What Is Wrong With People!?

A Historical & Modern Look Into Why People Are So Weird

THE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

> Are you consciously building the life you want to live, or simply adapting to the life society has placed in front of you?



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1817) · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

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WHY THIS EXISTS

“What is wrong with people?” is a joke. It is also a real question.

Almost everyone has muttered it in traffic, in a comment section, or at a family dinner. Behind the eye-roll sits a serious worry: that people today think less for themselves, take less responsibility, and drift through life on autopilot, while previous generations were tougher, freer, and more sure of what they were for.

This piece takes that worry seriously enough to test it. The central question is simple to say and hard to answer:

> *Are human beings today living more independent, purposeful, and personally fulfilling lives, or are modern social structures, cultural expectations, and everyday habits encouraging conformity, dependency, and passive existence?*
>
> The central question of this investigation

We will look at it from five distances: the deep past, about a hundred years ago, thirty to fifty years ago, the smartphone decade, and the years since 2020. We will meet the philosophers who argued about it and the researchers who tried to measure it. Then we will hold the popular assumptions up to the data, one at a time.

The goal is not to prove that earlier generations were better, or that today is inevitable progress. People have been sure the next generation is worse for at least two thousand years, and they have usually been wrong in ways worth understanding.

(Spoiler: the answer is not “everyone except me.”)

How to read the labels

EVIDENCE
Something measured: a survey, a census count, a study result. Every number has a numbered source you can click.

INTERPRETATION
A philosophical or scholarly reading of what things mean. Reasonable people can disagree.

CONTESTED / SPECULATIVE
Credible experts disagree, the data are thin, or the claim is a forecast rather than a finding.

ANALYSIS
Our own synthesis or judgment, clearly marked so you can weigh it separately from the evidence.

A note on scope

Most measured trends here are from the United States, where the longest-running surveys exist. Where global data exist, they are flagged. Small numbered chips like 1 open the source.

BEFORE YOU READ · CHECKPOINT 1

A two-minute self-audit

Eight statements. No score, no judgment. Pick a number from 1 to 5 for each, then compare your answers at the final checkpoint.

In the last month, I made at least one important decision mostly on my own judgment, not because others expected it.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I could explain, in a sentence or two, what I am trying to do with my life right now.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

Most of my free time goes to things I chose on purpose, not things that just happened to be in front of me.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

When something goes wrong in my life, my first instinct is to ask what I can do about it.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I hold at least one opinion that most people around me do not share, and I can say why.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I have people I could call at 2 a.m., and I am that person for someone else.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I regularly do something that is hard, slow, or unrewarded today because it matters to me later.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

If my phone, feeds and news apps disappeared for a week, I would still know what I value and what to do next.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

These statements are not a validated psychological test. They borrow the themes researchers use: autonomy, purpose, a sense of control, belonging, and the ability to act against the crowd. Read them as a mirror, not a measurement.

Where each statement comes from

- Decisions and free time: *autonomy* in self-determination theory →
- Purpose: Frankl, and the studies linking purpose to health →
- "What can I do about it?": locus of control and self-efficacy →
- Unpopular opinions: Asch, Mill and Kierkegaard →
- The 2 a.m. call: the Harvard Study of Adult Development →

I

PART I

The long view: five distances from today

Before asking whether people are “worse” now, it helps to know what “before” looked like. For most of history the question “who do you want to be?” barely made sense. That is the starting point.

What was life like?
Work, family, faith and status were mostly inherited.

What changed?
Choice expanded enormously, and so did comfort.

What stayed?
The need to belong, and the complaint about the young.

MAP OF THE JOURNEY

Five distances from today

Each layer changes what "normal" meant. Click through to the pages that cover it; no time machine required.

Deep history
Antiquity → 1800s

Life was local, short and mostly agricultural. Identity was given by family, village, faith and trade. Philosophers from Aristotle to Kant argued about what a good and self-directed life would even be. The Enlightenment made the radical bet that ordinary people could and should think for themselves.

The pre-assigned self · "Kids these days" since 700 BCE · The Enlightenment bet · Industrialization

~100 years ago
1920s → 1950s

Depression, war and then a postwar boom. Life expectancy jumped, people married younger than at any time on record, and thinkers worried loudly about the "organization man" and the "lonely crowd." The famous conformity experiments were born in this era's anxieties.

1920s–1950s · Asch · Milgram · Fromm

30–50 years ago
1970s → 1990s

Trust in government fell from its 1960s peak. Commentators named a "Me Decade." Parents began choosing more distinctive names, and Robert Putnam warned that Americans were "bowling alone." Yet reported happiness barely moved for decades.

1970s–1990s · Trust · Are we more individual?

~10 years ago
The 2010s

Smartphones went from novelty to near-universal. Time alone rose, in-person time with friends fell, and teen mental-health measures worsened from about 2013. The cause is hotly debated.

The smartphone decade · Teens and screens · Loneliness

Since 2020
The pandemic years and after

A sharp break in daily routines: work, school and social life moved home. Did things "slip faster than normal" afterwards? Some measures say yes, some say no, and some are too new to judge.

Testing the hypothesis · The scorecard

DEEP HISTORY

For most of history, the self came pre-assigned



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Harvesters*, 1565. Work, rest and company were shared by the whole village. · Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

Picture a life in which your trade, your faith, your spouse and your social rank were largely settled before you could talk. For most people in most of recorded history, that was simply how life worked.

EVIDENCE

As late as **1900, 41% of the U.S. workforce worked in agriculture**; by 2000 it was 1.9% [2]. In 1900 American life expectancy at birth was **47.3 years**; in 2024 it reached a record **79.0** [3][4]. In 1940 only **4.6%** of adults had a college degree [5]; today about 43% of 25- to 54-year-olds do [6].

INTERPRETATION

The philosopher Charles Taylor describes the modern shift as the rise of an “ethic of authenticity”: the idea that each of us has an original way of being human and should find it, rather than accept a role from outside [7][8]. That idea is so normal now that it is easy to forget how new and how demanding it is.

What was harder

Survival. Disease, famine and childbirth killed early and often. Choice was a luxury of the few.

What was easier

Knowing where you belonged. Duties came with a script, and so did a community that would notice if you failed them.

The trade-off

Modern life swapped a fixed script for an open question. Freedom and the burden of choosing arrived together, a theme Erich Fromm would make famous.

A VERY OLD COMPLAINT

“Kids these days”: a complaint at least 2,700 years old

Grumbling about the youth may be humanity’s longest-running tradition, narrowly ahead of grumbling about the weather.

Some of the most-shared “ancient complaints about young people” are real. Some are invented. Decide for each one, then check the answer underneath.

“The father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father… Men will dishonour their parents as they grow quickly old.”

Usually attributed to: Hesiod, *Works and Days*, c. 700 BCE

Answer: Genuine. Hesiod describes the “race of iron,” the last and worst of his five ages of humanity (Evelyn-White translation) [9].

“Our parents’ age, worse than our grandparents’, has produced us, more worthless still, who will soon bring forth offspring yet more corrupt.”

Usually attributed to: Horace, *Odes*, c. 23 BCE

Answer: Genuine. The Latin is *aetas parentum, peior avis, tulit nos nequiores, mox daturos progeniem vitiosiorem* (Odes III.6.46–48; translation ours) [10].

“The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise.”

Usually attributed to: Socrates, c. 400 BCE

Answer: Misattributed. Quote Investigator traced it to a 1907 Cambridge dissertation by Kenneth John Freeman, who was *summarizing* ancient complaints in his own words [11].

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Usually attributed to: Aristotle, c. 340 BCE

Answer: Misattributed. It is Will Durant’s 1926 summary of Aristotle’s ethics, not Aristotle’s words [12]. The real idea is on the Aristotle page.

EVIDENCE

Why the complaint never dies. In 2019, Protzko and Schooler found that adults judge “kids these days” as especially lacking in the very traits the adults themselves excel at: well-read adults think kids read less, authoritarian adults think kids are less respectful. Part of the cause is memory: we project our present selves onto our younger selves [13].

EVIDENCE

The illusion of moral decline. Mastroianni and Gilbert analyzed surveys from **60+ nations going back to 1949.** People everywhere believe morality is declining. Yet when the same surveys asked people to rate the morality of those around them now, the ratings did not fall over time [14].

ANALYSIS

That does not mean nothing changes; plenty has, and the rest of this piece measures it. It means a feeling of decline is not evidence of decline. The useful question is not “are people worse?” but “which specific things changed, by how much, and why?”

The Enlightenment bet: ordinary people can think for themselves

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another… Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!

Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), trans. Ted Humphrey [15]

Kant's essay is usually remembered as a battle cry. It is also a surprisingly modern diagnosis of why people *don't* think for themselves. His answer was not stupidity. It was convenience:

> *It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay.*
>
> Kant, 1784 [15]

INTERPRETATION

Swap "book" for "search engine," "pastor" for "influencer," and "physician" for "wellness app," and Kant could be writing in 2026. The worry that comfort breeds dependence is not a modern discovery; it was built into the founding argument for modern freedom.

