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.

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VALUES / CONNECTION / PURPOSE / DIGITAL LIFE

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

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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. Nobody has necessarily done anything wrong. Yet it is possible to reach bedtime having been occupied almost continuously and engaged very little.

Now picture a difficult evening spent caring for someone, learning an instrument, fixing a mistake, or keeping a promise. It may contain less pleasure and more life. That is a philosophical distinction, not a laboratory finding: enjoyment, meaning, freedom, and belonging overlap without being the same thing.

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

This investigation follows four connected questions: Who teaches us what matters? What holds us together? What makes a life our own? And what happens when much of that life moves onto a screen?

The title points outward. The investigation should eventually point inward. “What is wrong with people?” becomes useful when it includes the person asking.

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.

These windows are comparisons, not stages that every society passes through identically. The main demographic examples are American. Chinese ethical thought and cross-national value research help keep the United States from being mistaken for humanity.

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

05 / PRELUDE · THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

Four kinds of claim. Four different jobs.

A striking story can illuminate a question without settling it.

Measured change

A survey or demographic series can show what changed in a defined population. It rarely tells the whole story of why.

Research interpretation

A proposed explanation connects findings. Competing explanations may fit the same pattern.

Philosophical argument

A thinker argues for what freedom, virtue, or meaning should involve. The argument needs reasoning, not a percentage attached to it.

Open question

Some things remain unresolved. Naming the gap is more useful than filling it with confidence.

The pages identify evidence where it matters, link to sources, and keep dates and populations attached to numbers. A comparison of 1970 and 2021 is a comparison of those years, not a claim to describe this morning.

Be suspicious of the easy generational punchline. A twenty-year-old and a seventy-year-old differ in age, upbringing, and historical experience. A single survey cannot reliably separate those ingredients. “Kids these days” is a very old research design. Its peer-review record is less impressive.

CONSIDER THIS

Which conclusion would become less comfortable if the evidence pointed in the other direction?

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.

Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross gave this everyday observation an experimental form in 1961. Nursery-school children who watched an aggressive adult model later reproduced some of the modeled actions. The setting was a laboratory, the target an inflatable doll, and the outcome immediate behavior. It did not prove that a television program creates a criminal. It demonstrated that observation can teach conduct.

A mind in context · 1925-2021

AB

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’s analyses also find substantial resemblance between parents’ and children’s religious and political affiliations. Resemblance can come through instruction, shared routines, social networks, or circumstances. Family influence has competitors; it has not vanished.

CONSIDER THIS

What did the adults around you teach without ever putting it into words?

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’s conduct matters alongside commands and punishments. The modern application is straightforward: 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.

These thinkers did not agree on a finished recipe. They help expose a permanent tension: a child must learn rules while also learning when a rule deserves a challenge.

Overprotection can leave judgment underused. Neglect can leave it unsupported. Neither concern justifies the fantasy that a single parenting slogan can solve every household. A child’s age, temperament, resources, and surroundings matter.

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.

CONSIDER THIS

Does good education produce compliance while watched, or judgment when nobody is watching?

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

09 / PART I · EDUCATION, CULTURE & VALUES

More schooling. A harder question.

Access to education and the quality of judgment are related, but they are not interchangeable.



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, only 24.5% of U.S. adults age 25 and over had completed high school or more, according to the NCES historical series. That is a useful antidote to comparing today’s entire population with the small, unusually educated sample whose books and speeches still circulate.

Expanded schooling made sustained study available to people once excluded or pushed early into work. It does not follow that every new credential represents stronger reasoning. Completion measures attainment, not intellectual courage.

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.

> The useful test is not whether students can repeat an opinion. It is whether they can explain it, question it, and revise it.

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.

The Television Academy describes Leave It to Beaver as a celebration of family life and the small decisions through which children grow. Its household is a recognizable ideal, not a census report. A polished fictional home can offer a moral model while leaving much of the surrounding society outside the frame.

Try the same questions on any contemporary comedy, film, or novel: Who is admirable? Who is ridiculous? Which commitments are noble, and which are embarrassing? Is authority earned, inherited, abusive, or simply a joke? Whose ordinary life is permitted to count as ordinary?

