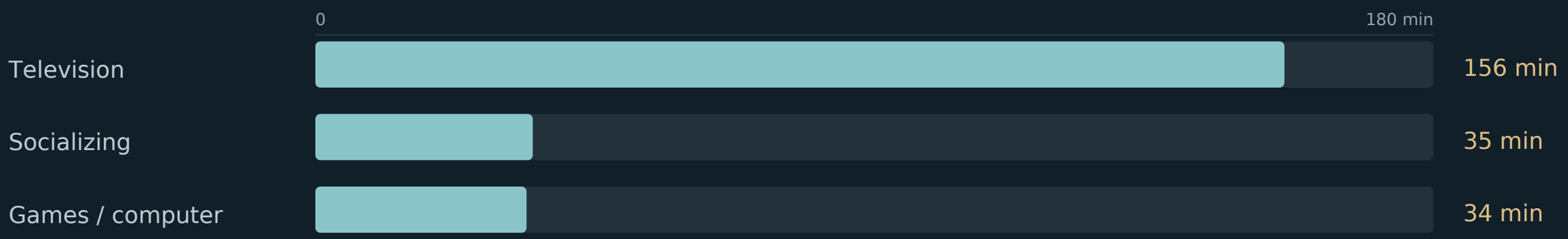
SOURCES [40] Sherry Turkle · [38] Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen

30 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

Attention is a life with the minutes added up.

The most revealing question may be: what did this replace?

Selected daily leisure activities · U.S., 2024



BLS American Time Use Survey, civilian population age 15+. Daily averages across the population for primary activities.

The same release puts socializing and communicating at 43 minutes a day in 2014 and 35 in 2024.

Television still takes the biggest share in the chart. Long before anyone carried a screen into bed, there was one in the living room that could make an entire evening disappear.

A screen can make a long wait bearable, bring a friend closer, or give a person a quiet hour. It can also take the hour when the two of you finally had time to talk.

SOURCES [37] BLS

31 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

A small daily habit becomes a large annual decision.

What could you do with the same half hour every day?

Daily minutes	Hours / week	Hours / year	15-minute sessions / year
15	1.8	91.2	365
30	3.5	182.5	730
60	7.0	365.0	1,460
120	14.0	730.0	2,920

Annual figures use 365 days. Hours are rounded to one decimal.

Open the interactive calculator in the HTML edition

Thirty minutes could buy a walk with someone, a few pages of a book, or another attempt at a piece of music that currently sounds like the furniture is being moved.

Some evenings, a show and a comfortable chair are exactly what you want. The calendar gets interesting when you realize how many evenings the chair has chosen for you.

A calendar can quietly become an autobiography.

32 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

The profile is real. It is also a selection.

Every presentation of a self leaves something outside the frame.

Sherry Turkle writes about the appeal of an identity you can edit. A conversation with a real person can take a turn you never planned. A post can sit in drafts until it says precisely what you want it to say.

We select what people see offline too, from clothes to manners to the stories we tell on a first date. Online, the selection can last indefinitely, reach people we'll never meet, and come with a running score.

A carefully selected life can be perfectly sincere. It's still a brutal comparison for your entire Tuesday, including the dishes and the inexplicable bad mood.

Useful connection

A message becomes a call, a meeting, practical support, or an ongoing shared activity.

Endless performance

The interaction mainly feeds comparison, image management, or a cycle of checking for approval.

SOURCES [40] Sherry Turkle

33 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

Meeting online is a beginning, not an outcome.

Access can expand. Trust still has to be built.

In 2019, Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen reported that meeting online had become the most common route for U.S. heterosexual couples. Dating apps were one part of that shift.

In a Pew survey fielded in 2022, one in ten partnered adults said they had met their current partner through a dating site or app.

What online access can do

Introduce people beyond existing social circles, including those with limited local opportunities.

What a profile cannot do

Demonstrate how someone handles disagreement, inconvenience, responsibility, or your unremarkable everyday company.

Messages give you time to find the right words. Calls introduce silences. In person you learn how somebody treats the waiter, handles a change of plans, and behaves after you've both had a tedious day.

A long questionnaire and a quick swipe offer different ways to meet. Both eventually ask you to spend time with someone who has an entire life outside the profile.

SOURCES [38] Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen · [39] Pew

34 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

The experiment is more interesting than the panic.

Four weeks away from Facebook. Where did the time go?

Four weeks before the 2018 U.S. midterm election, Allcott and colleagues had some participants deactivate Facebook. Those participants reported greater well-being and knew less factual news. They spent some of the recovered time socializing, and some watching television alone. The village square would have to wait.