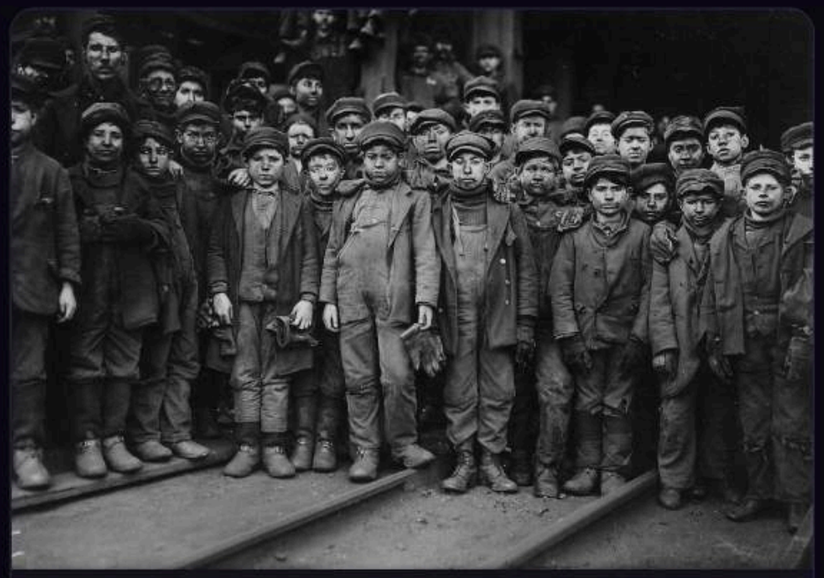
The bet, in three moves

- **Locke (1689):** each person owns themselves; authority must be consented to →
- **Kant (1784):** immaturity is "self-imposed"; the cure is courage ↺
- **Mill (1859):** the danger is no longer kings but custom, the pressure to be like everyone else →

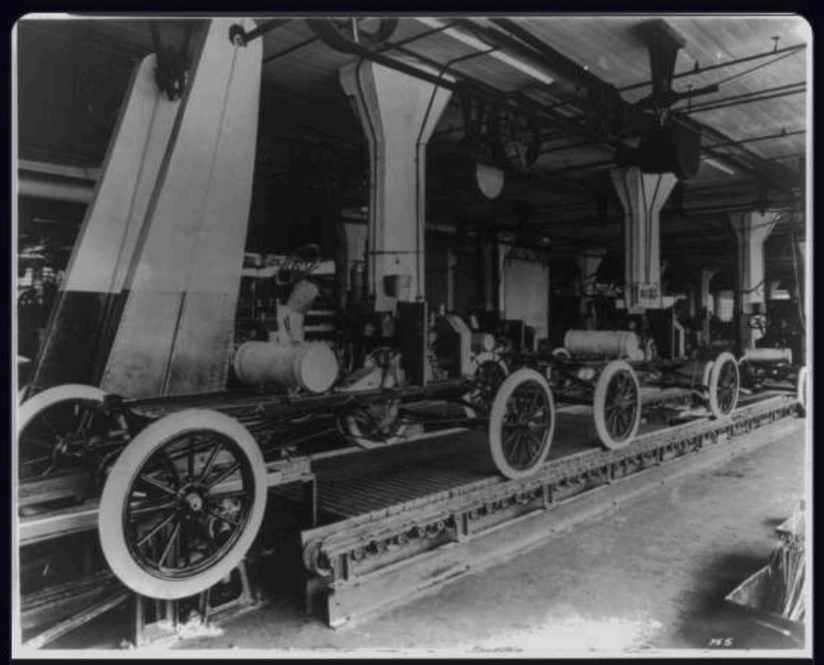
ANALYSIS

Notice that each step moves the threat closer to home: from the state, to our own laziness, to our neighbors. That is roughly the path this piece follows into the present.

Industrialization: the clock replaces the season



Lewis Hine, breaker boys at a Pennsylvania coal breaker, 1910. Hine's photographs helped build public support for child-labor laws. · Lewis Hine, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

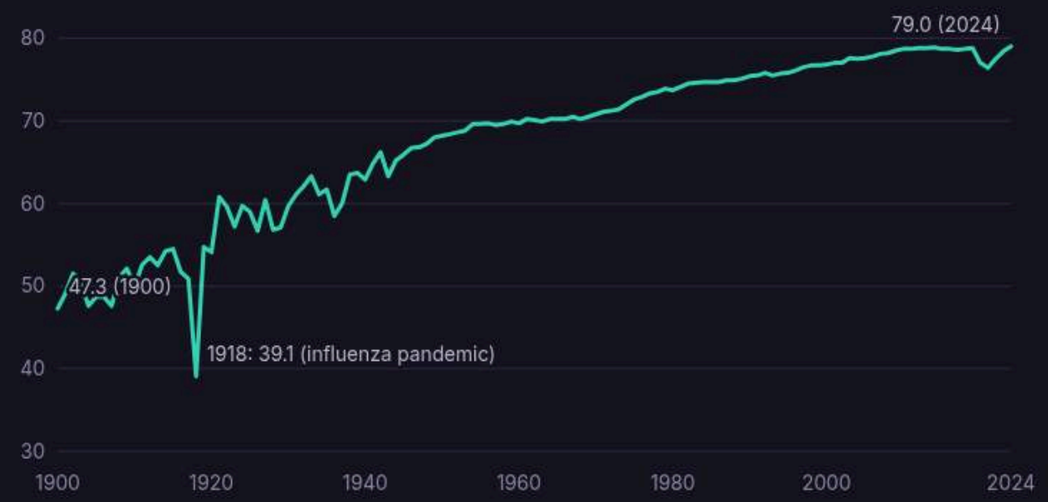


Ford Highland Park assembly line, 1913. Tasks were split into tiny, repeatable steps. · Library of Congress, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

Factories brought wages, cities and anonymity. They also brought a new kind of work: repetitive, timed and directed by someone else. Many of the modern worries about "passive" people begin here.

Life expectancy at birth, United States, 1900–2024

Years. The 1918 dip is the influenza pandemic; the 2020–21 dip and recovery are shown for completeness.



Sources: NCHS (1900–2018) [3]; MMWR (2019–2022) [16]; NCHS Data Brief 548 (2023–2024) [4].

41%
of U.S. workers were in farming in 1900
1.9% by 2000 [2]

+31.7
years of life expectancy, 1900→2024
47.3 → 79.0 [3] [4]

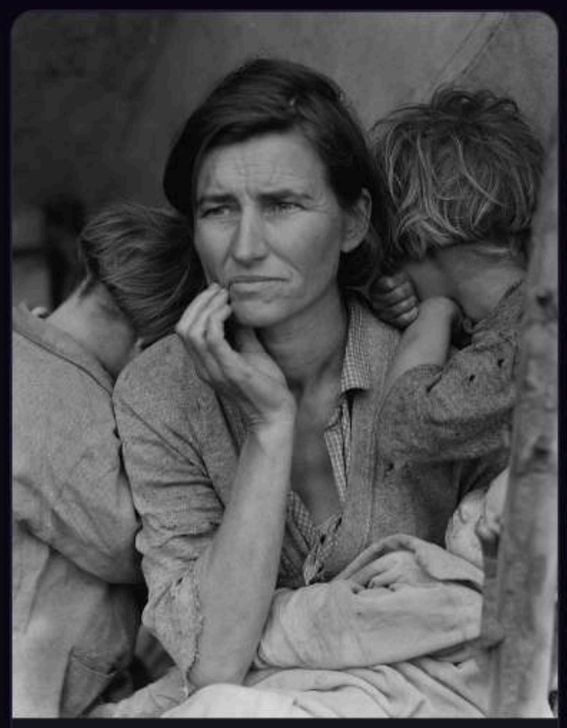
4.6%
of adults held a bachelor's degree in 1940
33.4% of adults 25+ by 2016 [5]

~100 YEARS AGO · 1920S → 1950S

Depression, war, boom, and a panic about conformity



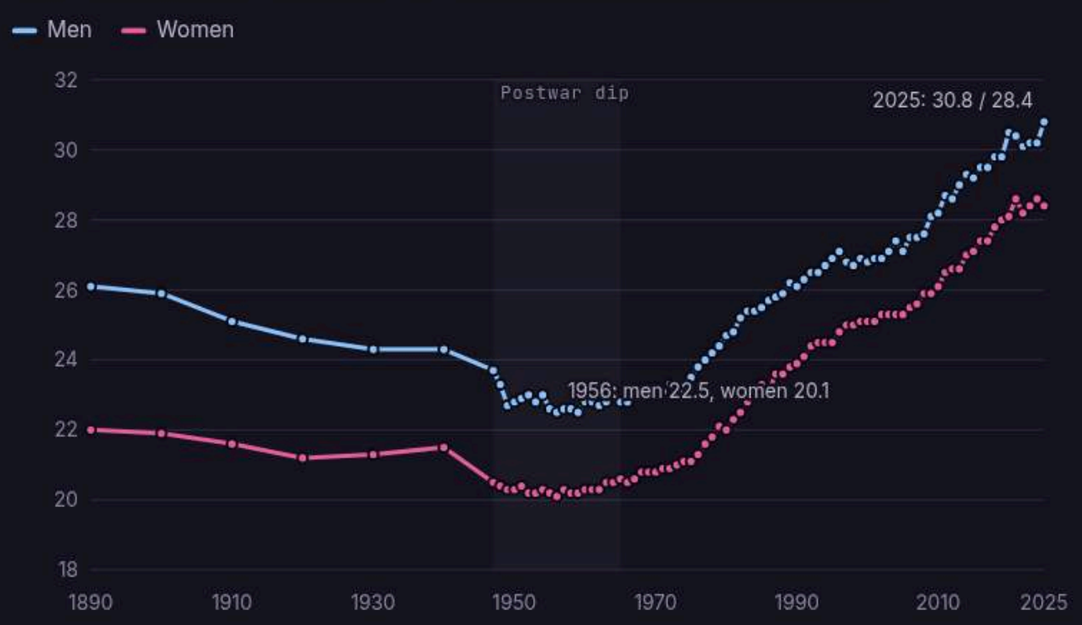
Edward Hopper, *Automat*, 1927. Urban solitude became a subject of art. · Edward Hopper, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936. The Depression made dependence on forces beyond one's control a mass experience. · Dorothea Lange, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

Median age at first marriage, 1890–2025

Years. The 1950s were the youngest marrying era on record, not the historical norm.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Table MS-2 [17].