Those questions reveal a work’s choices. They do not establish a coordinated plan across every studio, publisher, or institution. Evidence of a repeated message is not automatically evidence of a common motive.

Intentional message

A creator, school, or campaign can openly advocate an ideal. Examine the stated aim and the actual material.

Unintended lesson

Casting, incentives, repeated plots, and what a story omits can shape expectations without a central organizer.

CONSIDER THIS

Which fictional version of a successful life did you absorb before you ever examined it?

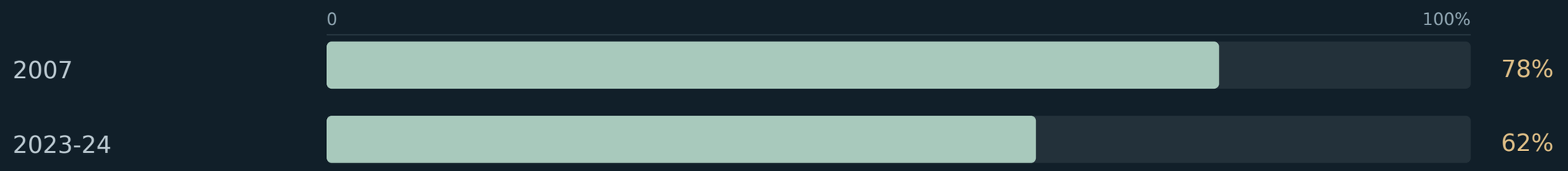
SOURCES [13] Television Academy · [09] Bandura, Ross & Ross

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. Two survey points, not a continuous trend line. Religious identity does not measure personal morality or church participation.

Religious institutions historically offered more than propositions about God: they supplied rituals, obligations, help, and a recurring place to encounter people. The decline in Christian identification marks a change in affiliation. It does not tell us that everyone who leaves becomes selfish, or that everyone who stays lives by the teaching.

Pew’s 2025 report also finds that the longer decline had slowed in recent years. A compelling historical trend still needs its brakes checked before being driven into the future.

Schools, families, entertainment, political movements, and online communities can supply competing accounts of duty and identity. The question is not simply whether old authority deserves loyalty. It is whether its replacements cultivate anything beyond preference and affiliation.

> **CONSIDER THIS**
>
> If an institution loses credibility, who takes over its useful work?

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.

That is an explanatory framework, not a scoreboard declaring one population morally superior. A national average does not describe every household. Nor does wealth erase religion, memory, political institutions, or historical experience.

A practical implication follows: a person worried about basic security may understand freedom differently from a person who can take survival for granted. One asks for stability. Another asks for room to explore. Each can misread the other as defective rather than differently situated.

> People do not build their values from the same starting conditions. They do, however, have to share a world.

Patriotism and civic responsibility fit this tension. Affection for a country can motivate service and criticism alike. Mere obedience is a poor substitute for judgment; reflexive contempt is a poor substitute for contribution. Those are civic arguments to examine, not survey findings to announce.

CONSIDER THIS

Which of your priorities would change if your everyday security changed?

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?

The educator’s 2006 talk makes a lively case for taking creativity seriously. Listen for its strongest argument, then ask what evidence would be needed to evaluate it across different schools.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

A mind in context · 1950-2020

KR

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.

An entertaining criticism is a beginning. A useful educational response must also explain how children acquire knowledge, practice difficult skills, and learn to recognize errors. Creativity without knowledge can run out of material. Knowledge without curiosity can become very well organized furniture.

> Values are learned in institutions, but they are lived in relationships. The next question is what happens to the people who must carry them together.

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 changed where people lived and worked and how households supported themselves. It did not replace a single universal extended family with one universal modern arrangement. The timing and consequences differed by place and class.