The National Academies' 2024 review describes a mixed landscape for adolescents. A group chat can give one teenager a place to belong and another a conflict that follows them home. Across the evidence, the review found too little to draw a population-wide causal conclusion about adolescent health.

SOURCES [41] Allcott et al. · [42] National Academies

35 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

Connection is not the same as conversation.

A device can bring someone closer. It can also give us a way to leave without moving.



TED / YouTube - click the image to watch online

WATCH & THINK

Sherry Turkle · Connected, but alone?

Sherry Turkle’s 2012 talk takes up a familiar sight. Everyone is available, and everyone is looking down.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

ST

A mind in context · Born 1948

Sherry Turkle

MIT researcher · technology and the self

A professor whose interviews and writing examine how people experience computers, online identities, and relationships. Her work brings human descriptions into a debate often dominated by usage counts.

When someone needs to talk, an ordinary ten minutes of your attention can matter more than an entire day in which both of you were technically available.

A phone is a remarkable tool. Occasionally, so is putting it down.

> The things we value, the people we owe, and the work we choose all draw on the same hours.

SOURCES [40] Sherry Turkle

36 / AFTERWORD · THE SHARED HUMAN PROBLEM

We have gained freedoms. We have inherited work.

A shared script can disappear faster than the skills needed to live without it.

An inherited way of life can give you a name, people to call, and work worth doing. It can also assign you a place you have no wish to occupy. More freedom gives you a chance to leave and the job of deciding where to go.

A town can lose the factory, the church, or the club that once brought people together. A person can gain choices and still spend years looking for the kind of company that used to be there on Thursday nights.

Values

What deserves attention?

Relationships

Who depends on whom?

Purpose

What is worth doing?

Attention

What actually gets done?

We want community and dodge its obligations. We want individuality and hate being the one who disagrees. We want meaning and would prefer that somebody else handle the decisions. The internet gave a few old habits the ability to work around the clock.

> The uncomfortable possibility is that some of what is wrong with people is what people are repeatedly rewarded for doing.

SOURCES [28] John Stuart Mill · [27] Émile Durkheim · [21] Robert D. Putnam · [30] Erich Fromm

37 / AFTERWORD · THE SHARED HUMAN PROBLEM

A private good life still needs a shared world.

We cannot solve every social problem by adjusting our personal morning routine.

HA

A mind in context · 1906-1975

Hannah Arendt

Political thinker · action and the common world

A German-born Jewish thinker who fled Nazism and later wrote in the United States. The Human Condition (1958) examines labor, work, and action, including the public space where distinct people speak and act together.

For Hannah Arendt, public life happens among people who see the world differently and still have to share it. A meeting where everyone already agrees can be pleasant. The harder work begins when the next person speaks.

A family has to decide who takes care of a parent. A school has to make room for serious disagreement. A town has to find a reason for people to keep meeting after the immediate crisis passes.

People build a common world by doing things together long enough to have something in common.

SOURCES [36] Hannah Arendt

38 / AFTERWORD · THE SHARED HUMAN PROBLEM

The question comes home.

What is wrong with people? Quite a lot, apparently. There is still room to work.

The past offers wisdom without a warranty. The present offers opportunity without instructions. A good life has to borrow carefully from both.

We can keep the freedoms people fought for and recover some of the habits that made freedom livable. Both take work, usually on a day when there are easier things to do.

> Which belief have you never seriously examined?
>
> Which person needs more than your occasional reaction?
>
> Which responsibility would make your life more your own?
>
> Which hour keeps disappearing without your consent?

Civilization will have to look after itself until lunch. After lunch, there may be a call worth making.

> We have become extraordinarily inventive at creating ways to live. Becoming better at living remains a human responsibility.

Explore the sources →

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources.

Primary texts, research, data, talks, and image records.

Each source is labeled by type. Each entry links to the underlying text or research and explains what it can support. Data retain their observation dates; this is a historical investigation, not a live statistical feed.

01 · Primary text

Aristotle · Nicomachean Ethics, Book II

Moral character, practice, and habit. W. D. Ross translation; ancient argument, not an experimental result.

Discussed in chapters 21

02 · Primary text

Plato · Republic, Books II-III and VII

Education, stories, political order, and the allegory of the cave. Benjamin Jowett translation.

Discussed in chapters 07

03 · Primary text

Confucius · Analects: On Government

Columbia University selections on moral example, governing, and social roles.

Discussed in chapters 04, 07

04 · Primary text

John Locke · Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693)

Original-edition passage on the establishment of habits; addressed to the education of a gentleman, not a universal school system.

Discussed in chapters 08

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

05 · Primary text

Jean-Jacques Rousseau · Émile (1762)

An educational thought experiment about development and society, with restrictive assumptions about women’s education.