The mid-century is often remembered as the era of rugged individuals. People living through it were worried about the opposite.

EVIDENCE

In 1950 the sociologist David Riesman described Americans as increasingly **"other-directed,"** steering by the signals of peers and media rather than an inner compass [18]. In 1956 William H. Whyte's bestseller *The Organization Man* described white-collar workers who had traded independence for belonging to the company [19].

EVIDENCE

Men married at a median age of **22.5** and women at **20.1** in 1956, the lowest ever recorded. In 1890 it had been 26.1 and 22.0; by 2025 it was 30.8 and 28.4 [17].

INTERPRETATION

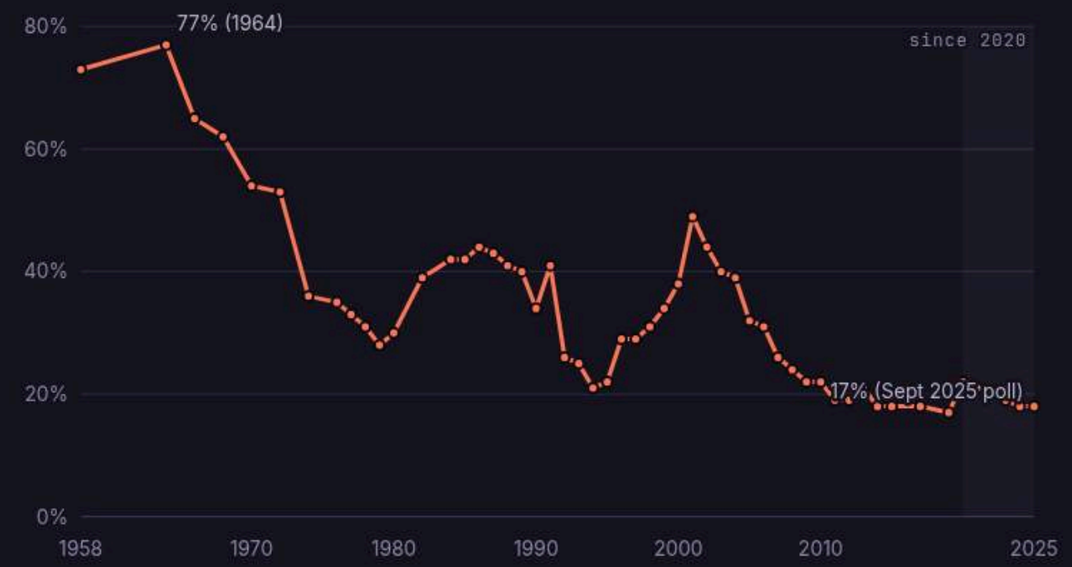
The landmark experiments on conformity and obedience, Asch in the early 1950s and Milgram in the early 1960s, were shaped by this era and by the shadow of fascism, which Fromm had analyzed in 1941. "Why do ordinary people go along?" was the question of the age.

30–50 YEARS AGO · 1970S → 1990S

The “Me Decade,” the trust collapse, and a surprising constant

Trust the federal government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”

Percent of U.S. adults; annual average of Pew’s compiled trend.



Source: Pew Research Center, compiled from NES, Gallup, ABC/WaPo, CBS/NYT, CNN and Pew surveys [20].

EVIDENCE

Trust in Washington fell from **77% in 1964** to **under a third by 1979–80**, briefly rebounded in the 1980s and after 9/11, and reached **17%** in Pew’s September 2025 survey [20].

INTERPRETATION

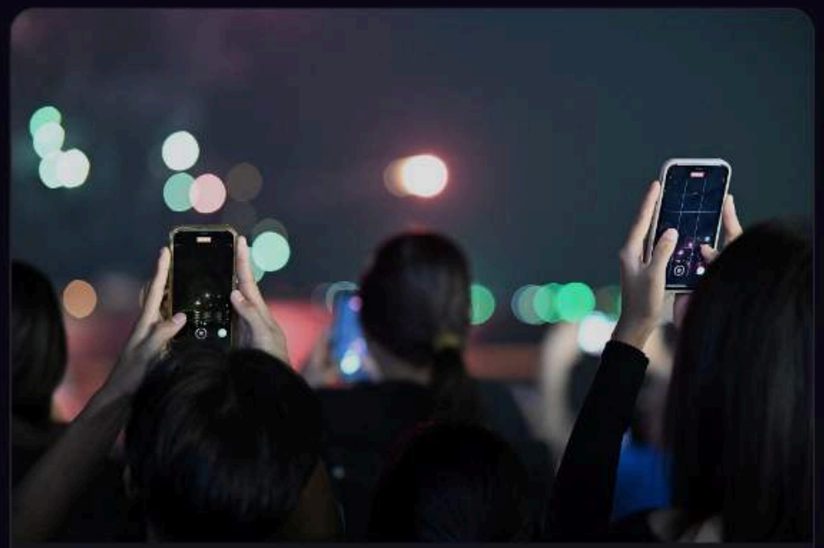
In 1976 the journalist Tom Wolfe named the 1970s the **“Me Decade”**: a mass turn toward self-improvement and self-exploration [21]. In 1995 the political scientist Robert Putnam argued that Americans were joining less and “bowling alone” [22].

EVIDENCE

The surprising constant. Through all of it, the share of Americans calling themselves “very happy” in the General Social Survey barely moved, staying between about 28% and 36% in every survey from 1972 to 2018 [1]. The big drop came later; see the happiness page.

~10 YEARS AGO · THE 2010S

The smartphone decade



Phones up: by the late 2010s, recording the moment had become part of the moment. · PattayaPatrol, CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

35% → 91%

U.S. adults owning a smartphone, 2011 → latest Pew survey [23]

60 → 20

minutes per day spent with friends in person, 2003 → 2020

Surgeon General, from time-use data [24]

30% → 37%

high-schoolers persistently sad or hopeless, 2013 → 2019

CDC YRBS [25]

EVIDENCE

Several social measures that had been drifting for decades turned sharply in the 2010s, especially for the young. Young Americans aged 15–29 spent roughly **45% more time alone** in 2023 than in 2010 [26].

CONTESTED

Whether smartphones and social media *caused* the teen mental-health decline is one of the liveliest fights in social science. Jonathan Haidt argues yes [27]; the psychologist Candice Odgers argues the evidence shows correlation, not proven causation [28]. Both sides are covered on the teens page.

Raphael, *The School of Athens* (1509–11) · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

II

PART II

Nine thinkers, one argument across 2,400 years

Philosophers rarely agree, but on this subject they form a surprisingly coherent conversation: what it means to live a self-directed life, why it is hard, and what gets in the way.

The classical root
Aristotle: a good life is practiced, not found.

The modern alarm
Mill, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Fromm: beware the crowd.

The modern repair
Frankl, Bandura, Taylor: meaning, agency, and authenticity done right.

MAP

The thinkers at a glance

Nine people who spent their lives worrying about how the rest of us live ours. Click any thinker. Each page has a short biography, the core idea, a verified quotation, a video, and what the idea suggests about life now.



384–322 BCE

Aristotle

Flourishing is built through habit



1632–1704

John Locke

You own yourself, and answer for yourself



1806–1873

John Stuart Mill

Custom is the quiet tyrant



1813–1855

Søren Kierkegaard

The crowd is untruth



1844–1900

Friedrich Nietzsche

Become who you are



1905–1997

Viktor Frankl

Meaning is the last freedom



1900–1980

Erich Fromm

Freedom can feel like a burden



1925–2021

Albert Bandura

Belief in your own agency shapes what you attempt



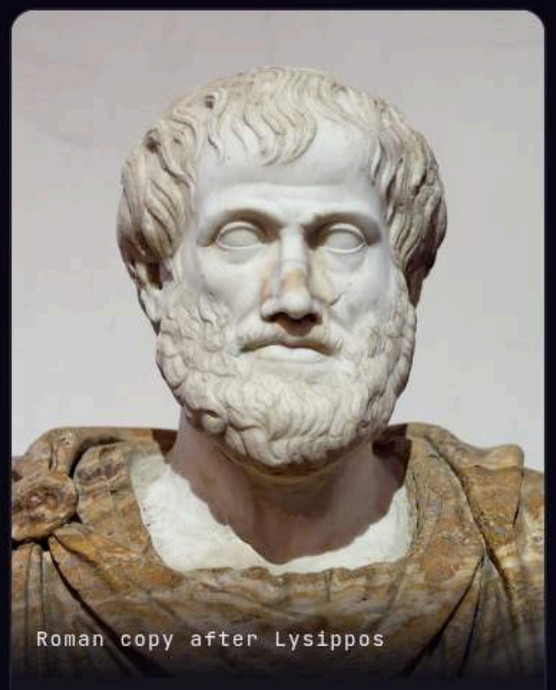
b. 1931

Charles Taylor

Authenticity needs a horizon

INTERPRETATION

Read in order, the nine form a rough arc. Aristotle says a good life is a *practice*. Locke and Mill make the individual the owner and author of that practice. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Fromm warn that most people hand authorship back to the crowd. Frankl, Bandura and Taylor, writing after the 20th century's disasters, ask how to recover it.