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 ↗

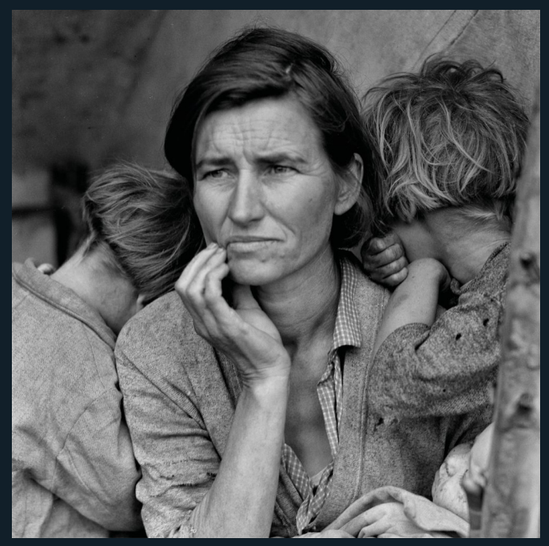
The distinction matters now. Asking children to contribute can teach competence and care. Treating their hardship as proof of an earlier generation’s superior character turns necessity into a motivational poster.

14 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

The family was never just a feeling. / continued

CONSIDER THIS

Which old obligations are worth preserving, and which existed because someone had no real choice?



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

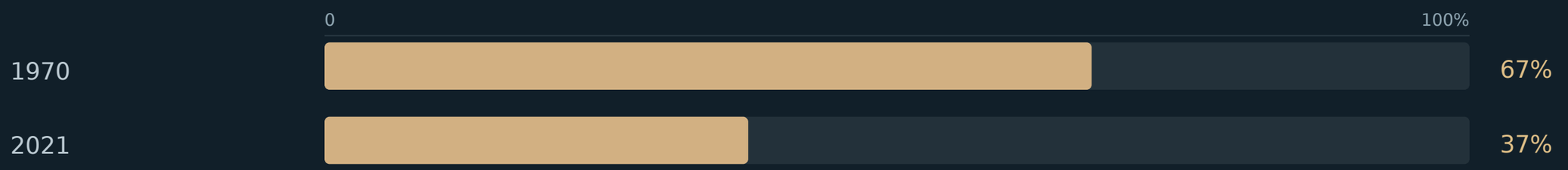
SOURCES [17] National Geographic · [08] Lewis Hine

15 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

One familiar household is less common.

A demographic shift is real. Its meaning requires more than one explanation.

Living with a spouse and children under 18



U.S. adults ages 25-49. Pew analysis of census and ACS data, published 2023. This is not the marriage rate or a measure of relationship quality.

Later marriage, fewer people marrying, changing parenthood, and a wider range of living arrangements all affect this comparison. It would be a mistake to label everyone outside the category lonely, childless, or without family.

It would also be a mistake to say structure does not matter. Care, money, time, and reliable adults have to come from somewhere. When commitments dissolve or never form, their practical work does not evaporate. Someone performs it, pays for it, or goes without it.

The strongest question is about dependable care: who takes responsibility for children, older relatives, and one another when everyday life becomes difficult? A household’s label cannot answer that by itself.

CONSIDER THIS

What forms of commitment can survive a week in which nobody feels especially fulfilled?

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

Goldin’s historical work documents both the transformation of women’s economic roles and the marriage bars that restricted married women’s employment in the twentieth century. The older arrangement was not simply a collection of freely chosen preferences.

Greater economic independence can expand the ability to choose a partner or leave an intolerable arrangement. At the same time, a household with more possible arrangements must negotiate more things: paid work, care, schedules, standards, and whose opportunities take priority.

In the 2024 American Time Use Survey, women who did household activities spent more time on them than men who did. That broad average is not a verdict on a particular couple. It is a reason to examine the work that remains after the slogans stop.

> 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 saw associations as a practical answer to individual powerlessness. People learned cooperation by organizing it. A community was something they did, not just somewhere they happened to reside.

Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone later assembled evidence of declining participation in many American civic networks. His diagnosis was already prominent before smartphone social media. Commuting, work, television, generational change, and other developments belong in the explanation; one app cannot plausibly carry the entire history.

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.

CONSIDER THIS

Where do people regularly count on your presence, and where do you count on theirs?

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

18 / PART II · FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITY

The trust problem has a measurement problem.