Discussed in chapters 08

06 · Historical data

NCES · Digest of Education Statistics, Table 104.10

High school completion or higher among U.S. people age 25 and over. The 1940 figure used here is 24.5%; completion is not a measure of wisdom or civic virtue.

Discussed in chapters 09

07 · Historical image

Frances Benjamin Johnston · Washington classroom, circa 1899-1900

Library of Congress, classroom scene with blocks and blackboard. An individual photograph, not a representative sample of schooling.

Discussed in chapters 09

08 · Historical record

Lewis Hine · Children working in cotton mills

1908 North Carolina spinner photograph and National Child Labor Committee collection. Documentary evidence of conditions, not an estimate of all childhood experiences.

Discussed in chapters 14

09 · Experiment

Bandura, Ross & Ross · Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models (1961)

Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 63, 575-582. Laboratory imitation among nursery-school children; limited basis for claims about adult beliefs or society-wide effects.

Discussed in chapters 06, 10

10 · Survey

Pew Research Center · Most U.S. parents pass along religion and politics (2023)

Analysis of surveys conducted 2015-2022. Family resemblance does not establish a single mechanism of transmission.

Discussed in chapters 06

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

11 · Survey

Pew Research Center · Religious identity, 2023-24 Religious Landscape Study

U.S. Christian identification: 78% in 2007 and 62% in 2023-24. Identification is distinct from attendance, conduct, belief intensity, and institutional influence.

Discussed in chapters 11

12 · Survey

Pew Research Center · Decline of Christianity has slowed (2025)

Recent stabilization complicates extrapolations from the longer decline. Published in 2025; underlying principal study fielded 2023-24.

Discussed in chapters 11

13 · Cultural history

Television Academy · Leave It to Beaver

Industry oral-history archive discussing the family ideal in the series. A fictional household is a cultural artifact, not demographic evidence.

Discussed in chapters 10

14 · International survey

World Values Survey · Findings and Inglehart-Welzel cultural map

Traditional/secular-rational and survival/self-expression dimensions; society-level patterns conceal substantial internal variation.

Discussed in chapters 04, 12

15 · Talk / argument

Ken Robinson · Do schools kill creativity? (TED, 2006)

A memorable critique of narrow educational priorities. A talk advances an argument; it is not a causal evaluation of all schools.

Discussed in chapters 13

16 · Demographic data

Pew Research Center · The modern American family (2023)

U.S. adults ages 25-49 living with a spouse and at least one child under 18: 67% in 1970; 37% in 2021. Census and ACS analysis, not the share of all adults who are married.

Discussed in chapters 15

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

17 · Historical synthesis

National Geographic · Industrialization, Labor and Life

Industrial change reshaped settlements, work, and family life. Effects varied across countries, occupations, and classes.

Discussed in chapters 04, 14

18 · Economic history

Claudia Goldin · The quiet revolution (2006)

Women’s changing employment, education, expectations, and family decisions; NBER Working Paper 11953.

Discussed in chapters 04, 16

19 · Economic history

Claudia Goldin · Marriage bars (1988)

Documents employment restrictions affecting married women in the 1920s-1950s; NBER Working Paper 2747.

Discussed in chapters 16

20 · Primary text

Alexis de Tocqueville · Association in civil life (1840)

Excerpt from Democracy in America. Voluntary association as a means of collective action in a democratic society.

Discussed in chapters 17

21 · Research synthesis

Robert D. Putnam · Bowling Alone and research materials

The book’s thesis about declining American social capital, supporting materials, and the possibility of civic renewal. Decline began before smartphone social media.

Earlier Bowling Alone essay (1995) ↗

Discussed in chapters 17, 36

22 · Survey

Pew Research Center · Americans’ trust in one another (2025)

34% chose “most people can be trusted” in the 2023-24 measure. Interpersonal trust differs from trust in government.

Discussed in chapters 18

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

23 · Methods

Pew Research Center · Social trust methodology (2025)

Alternative wording yields different levels and recent trends: 52% in 2018 and 55% in February 2025 on that alternative measure. Do not splice question formats.

Discussed in chapters 18

24 · Research review

U.S. Surgeon General · Social connection advisory (2023)

Distinguishes social connection, isolation, and loneliness. Health associations and time-use trends are not a single causal experiment.

Discussed in chapters 19

25 · Talk / longitudinal study

Robert Waldinger · What makes a good life? (TED, 2015)

Accessible introduction to the Harvard Study of Adult Development and relationship quality. Original cohorts were men, not a random sample of humanity.

Discussed in chapters 20

26 · Research interview

Harvard Gazette · Relationships, happiness, and health (2023)

Interview with study director Robert Waldinger; relationship maintenance and the study’s later inclusion of descendants.