Aristotle · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

> *As it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy.*
>
> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, trans. D. P. Chase [29]

THINKER

Aristotle

384–322 BCE · Stagira, northern Greece → Athens

Studied ~20 years at Plato's Academy · Tutored the young Alexander the Great · Founded the Lyceum in Athens · *Nicomachean Ethics*

A good life is not a feeling you find. It is *a character you build*, one repeated choice at a time.

Aristotle called the highest human good *eudaimonia*, usually translated as happiness but closer to "flourishing." It is an activity, not a mood: living well over a whole life, using reason, among friends, as a citizen. Virtue sits between extremes (courage between cowardice and recklessness) and is acquired the way skills are, by doing [29] [30].

He also thought humans are by nature social and political animals. On his account, a flourishing life cannot be lived alone.



WATCH

Aristotle & Virtue Theory · CrashCourse — Crash Course Philosophy #38 · Open on YouTube ↗

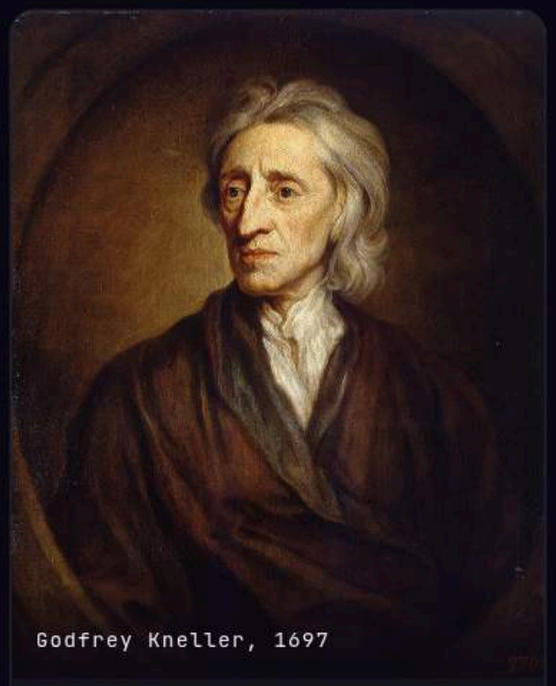
INTERPRETATION

Then: Character was formed inside a tight community that watched, judged and trained you. Habit was mostly social.

ANALYSIS

Now: Our habits are increasingly designed by others, through feeds, notifications and defaults. Aristotle would ask the uncomfortable question: whose character are your daily repetitions building?

Further reading: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Aristotle's Ethics" [30]. The popular line "we are what we repeatedly do" is not his.



Godfrey Kneller, 1697

John Locke · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

> *Every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself.*
>
> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, §27 (1689) [31]

THINKER

John Locke

1632–1704 · Wrington, England

Trained as a physician | *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) | *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) | Lived in exile in Holland, 1683–89

Every person *belongs to themselves*, and is therefore answerable for what they make of themselves.

Locke argued that the mind starts out like "white paper" and is filled by experience, so who we become depends heavily on what we are exposed to and what we do with it. In politics he argued that government is legitimate only by consent, because individuals are, first, their own [32] [33].

He also tied personal identity to consciousness and memory: you are the same person to the extent you can own your past actions. That makes the self something you are accountable for, not just something that happens to you [32].



WATCH

Political Theory: John Locke · The School of Life · Open on YouTube ↗

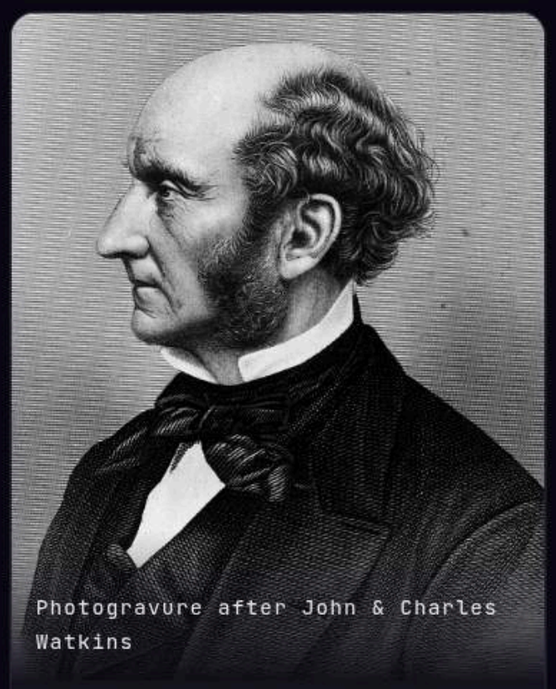
INTERPRETATION

Then: Self-ownership was a radical claim against kings, lords and state churches that assumed they had rights over your body, labor and conscience.

ANALYSIS

Now: The outside claims on us today are softer: employers, platforms, algorithms. Locke's question still applies. If you own yourself, who is currently making most of your decisions?

Further reading: SEP, "Locke's Political Philosophy" [33].



John Stuart Mill · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

THINKER

John Stuart Mill

1806–1873 · London

- Learned Greek at age three
- Suffered a "mental crisis" at twenty
- *On Liberty* (1859), which he called a joint work with Harriet Taylor Mill
- Member of Parliament, 1865–68

The greatest threat to freedom is not the law. It is *custom, and our willingness to copy*.

Mill's father raised him as an intellectual experiment, and at twenty he fell into a depression he later linked partly to an education that had trained his reasoning while neglecting his feelings. *On Liberty* argues that society should leave people free to run "experiments of living," because individuality is a source of both happiness and progress [34] [35].

His sharpest target was social pressure, which he thought could be more oppressive than government because "it leaves fewer means of escape."

> *He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.*
>
> Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 3 (1859) [34]

> *Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides.*
>
> Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 3 [34]



WATCH

John Stuart Mill: On Liberty · Academy of Ideas · Open on YouTube ↗

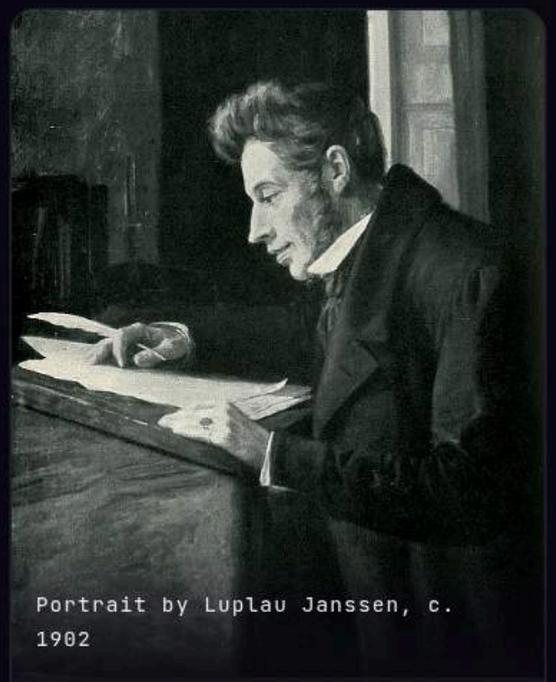
INTERPRETATION

Then: Mill wrote when village gossip, church and class could ruin anyone who lived differently.

ANALYSIS

Now: Today you can find a community for almost any way of life, which is a Millian victory. But online communities can enforce their own customs as fiercely as any village.

Further reading: SEP, "John Stuart Mill" [35].



Portrait by Luplau Janssen, c. 1902

Søren Kierkegaard · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

> *The crowd is untruth.*
>
> Kierkegaard, "On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual'," trans. Bellinger [36]

THINKER

Søren Kierkegaard

1813–1855 · Copenhagen

Wrote under many pseudonyms | *Either/Or* (1843) | *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) | Often called the first existentialist

You can lose yourself *without anyone noticing*, including you.

Kierkegaard spent much of his life walking Copenhagen, talking to everyone and watching how people disappeared into roles, opinions and "the public." For him the deepest task was to become a single individual who chooses and answers for their own life, rather than living by what "one" does [37].

He was scathing about crowds: not because people are stupid, but because a crowd dissolves responsibility. In his words, a crowd "either renders the single individual wholly unrepentant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of his decision" [36].

> *The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as quietly as if it were nothing.*
>
> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), trans. Lowrie [38]



WATCH

Philosophy: Søren Kierkegaard · The School of Life · Open on YouTube ↗

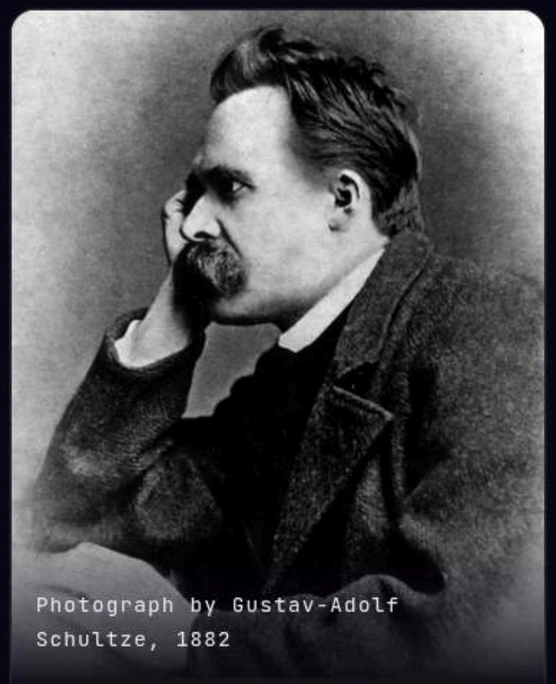
INTERPRETATION

Then: The crowd meant the press, the market square and the coffee house.