A number can be accurate and still answer the wrong question.

In Pew’s 2023-24 measure, 34% of Americans said most people could be trusted. That is a finding about a particular question, not proof that two-thirds of the country trust nobody.

The same research program explains why wording matters: an alternative trust measure found 52% in 2018 and 55% in February 2025, without a significant recent decline. Those figures should not be spliced into the first measure as if they belonged to one continuous series.

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.

This is also a lesson in intellectual responsibility: a dramatic number deserves more questions, not a larger font alone.

CONSIDER THIS

When you say people cannot be trusted, which people and which situations do you mean?

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 brings together evidence linking social connection with health. It also discusses changing patterns of time spent alone and with others. These findings make connection a serious social concern; they do not justify diagnosing every person who enjoys a quiet evening.

Historical loneliness is difficult to compare neatly. Earlier generations lacked today’s survey systems, and family proximity did not guarantee warmth. Modern measures can document a problem without proving that nobody before us ever felt it.

The constructive question is about availability and quality: can someone reach a dependable person, feel understood, and participate in something that continues beyond a single interaction?

CONSIDER THIS

Are you getting the amount of contact you want, or the kind of connection you need?

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?

A clear introduction to the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Notice the emphasis on relationship quality, rather than popularity or an impressive contact list.

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.

Longitudinal research follows lives over time and can reveal patterns that a snapshot misses. It still has selection, measurement, and causal limits. "Good relationships matter" is a stronger takeaway than "one kind of household guarantees a good life."

The practical challenge is almost offensively ordinary: make the call, return the favor, show up again. Human beings have devoted considerable ingenuity to discovering alternatives to these activities. Most alternatives still require someone to show up.

> Relationships help form a self. They can also smother one. The next problem is how to belong without handing over the responsibility for living.

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

21 / PART III · INDIVIDUALITY, RESPONSIBILITY & PURPOSE

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 argues that moral character develops through practice. Repeated action helps shape the person capable of acting well. This is not simply a demand to feel virtuous before doing anything useful.

The application is uncomfortable because it makes ordinary repetition matter. Honesty practiced only when convenient is a fragile skill. Patience endlessly admired but never exercised remains a decorative preference.

Habituation is not blind repetition. Aristotle’s ethics also requires practical judgment: how to act appropriately in a particular situation. Courage is not identical to charging at every problem. Sometimes the impressive speech is the thing that needed restraint.

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

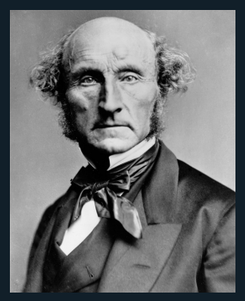
CONSIDER THIS

Which repeated action is quietly building a person you would rather not become?

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.

That argument does not make every impulse wise or every disagreement brave. Originality can produce discovery, foolishness, or a slightly different way to be fashionable. The question is whether a person is exercising judgment or merely switching uniforms.

The social cost of disagreement can exist in a village, workplace, religious community, university, or online group. No faction has patented the desire to punish an inconvenient thought. A useful intellectual freedom therefore includes the ability to explain an opponent’s argument before enjoying the applause for defeating it.

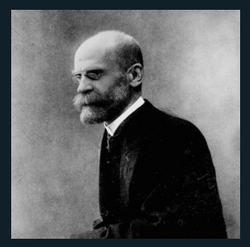
> **CONSIDER THIS**
>
> Could you disagree with your own group without immediately searching for a replacement group to applaud you?

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 modern person may have more freedom to choose an occupation while depending on power networks, supply chains, standards, institutions, and strangers. Independence does not mean manufacturing civilization in the garage.

Durkheim’s concern was how differentiation could produce durable moral relations rather than disconnected interests. Anomie points to failures of regulation and shared expectations, not simply a dislike of modernity.

This changes the argument about self-reliance. Competence and initiative matter. So do systems that make effort usable and fair dealings possible. The question is which dependencies cultivate capability and reciprocity, and which make people passive or easy to exploit.