Discussed in chapters 20

27 · Historical scholarship

Émile Durkheim · Division of labor (1893), University of Chicago research archive

Robert Alun Jones’s guide to mechanical and organic solidarity, interdependence, and abnormal or anomic forms of the division of labor.

Discussed in chapters 23, 36

28 · Primary text

John Stuart Mill · On Liberty (1859), especially Chapter III

Individuality, social pressure, custom, and experiments in living. Mill’s account is a philosophical defense, not a claim that all choices are equally good.

Discussed in chapters 04, 22, 36

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

29 · Primary text

Epictetus · Enchiridion, especially sections 1 and 5

Stoic distinction between what is up to us and what is not. Ancient guidance must be interpreted in context.

Discussed in chapters 24

30 · Primary text

Erich Fromm · Mechanisms of Escape, from Escape from Freedom (1941)

Account of authoritarianism and automaton conformity. A historical and psychoanalytic interpretation, not a contemporary prevalence estimate.

Text excerpt (1942 edition) ↗

Discussed in chapters 25, 36

31 · Biography

Viktor Frankl Institute · Standard biography

Frankl (1905-1997), Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist, concentration-camp survivor, and developer of logotherapy. His ideas predated his imprisonment.

Discussed in chapters 26

32 · Interpretive resource

Viktor E. Frankl Institute of America · Meaning and logotherapy

Meaning-centered interpretation from the institute. Provides a philosophical and therapeutic lens rather than a universal causal explanation of happiness.

Discussed in chapters 26

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

33 · Psychological theory / review

Ryan & Deci · Self-determination theory (2000)

American Psychologist, 55, 68-78. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness; autonomy means volition, not total independence from other people.

Paper abstract ↗

Discussed in chapters 24, 27

34 · Observational research

Killingsworth, Kahneman & Mellers · Income and emotional well-being (2023)

PNAS, 120, e2208661120. Adversarial collaboration reconciles differing findings; no universal happiness ceiling and no proof that money purchases purpose.

Paper abstract ↗

Discussed in chapters 27

35 · Talk / argument

Barry Schwartz · The paradox of choice (TED, 2005)

A psychologist’s case that abundant options can create burdens. Effects depend on context; more choice is not invariably worse.

Discussed in chapters 28

36 · Philosophical scholarship

Hannah Arendt · Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Action, plurality, speech, and public life; interpretation of The Human Condition (1958).

Discussed in chapters 37

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

37 · Time-use data

BLS · American Time Use Survey, 2024 results

U.S. civilian population age 15+: TV 2.60 hours/day; socializing and communicating 0.59; games/computer leisure 0.57. Primary activities, not total screen exposure. Socializing: 43 minutes in 2014, 35 in 2024.

Discussed in chapters 16, 30

38 · Survey research

Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen · Disintermediating your friends (2019)

PNAS, 116, 17753-17758. Online meeting became the most common route for U.S. heterosexual couples. Meeting online is broader than dating apps; it does not establish every platform’s long-term success rate.

Paper abstract ↗

Discussed in chapters 29, 33

39 · Survey

Pew Research Center · Online dating in the U.S. (2023)

Survey fielded July 2022. One in ten partnered adults met their current partner through a dating site or app; this is not ten percent of all users finding partners.

Discussed in chapters 33

40 · Talk / interpretation

Sherry Turkle · Connected, but alone? (TED, 2012)

MIT researcher’s account of devices, mediated identity, and conversation. Interpretive critique complements but does not replace causal evidence.

Discussed in chapters 29, 32, 35

39 / REFERENCE · SOURCES & IMAGE CREDITS

Follow the argument back to its sources. / continued

41 · Randomized experiment

Allcott et al. · The welfare effects of social media (2020)

American Economic Review, 110, 629-676. Four-week Facebook deactivation before the 2018 U.S. midterms: well-being rose, news knowledge fell, and offline activities included both socializing and TV alone.

Author manuscript (2019) ↗

Discussed in chapters 34

42 · Consensus review

National Academies · Social Media and Adolescent Health (2024), Summary

Review did not support a population-level causal conclusion about adolescent health. Does not establish no harm; effects can vary by user, content, and platform features.

Discussed in chapters 34

Image credits: historical portraits of Mill (Treccani), Aristotle bust (Studenti), Durkheim (SozTheo), Tocqueville / Théodore Chassériau (MIT News); Johnston classroom (Library of Congress); Hine spinner print (Artsy); Lange’s Migrant Mother (Musei di Bassano del Grappa); Parks’s family at dinner (Forbes). Each image record is linked where the image appears. Portrait reproductions show historical likenesses, not photographs of the ancient figures.