ANALYSIS

Now: A comment section or a trending topic is the purest crowd ever invented: anonymous, instant, and with responsibility split a million ways.

Further reading: SEP, "Søren Kierkegaard" [37].



Photograph by Gustav-Adolf Schultze, 1882

Friedrich Nietzsche · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

> *If a man knows the wherefore of his existence, then the manner of it can take care of itself.*
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Arrows" §12 (1889), trans. Ludovici [39]

THINKER

Friedrich Nietzsche

1844–1900 · Röcken, Prussia

Professor at Basel at 24 · Left teaching through illness in 1879 · *The Gay Science* (1882) · Mental collapse in Turin, 1889

Stop living by the herd's values. *Become who you are*.

Nietzsche thought most people adopt the values of their culture without examining them, a "herd" morality that prizes comfort and sameness. The alternative is not to do whatever you like but to create and live by values you have genuinely made your own, and to affirm your life fully [40].

> *Thou shalt become what thou art.*
>
> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §270, trans. Common [41]

A note on a famous line: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how" is a looser rendering of the same maxim, made famous by Viktor Frankl, who quotes it in *Man's Search for Meaning*. The Ludovici translation is quoted at left.



WATCH

Philosophy: Nietzsche · The School of Life · Open on YouTube ↗

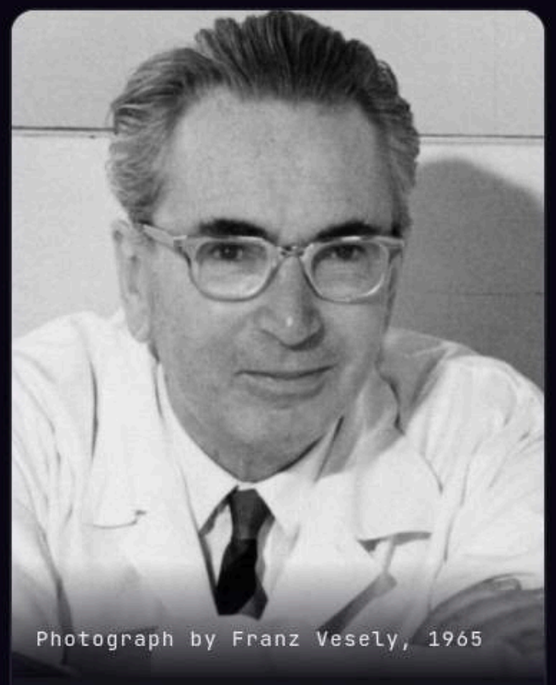
INTERPRETATION

Then: The herd was church, nation and bourgeois respectability.

ANALYSIS

Now: Today's herd is less about obedience and more about imitation: shared aesthetics, trending opinions, borrowed goals. Nietzsche would ask whether "being yourself" has itself become a template.

Further reading: SEP, "Friedrich Nietzsche" [40].



Photograph by Franz Vesely, 1965

Viktor Frankl · CC BY-SA 3.0 de · Wikimedia Commons

> *Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*
>
> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* [42]

THINKER

Viktor Frankl

1905–1997 · Vienna

Psychiatrist and neurologist | Survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Dachau subcamps | *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) | Founded logotherapy

When everything else is taken, *you still choose your response*, and that choice is where meaning lives.

Frankl was deported in 1942. His wife, parents and brother died in the camps. In 1946 he dictated the book that became *Man's Search for Meaning* in nine days [43]. His central claim: the primary human drive is not pleasure or power but meaning, found through work, love, and the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering [42].

Often misattributed: "Between stimulus and response there is a space…" is not found in Frankl's writings; it was popularized by Stephen Covey and may trace to Rollo May [44].



WATCH

Why to Believe in Others · Viktor Frankl, 1972 talk — archival recording · Open on YouTube ↗

INTERPRETATION

Then: Frankl tested his idea in the most extreme conditions imaginable.

ANALYSIS

Now: Frankl warned of an "existential vacuum" in comfortable societies: boredom and aimlessness once survival is no longer the problem. Modern purpose research, covered in Part V, tests that idea with data.

Further reading: Viktor Frankl Institut biography [43].



Photograph by Müller-May, 1974

Erich Fromm · CC BY-SA 3.0 de · Wikimedia Commons

> *The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious any more. But the price he pays, however, is high; it is the loss of his self.*
>
> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, ch. V (1941) [45]

THINKER

Erich Fromm

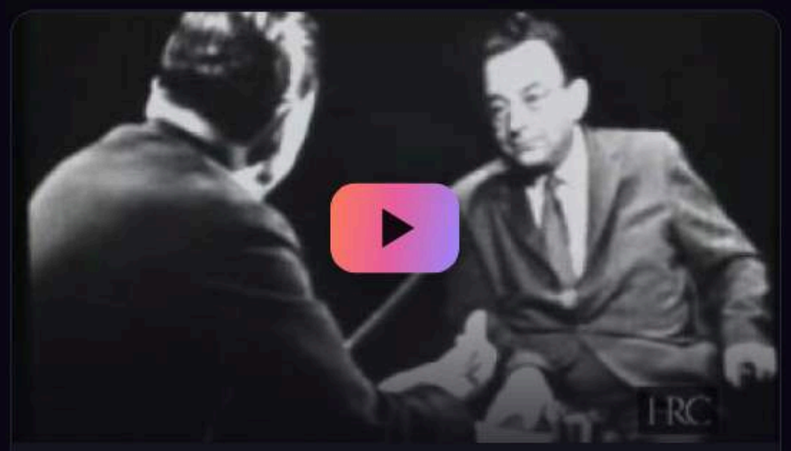
1900–1980 · Frankfurt → New York → Mexico → Switzerland

Psychoanalyst and social philosopher · Fled Nazi Germany, reached the U.S. in 1934 · *Escape from Freedom* (1941) · *The Art of Loving* (1956)

Modern freedom can be so frightening that people *run from it into conformity*.

Fromm's question in 1941 was why millions of people embraced authoritarianism. His answer: modern people were freed from old bonds of church, guild and village but left isolated and anxious. One escape is submission to a strong leader. Another, which he saw everywhere in democracies, is **"automaton conformity"**: becoming exactly what others expect [45].

> *The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be.*
>
> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941) [45]



WATCH

The Mike Wallace Interview: Erich Fromm · 1958 broadcast — archival recording · Open on YouTube ↗

INTERPRETATION

Then: Fromm saw conformity as the price of escaping the loneliness of a market society.

ANALYSIS

Now: Fromm would recognize curated online selves, an identity shaped to be liked, as a new form of the "marketing orientation" he described in 1947.

Further reading: Fromm Wallace interview, Harry Ransom Center [46].

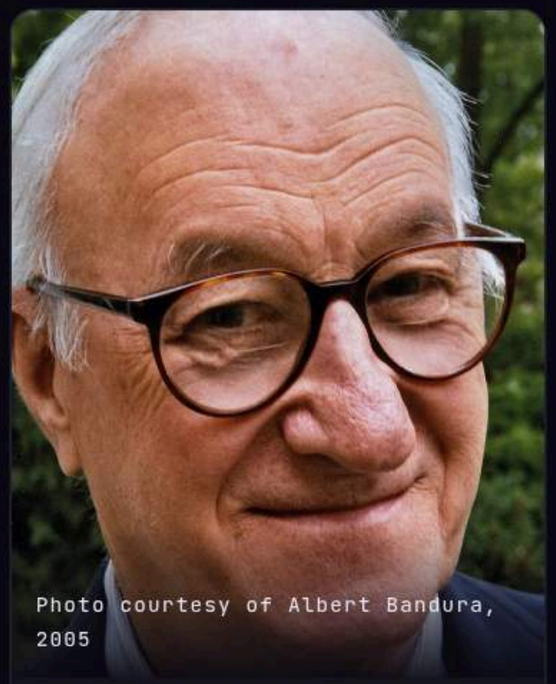


Photo courtesy of Albert Bandura, 2005

Albert Bandura · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

> *People are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them.*
>
> Bandura, "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency" (2006), abstract [47]

THINKER

Albert Bandura

1925–2021 · Mundare, Alberta → Stanford

Stanford professor from 1953 | Bobo doll studies (1961) | Self-efficacy theory (1977) | National Medal of Science

People are not just shaped by their surroundings. *They shape them back*, if they believe they can.

Bandura's Bobo doll experiments showed children copying an adult's aggression toward an inflatable doll they had merely watched [48]. Learning, he argued, is social: we imitate models. But we are not just copiers. His theory of **self-efficacy** holds that our belief in our ability to succeed strongly predicts what we attempt, how hard we try and how long we persist [49].

In 2006 he summarized human agency in four properties: *intentionality*, *forethought*, *self-reactiveness* and *self-reflectiveness* [47].