> The opposite of helplessness is not needing nobody. It is being able to act, contribute, and rely on others intelligently.

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.

The Stoic challenge is to direct effort toward judgment and conduct rather than demand complete control over outcomes. Modern readers can use that distinction without pretending that poverty, illness, violence, or institutional barriers are imaginary.

Two evasions sit on opposite sides of the same problem. “Everything is your fault” denies unequal circumstances. “Nothing is your responsibility” deprives a person of meaningful agency. Neither account is adequate to a life lived among other people.

The practical question

Within the situation that actually exists, what action is available now?

The public question

Which arrangements should change so that more people have meaningful options?

Those questions can be asked together. Helping someone does not require denying their capacity. Asking for accountability does not require pretending everyone began at the same starting line.

CONSIDER THIS

Which effort are you avoiding because it cannot guarantee the result?

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 modern application is recognizable: a workplace rewards one personality, a social group rewards another, and the person learns to confuse acceptance with authenticity. The script may promise safety from criticism, uncertainty, or having to explain a difficult decision.

There is nothing automatically inauthentic about shared customs. A practice can be inherited, examined, and freely embraced. The important distinction is whether belonging permits judgment, or makes independent judgment the price of admission.

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

CONSIDER THIS

Which part of your identity would remain if it stopped receiving approval?

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.

Frankl’s approach directs attention toward what a particular life asks of a person: work to do, someone to love, a responsibility to meet, or an unavoidable hardship to face. It does not require treating suffering as desirable. Preventable suffering should be prevented.

The distinction between happiness and meaning helps explain why a difficult commitment may feel worthwhile even when it is tiring. Caring for a child, keeping faith with a friend, or mastering an uncertain craft can give a life direction without providing constant enjoyment.

This is a lens, not a verdict on someone who cannot currently feel purposeful. Meaning is not a competition in who can endure the most. A life may be rebuilt through modest responsibilities long before it acquires an impressive narrative.

CONSIDER THIS

What would remain worth doing on a day when it brought no applause?

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.

Psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci’s self-determination theory places these three needs at the center of motivation and well-being. Autonomy does not mean never needing help. It concerns the quality of motivation, including within relationships.

Material conditions also matter. A 2023 collaboration by Matthew Killingsworth, Daniel Kahneman, and Barbara Mellers found that income and emotional well-being did not follow one simple universal plateau. The pattern varied across the happiness distribution. That is observational evidence about well-being, not proof that an income increase buys a coherent purpose.

Convenience can remove needless drudgery and make room for a better life. The room still needs furnishing. If every saved hour becomes another hour of passive occupation, efficiency has solved the scheduling problem while leaving the living problem untouched.

CONSIDER THIS

Which would improve your life most right now: more resources, more capability, more connection, or more say over your time?

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

A psychologist’s argument about the burdens of abundant options. Consider where more choice helps, and where comparison becomes an activity that never ends.

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.

The reasonable response is not to abolish options. It is to develop standards for choosing and the patience to inhabit a choice. A friendship, vocation, or skill cannot be fully evaluated from its product page.

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

> Digital platforms offer almost unlimited opportunities to compare, perform, connect, and escape. The final part asks what those opportunities do to the hours in which a life is made.

SOURCES [35] Barry Schwartz

29 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

First we went online. Then online came with us.

The change is not just content. It is availability, scale, and interruption.

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.

These are overlapping changes, not a claim that every early online experience was wholesome or every current one is empty. Digital connection can preserve distant relationships, support isolated people, and make learning possible beyond geography.

The harder question is whether a particular design and pattern of use strengthens the life around it. Being connected is a technical condition. Feeling known and acting responsibly toward someone are human achievements.

CONSIDER THIS

When does an online visit help you return to life, and when does it keep postponing the return?