WATCH

Inside the Psychologist's Studio with Albert Bandura · Association for Psychological Science · Open on YouTube ↗

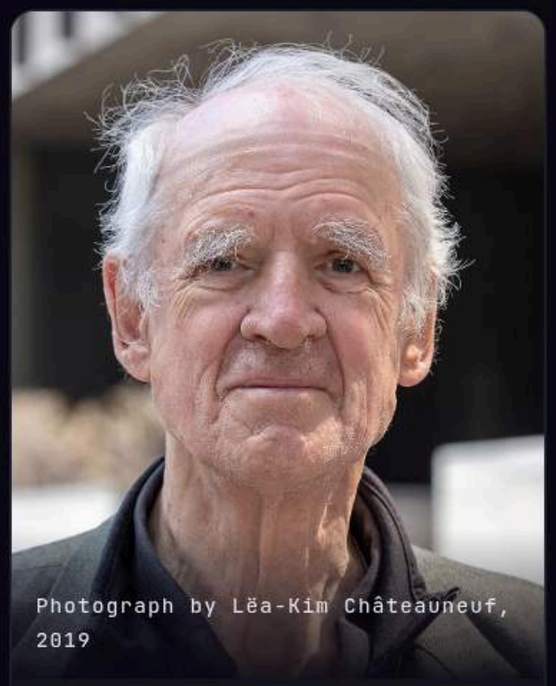
INTERPRETATION

Then: Bandura's models were parents, teachers and TV characters.

ANALYSIS

Now: Today's models are chosen by algorithms and seen by millions. Bandura's theory predicts we will copy them. It also says efficacy is built through "mastery experiences": doing hard things yourself.

Further reading: Bandura 2006, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* [47].



Photograph by Lëa-Kim Châteauneuf, 2019

Charles Taylor · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

> *I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter.*
>
> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992) [7]

THINKER

Charles Taylor

born 1931 · Montreal

Professor emeritus, McGill University · *Sources of the Self* (1989) · *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991) · Templeton Prize 2007

Being true to yourself is a real ideal, but it collapses into *narcissism* without something bigger than you.

In his 1991 Massey Lectures, Taylor identified three "malaises" of modern life: an individualism that can flatten life into self-absorption; the dominance of instrumental, cost-benefit reasoning; and a resulting loss of freedom as people withdraw from public life [7].

But he refused to dismiss authenticity as mere selfishness. It is a genuine moral ideal, he argued. Its degraded forms simply forget that a self can only be defined against "horizons of significance": history, nature, community, the demands of others [8].



WATCH

The Malaise of Modernity, part 1 of 5 · Charles Taylor, CBC Massey Lectures · Open on YouTube ↗

INTERPRETATION

Then: Taylor wrote just before the internet era, watching a consumer culture of self-fulfillment take hold.

ANALYSIS

Now: Taylor offers a middle path between "kids these days" cynicism and uncritical celebration: authenticity is worth pursuing, but it requires connection to things beyond the self.

Further reading: SEP, "Authenticity" [8].

QUOTE CHECK

The fake-quote wall

Some of the most-shared lines about self-direction were never said by the people they are pinned to. The internet's favorite philosophers have said a remarkable number of things they never said. Every quotation elsewhere in this piece was checked against a published translation.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." NOT ARISTOTLE

Actually: Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (1926), summarizing Aristotle. [12]

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response." NOT VIKTOR FRANKL

Actually: Not found in Frankl's works. Popularized by Stephen Covey; possibly a paraphrase of Rollo May. [44]

"The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority..." NOT SOCRATES

Actually: Kenneth John Freeman's 1907 dissertation, paraphrasing ancient complaints. [11]

"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." LOOSELY NIETZSCHE

Actually: A loose rendering of Nietzsche's maxim, popularized by Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. An older translation reads: "If a man knows the wherefore of his existence, then the manner of it can take care of itself." [39]

EVIDENCE

Verified, and better. Aristotle really did write: "by doing just actions we come to be just; by doing the actions of self-mastery we come to be perfected in self-mastery; and by doing brave actions brave" (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.1, Chase translation) [29]. Nietzsche really did write "Thou shalt become what thou art" [41].

ANALYSIS

Misquotations survive because they are tidier than the originals. That is a small lesson in the topic itself: a line spreads because it is easy to repeat, not because anyone checked.

III

PART III · INDIVIDUALITY AND CONFORMITY

Fitting in: how much do we really follow the crowd?

The most famous experiments in psychology were designed to answer the question this piece asks. Their results are more interesting, and more contested, than the textbook versions.

Asch, 1950s
Will you deny your own eyes to agree with a group?

Milgram, 1960s
Will you obey an authority against your conscience?

Since then
Has the pressure to conform grown or shrunk?

SOLOMON ASCH · 1951–1956

Would you deny your own eyes to agree with a group?

The lines were never the hard part. The people were.

Try it yourself · a sample trial



Which line, A, B or C, is the same length as the reference line? Six other participants have already answered:

Participant 1: “B”
Participant 2: “B”
Participant 3: “B”
Participant 4: “B”
Participant 5: “B”
Participant 6: “B”

You: ?

The correct answer is **A**. All six people before you said “B.” Would you have said what you saw, out loud, in that room?



WATCH

Asch Conformity Experiment · archival footage · Open on YouTube ↗

EVIDENCE

In Asch’s classic series, **123** men judged line lengths alongside a group of confederates who sometimes all gave the same wrong answer. On those critical trials, participants went along with the wrong majority **36.8%** of the time. About **one in four** never conformed at all [50].

36.8%

of answers on critical trials followed the wrong majority [50]

~25%

of participants never yielded once [50]

INTERPRETATION

The textbook headline is “people conform.” Asch himself emphasized the reverse: most answers, nearly two-thirds, were *independent*, even under pressure. The study can be read as evidence of how stubbornly people hold onto reality, not only how easily they let it go.

EVIDENCE

A 1996 meta-analysis of **133 Asch-type studies in 17 countries** found conformity in the U.S. had **declined** since the 1950s, and was higher in more collectivist cultures [51].

STANLEY MILGRAM · 1961–1963

Would you obey an authority against your conscience?



WATCH

Milgram experiment, 1963 · archival footage · Open on YouTube ↗



Public Announcement

WE WILL PAY YOU $4.00 FOR
ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME

Persons Needed for a Study of Memory

The recruitment ad promised $4 for "a study of memory." Participants did, it is safe to say, remember it. (Colors inverted for this dark page.) · Recruitment advertisement for the Yale obedience study, Public domain · Wikimedia Commons

• EVIDENCE

Volunteers were told to give increasing "shocks" to a learner (an actor) for wrong answers. In the best-known version, **26 of 40** participants (65%) continued to the maximum 450-volt switch [52].

• EVIDENCE

A partial replication in 2009, stopping at 150 volts for ethical reasons, found **70%** of participants willing to continue past that point, compared with 82.5% in Milgram's comparable condition. The difference was not statistically significant [53].

• CONTESTED

What do the studies really show? Haslam and Reicher argue that people in these studies were not blindly obedient but *identified* with the experimenter's scientific goals, which they call "engaged followership." When the experimenter gave a direct order ("you have no other choice"), people tended to refuse [54]. The Stanford Prison Experiment, often cited alongside Milgram, has been heavily criticized for coaching its "guards" [55].

• ANALYSIS

Either reading is uncomfortable. If people obey, authority is dangerous. If people follow causes they believe in, then the cause, and who frames it, matters enormously. Both apply to life today.

THEN VS. NOW

Are we more conformist than our grandparents?

We are all unique now, just like everyone else. On several long-run measures, culture has become steadily more individualistic.

↓

Conformity in U.S. Asch-type studies declined after the 1950s

Bond & Smith, 1996 [51]

32% → <10%

of U.S. boys given a top-10 name, 1955 → 2007

Girls: 22% → about 1 in 12 [56] [57]

“choose” ↑

Words like “choose,” “get” and “individual” rose in books 1800–2000; “obliged,” “give” fell

Greenfield, 2013 [58]

+12%

rise in individualism worldwide since 1960 (78 countries, 51 years)

Santos et al., 2017 [59]

EVIDENCE

Parents increasingly choose names to make their children stand out rather than fit in. In 1955, 32% of boys and 22% of girls received one of the ten most popular names. By 2007, fewer than 10% of boys and about 1 in 12 girls did [56] [57].

EVIDENCE

Across 78 countries over 51 years, Santos, Varnum and Grossmann found individualist practices and values rising by about 12% worldwide, driven mostly by socioeconomic development such as wealth, education and white-collar work [59].

INTERPRETATION

This complicates the popular story. By many measures, we prize uniqueness more than any generation in history. The question is whether *valuing* individuality is the same as *practicing* it. Mill, Nietzsche and Taylor would all say no: you can choose a distinctive name, outfit and playlist while still letting others write your life plan.

NOW

The new crowd: feeds, influencers and belonging

21%

of U.S. adults regularly get news from "news influencers"

Pew, 2024 [60]

37%

of adults under 30 do [60]

EVIDENCE

A classic 1995 review concluded that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation: people form bonds easily, resist breaking them, and suffer measurably when they lack them [61]. Conformity is partly the price of belonging, and has always been.

INTERPRETATION

Kierkegaard's "crowd" was the anonymous public of newspapers and coffee houses, where responsibility becomes "a fraction" of a decision [36]. Feeds create a new version: a crowd that is personalized, always present, and invisible as a crowd, because each person sees a slightly different one.

SPECULATIVE

Whether algorithmic feeds make people more conformist overall is not settled. Feeds can expose people to more varied views than a small town ever did, and can also reward imitation and outrage. Good long-run measures of "conformity in the wild" do not yet exist.

ANALYSIS

A fair summary: we are probably less pressured to conform to *local* norms than any generation before us, and more exposed to *mass* norms delivered privately. Asch's lines were visible to everyone; today's are not.