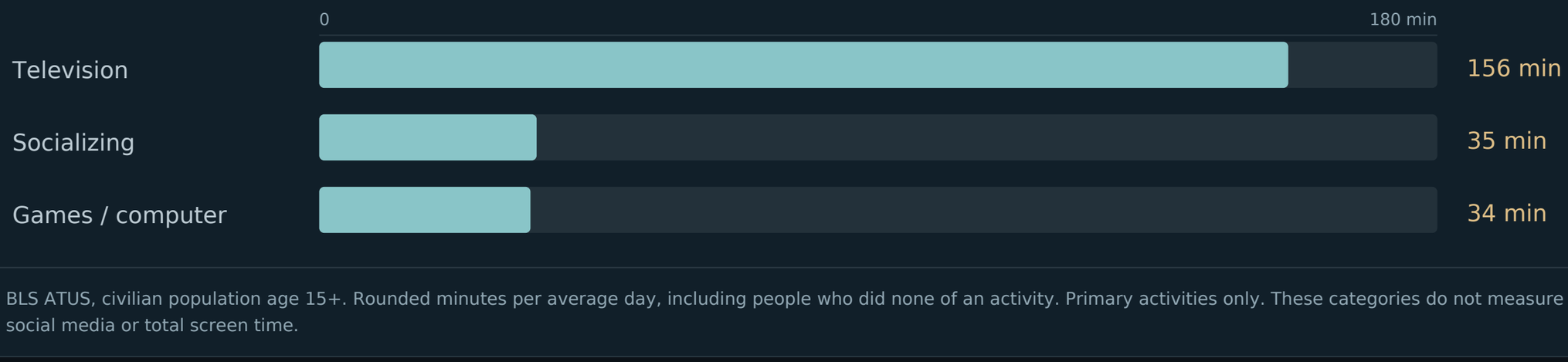
SOURCES [40] Sherry Turkle · [38] Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen

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 ATUS, civilian population age 15+. Rounded minutes per average day, including people who did none of an activity. Primary activities only. These categories do not measure all social media or total screen time.

The same release reports socializing and communicating falling from 43 minutes a day in 2014 to 35 in 2024. That trend deserves attention; it does not prove that phones caused every lost minute.

Television’s large share also punctures the story that passive leisure was invented by an app. The displacement question reaches back into the living room before it reaches into the pocket.

A screen can replace waiting, wasted travel, or isolation. It can also replace sleep, conversation, a hobby, or the quiet in which a person notices an unfinished thought. The medium alone cannot tell us which exchange took place.

CONSIDER THIS

After an hour online, what has become easier in the rest of your life?

SOURCES [37] BLS

31 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

A small daily habit becomes a large annual decision.

Compare the daily minutes. The calculation is simple; the alternative life is yours to choose.

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

Hours are rounded to one decimal; complete sessions are rounded down. Calculations assume 365 days. These are illustrations, not measured behavior or a productivity promise.

Open the interactive calculator in the HTML edition

Thirty minutes does not have to become a heroic transformation. It could become a recurring walk with someone, a few pages, a small project, or practice at something awkward enough to require patience.

Digital entertainment is not automatically wasted time. Rest and pleasure belong in a good life. The test is whether the pattern is chosen and satisfying, or simply the default that keeps winning because it asks the least of us.

A calendar can quietly become an autobiography. It is useful to read the draft before the whole book is finished.

CONSIDER THIS

What activity would you like those hours to make possible?

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’s work asks what changes when conversation is increasingly mediated by devices and editable identities. Her concern is not that every digital connection is false. It is that control over presentation can become more comfortable than the unpredictability of dealing with another person.

Offline life is curated too: clothes, manners, professional roles, and first dates all involve selection. Digital environments can intensify the process through persistence, audience size, and visible feedback. A person may begin addressing a metric rather than another person.

The distinction matters for judgment. A carefully selected life is not necessarily a dishonest life. But it is a poor comparison group 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.

CONSIDER THIS

Are you being understood, or becoming more skilled at being favorably interpreted?

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.

Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen’s 2019 research found that meeting online had become the most common route for U.S. heterosexual couples. Their category is broader than dating apps. The finding concerns how people meet, not whether every platform produces lasting relationships.

Pew’s survey fielded in 2022 offers a different denominator: one in ten partnered adults said they met their current partner through a dating site or app. That is not a claim that one in ten app users found a partner. Changing the denominator can turn a sensible finding into a wonderfully misleading advertisement.