IV

PART IV · RESPONSIBILITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Standing on your own: control, dependence and growing up

Do people today feel in charge of their lives? Do they rely more on institutions, parents and systems? And is adulthood arriving later, or just differently?

Inner
Locus of control, learned helplessness, self-efficacy.

Outer
Living at home, marriage, trust in institutions.

Daily
How kids grow up, and how adults work.

Who do you think is in charge of your life?

EVIDENCE

In 1966 Julian Rotter described **locus of control**: whether people believe outcomes depend mainly on their own actions (internal) or on luck, powerful others and circumstance (external) [62].

EVIDENCE

A meta-analysis of young Americans' scores found locus of control became steadily **more external** from 1960 to 2002, by about **0.80 standard deviations**. The average college student in 2002 was more external than about 80% of students in the early 1960s [63].

EVIDENCE

Seligman and Maier's "learned helplessness" research began in the 1960s with the idea that animals exposed to uncontrollable stress *learn* to give up. Fifty years later, they reversed the conclusion: passivity is the brain's **default** response to prolonged bad events. What is learned is *control*, the discovery that one's actions matter [64].



WATCH

The new era of positive psychology · Martin Seligman · TED · Open on YouTube ↗

INTERPRETATION

Read together with Bandura's self-efficacy research [49], this suggests agency is not a fixed trait but a skill built through experiences of making things happen. Frankl put it more bluntly in later editions of *Man's Search for Meaning*, recommending that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a "Statue of Responsibility" on the West Coast [42].

THEN VS. NOW · ADOLESCENCE

Growing up slower: safer, and less independent

47.7% → 12.7%

of U.S. children (K–8) walking or biking to school, 1969 → 2009

65

61.8 → 12.6

teen births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19, 1991 → 2024 (record low)

66

35% → 22%

of high-schoolers currently drinking alcohol, 2013 → 2023

25

↓

Teens less likely to drive, date, work for pay or go out without parents, 1976–2016

67

EVIDENCE

Using seven national surveys from 1976 to 2016, Twenge and Park found U.S. adolescents became less likely to take part in "adult activities" such as having a driver's license, dating, working for pay, drinking and going out without their parents. The decline appeared across demographic groups 67.

INTERPRETATION

The authors interpret this as a shift toward a "slow life strategy": when families are smaller, lives longer and education longer, development stretches out 67. That is not obviously bad. Fewer teen births and less teen drinking are real gains.

CONTESTED

The cost side is argued over. Some researchers and commentators link reduced independent play and travel to lower confidence and higher anxiety. Others say the evidence is mostly correlational and that today's teens are simply safer. Both can be partly true.

ANALYSIS

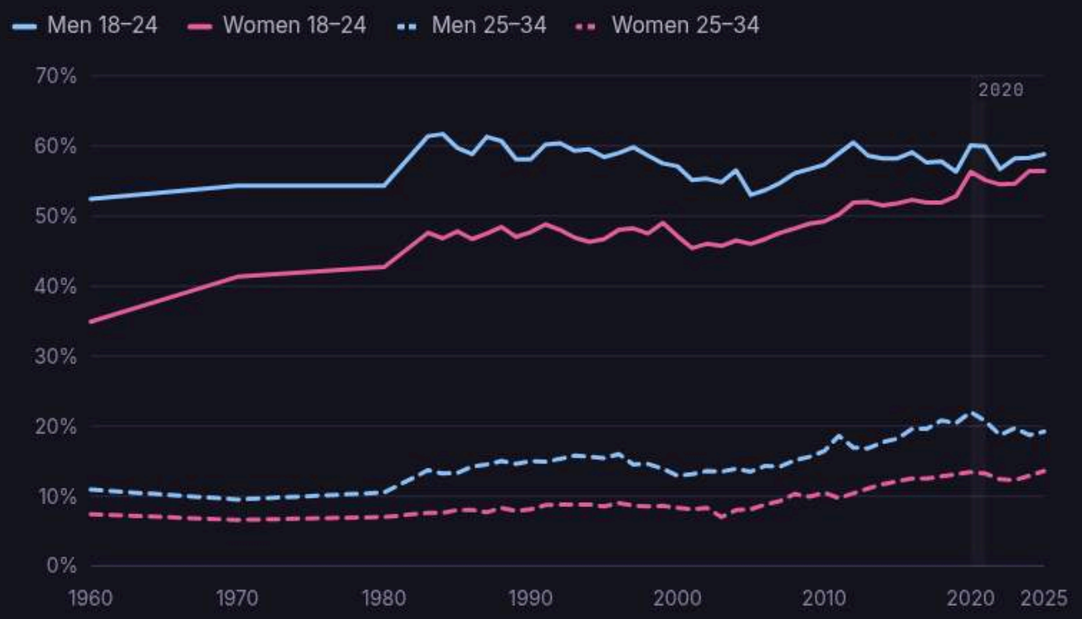
If self-efficacy grows through "mastery experiences" (Bandura), then a childhood with fewer unsupervised challenges may delay the building of agency, even while it reduces harm. This is a hypothesis, not a finding.

THEN VS. NOW · YOUNG ADULTS

Adulthood, rescheduled

Young adults living in their parents' home, 1960–2025

Percent. College students living in dorms are counted as living at home, which inflates the 18–24 figures.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Table AD-1 (Current Population Survey; 1960–1980 from the decennial census) [68].

EVIDENCE

Among men aged 25–34, the share living with parents roughly doubled, from **10.9% in 1960** to **20.4% in 2019**. It jumped to 22.0% in 2020 and was 19.2% in 2025. For women 25–34 it went from 7.4% to 13.6% [68].

EVIDENCE

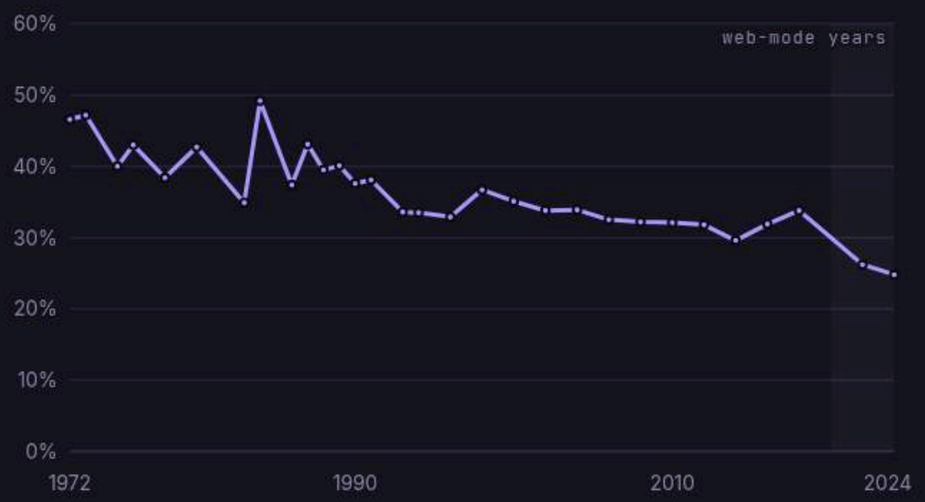
In July 2020, **52%** of 18- to 29-year-olds lived with a parent, the highest share Pew could find in the data, above the 48% of the 1940 census, at the end of the Great Depression [69].

INTERPRETATION

Living at home and marrying later (median first marriage now about 31 for men and 28 for women [17]) are often read as proof of a less independent generation. They are just as consistent with longer education, higher housing costs and a deliberate choice to delay. The data show *timing* has changed; they cannot show *character* has.

Who do we lean on? Trust in government and in each other

"Generally speaking, would you say most people can be trusted?"
Percent answering "can be trusted." General Social Survey; shaded years used a web/mail mode.



Source: GSS 1972–2024, tabulated for this piece [1]. Mode caution: [70].

● EVIDENCE

The share of Americans who say most people can be trusted fell from **46.6% in 1972** to about a third by the 2010s, and **24.8% in 2024** [1]. Trust in the federal government fell from 77% in 1964 to 17% in September 2025 [20].

● CONTESTED

A measurement warning. In 2021 the GSS moved mostly online and by mail because in-person interviews were not possible. NORC cautions that changes after 2018 may partly reflect the new method, not only real change [70]. The 2022 and 2024 readings, also mixed-mode, stay low, which suggests the decline is at least partly real.

● INTERPRETATION

Kant warned that people would happily outsource their thinking "if only I can pay" [15]. A society can depend heavily on institutions while trusting them very little, which may be the most uncomfortable combination of all: reliance without confidence.

Then: Institutions were trusted, neighbors were trusted, and both were relied on. **Now:** both are relied on, especially institutions, and neither is trusted much.

Engaged, or just employed?

U.S. employees “engaged” at work, 2000–2026

Percent. Annual figures to 2021, then quarterly readings.



Source: Gallup [71].

EVIDENCE

Gallup’s measure of employees who are involved in and enthusiastic about their work climbed for two decades to a **record 36% in 2020**, then fell. In the third quarter of 2026 it dropped to **29%**, the lowest since 2011, with the sharpest declines among remote and hybrid workers [71].

EVIDENCE

About **7%** of paid U.S. workdays were done from home in 2019. The share peaked around 60% in spring 2020 and has settled near **25%**, about 3.5 times the pre-2020 level [72].

INTERPRETATION

Remote work is a striking gain in autonomy over *where* and *when* people work. Engagement measures whether people feel connected to *what* they do and *who* they do it with. The data suggest the two do not automatically rise together.