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.

Moving from messages to calls and shared offline experience changes what can be learned. Selective disclosure may be entirely sincere and still incomplete. Lasting commitment requires dealing with a person as they are encountered over time.

Older matchmaking services and contemporary swipe-based platforms should not be treated as one unchanging intervention. Reliable comparisons need follow-up periods, clear definitions of success, and attention to who joined and who stayed in the sample.

CONSIDER THIS

What have you learned through repeated conduct that you could never learn from a profile?

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

34 / PART IV · SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL LIFE

The experiment is more interesting than the panic.

Some harms are plausible. Some benefits are real. Broad causal claims are harder.

In Allcott and colleagues' randomized study, participants deactivated Facebook for four weeks before the 2018 U.S. midterm election. Deactivation increased reported well-being and reduced factual news knowledge. Offline time included both socializing and watching television alone. Switching off a platform did not automatically send everyone into a thriving village square.

This experiment supports causal conclusions within its design, population, platform, and period. It does not establish the effect of every service, every form of use, or decades of exposure.

The National Academies' 2024 adolescent-health review did not find sufficient support for a population-level causal conclusion that social media changes adolescent health. That does not establish an absence of harm. Risks and benefits may depend on the user, content, social situation, and design.

Too simple

"Screens explain everything." This ignores earlier trends and other causes.

Also too simple

"Causation is difficult, so there is nothing to worry about." Uncertainty is not a finding of harmlessness.

CONSIDER THIS

Which specific person, pattern of use, outcome, and time period does a claim actually describe?

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?

The 2012 talk remains a useful provocation about attention and mediated relationships. Compare its interpretation with the experimental and review evidence on the previous page.

Watch on YouTube ↗

TED page & transcript ↗

A mind in context · Born 1948

ST

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.

The value of the question is practical: when a person needs your attention, can you give it? Not perfectly, forever, or with theatrical purity. Simply enough to make the other person feel that the conversation is happening with you.

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

> The four subjects now meet: values set priorities, relationships create obligations, purpose guides action, and attention decides which of those gets a place in the day.

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.

One thread runs through the whole investigation. Inherited institutions can give people identity, support, and purpose before they choose them. They can also impose restrictions and punish difference. Looser arrangements can expand opportunity while leaving more of the work of belonging and meaning to the individual.

That is a synthesis of the arguments here, not a single historical law. Some institutions renew themselves; some communities remain strong; some people build excellent lives in unconventional forms. The point is that freedom does not automatically organize its own conditions.

Values

What deserves attention?

Relationships

Who depends on whom?

Purpose

What is worth doing?

Attention

What actually gets done?

Human beings can want community while avoiding the obligations that produce it, individuality while fearing disapproval, and meaning while outsourcing difficult choices. These contradictions did not arrive with the internet. Modern systems can make them easier to practice at scale.

> 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.

Arendt’s emphasis on plurality is a useful counterweight to the fantasy of the perfectly self-contained individual. A shared world contains people who differ. Public life requires more than finding people who will confirm one another’s identity.

A practical response therefore has several levels. Individuals can keep commitments and protect attention. Families can negotiate care honestly. Schools can cultivate knowledge and judgment. Communities can create recurring opportunities to participate. Institutions and platforms can examine the behavior their incentives reward.

None of those actions guarantees a better society. Each makes the question more concrete than waiting for “people” to improve while exempting every institution and habit that helps produce the behavior.

CONSIDER THIS

What are the arrangements around you making easy, and what valuable things are they making unnecessarily difficult?

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.

Keep the gains that enlarge human dignity and possibility. Examine the losses that leave people less capable of commitment, attention, judgment, or care. Avoid treating every inherited custom as a prison or every new freedom as an achievement already completed.

> 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?

Those questions will not repair civilization before lunch. They may improve what happens after lunch. That is a respectable start.

> 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.

All interpretive callouts and reader questions are editorial commentary. Original charts reproduce only the specific values and populations identified in their captions. Talk links are supplementary; no video is necessary to follow the written argument.