V

PART V · PURPOSE AND MEANING

What makes a life go well? Philosophy meets the data

For two millennia the question belonged to philosophers. In the last eighty years researchers have started measuring it: who flourishes, who lives longer, who feels their life means something.

Needs
Autonomy, competence, relatedness.

Relationships
An 85-year study's main finding.

Purpose
Linked to longer life, but which way does it run?

SIDE BY SIDE

What the philosophers claimed, and what researchers later found

THINKER	THE PHILOSOPHICAL CLAIM · INTERPRETATION	WHAT LATER RESEARCH FOUND	STRENGTH
Aristotle	Flourishing is an activity, practiced among friends and fellow citizens.	The Harvard Study: relationship quality at 50 predicted health at 80 better than cholesterol. →	EVIDENCE
Locke · Mill	People should author their own lives; individuality is worth protecting.	Self-determination theory: autonomy is a basic psychological need linked to well-being. →	EVIDENCE
Kierkegaard · Fromm	People flee into the crowd, losing themselves to escape anxiety.	Asch: real conformity pressure, but most answers stayed independent. Belonging is a fundamental need. →	EVIDENCE
Nietzsche	Create your own values; "become what you are."	Global individualism has risen, but whether people examine their values is hard to measure. →	CONTESTED
Frankl	Meaning is the primary human drive, even in suffering.	Higher purpose is associated with lower mortality in large long-term studies. →	EVIDENCE
Bandura	People are contributors to their life circumstances.	Young Americans became more "external" in locus of control from 1960 to 2002. →	EVIDENCE
Taylor	Authenticity needs horizons of significance beyond the self.	In 14 of 17 rich countries, family is the most-cited source of meaning. →	EVIDENCE

ANALYSIS

The match is striking but imperfect. Research tends to confirm the philosophers' *positive* claims (relationships, autonomy and purpose matter) more clearly than their *alarms* (that people are sinking into the crowd). The alarms are harder to measure, which is not the same as being wrong.

EDWARD DECI & RICHARD RYAN · 1970S–TODAY

Self-determination theory: three needs

Autonomy

Feeling that your actions are your own, chosen and endorsed, not controlled from outside.

Competence

Feeling effective, able to meet challenges and grow skills.

Relatedness

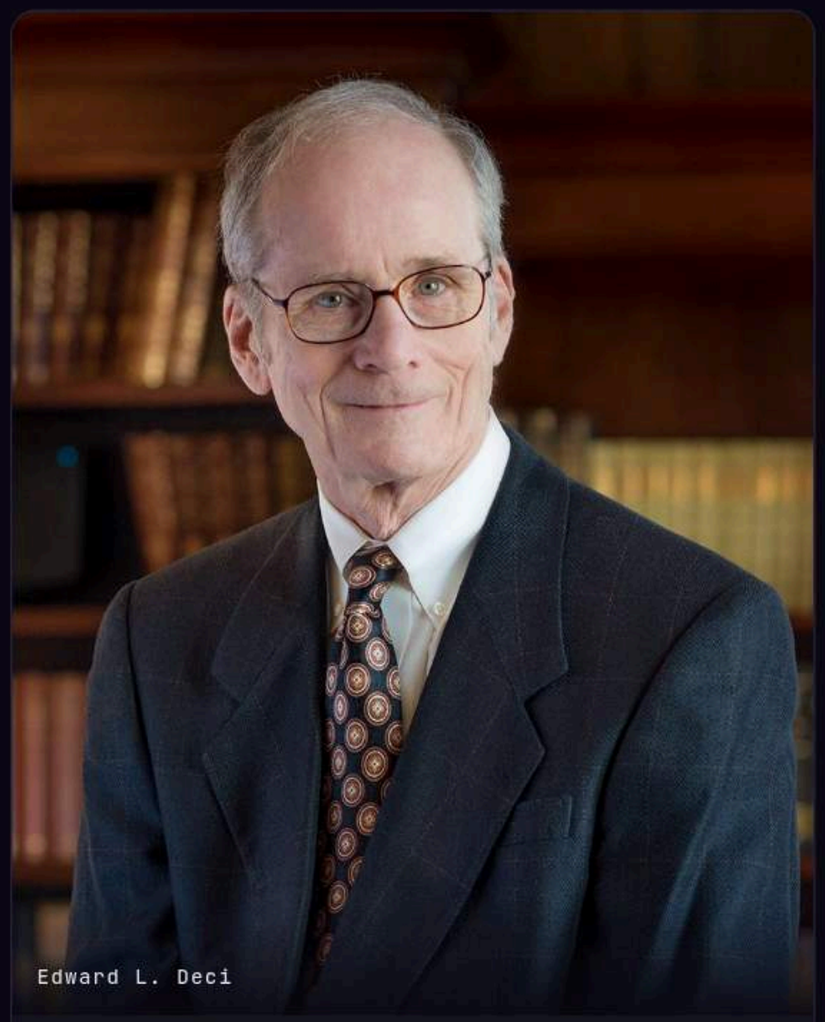
Feeling connected to and cared for by others, and caring for them.

EVIDENCE

Ryan and Deci's widely cited 2000 synthesis argues that these three needs are universal and that social environments which support them foster intrinsic motivation and well-being, while controlling environments (heavy surveillance, pressure, rewards used to control) undermine them [73].

INTERPRETATION

The theory gives Mill and Kierkegaard a modern vocabulary. "Living by the crowd" is low autonomy. "Ape-like imitation" is behavior driven by external regulation rather than personal endorsement. Notably, the theory does not treat autonomy as independence from others: relatedness is a need too.



Edward L. Deci

Edward L. Deci · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



WATCH

Promoting Motivation, Health, and Excellence · Ed Deci · TEDxFlourCity · Open on YouTube ↗

HARVARD STUDY OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT · SINCE 1938

What 85 years of lives say about a good one



WATCH

What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness · Robert Waldinger · TED · Open on YouTube ↗

1938
the study began
74

268 + 456
Harvard sophomores plus inner-city Boston young men
75

50 → 80
satisfaction with relationships at 50 predicted health at 80
75

EVIDENCE

The study followed 268 Harvard sophomores (the Grant Study) and 456 young men from Boston's inner city (the Glueck Study) for their whole lives, and later their children. Its directors report that the people most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at 80, and that relationship satisfaction was a better predictor than cholesterol levels 75 74.

CONTESTED

The original samples were all male and mostly white, and the findings are associations. Close relationships may protect health, or healthier, happier people may find relationships easier. The direction of cause is not fully settled.

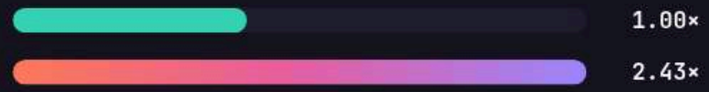
INTERPRETATION

Aristotle called a person without friends unlikely to flourish. On this point, the longest study of adult life agrees with the oldest theory of it.

PURPOSE IN LIFE

Does having a purpose help you live longer?

Risk of dying during follow-up, people with lowest vs. highest purpose



Alimujiang et al., *JAMA Network Open* 2019: 6,985 U.S. adults over 50, adjusted for other factors [76].

EVIDENCE

In a U.S. sample of 6,163 adults followed for 14 years, each standard deviation of higher purpose was associated with about a **15% lower** risk of dying (hazard ratio 0.85), across all ages [77].

EVIDENCE

Among 6,985 adults over 50, those with the lowest purpose scores were **2.43 times** as likely to die during follow-up as those with the highest, after adjustment [76].

CONTESTED

These are observational studies. Illness can sap purpose, so part of the link could run backward. Researchers adjust for health at baseline, but cannot rule it out entirely.

INTERPRETATION

Frankl's claim that meaning is a basic human need [42] now has some support from mortality data. Nietzsche's maxim, "if a man knows the wherefore of his existence…," reads almost like a hypothesis these studies tested.

We are richer and freer to choose. Has that bought meaning?

EVIDENCE

Money and happiness. A 2023 "adversarial collaboration" between rival researchers found that happiness generally keeps rising with log income. The exception is the least happy 20% of people, whose happiness plateaus at around $100,000 a year [78].

EVIDENCE

Sources of meaning. In a 2021 Pew survey of 17 advanced economies, family was the most-mentioned source of meaning in 14 of them. In the U.S., only about a third as many people cited their careers as cited family. Americans also became more likely to mention freedom and independence after 2017 [79].

CONTESTED

Poorer nations, more meaning? Across 132 nations, Oishi and Diener found residents of poorer nations reported more meaning in life, though less life satisfaction, which they linked to religiosity [80]. Critics argue country-level correlations cannot tell us about individuals [81].

CONTESTED

Too many choices? The popular idea that abundant choice paralyzes us has weak overall support: a meta-analysis of 50 experiments found an average effect close to zero (d = 0.02), though large effects appeared under specific conditions [82].

ANALYSIS

Prosperity seems to raise satisfaction more reliably than meaning. That fits Frankl's warning about an "existential vacuum" in comfortable societies, but the evidence is suggestive, not decisive.

Crowd with smartphones · PattayaPatrol, CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

VI

PART VI · THE EVIDENCE ON DAILY LIFE

How we live now: happiness, loneliness, community, screens

Four long-running measures of daily life, with their sources and caveats. Several had been drifting for decades; some turned sharply in the 2010s. Pull up a chair, ideally next to another human.

Happiness
Nearly fifty years of stability, then a break.

Connection
Less time together, more time alone.

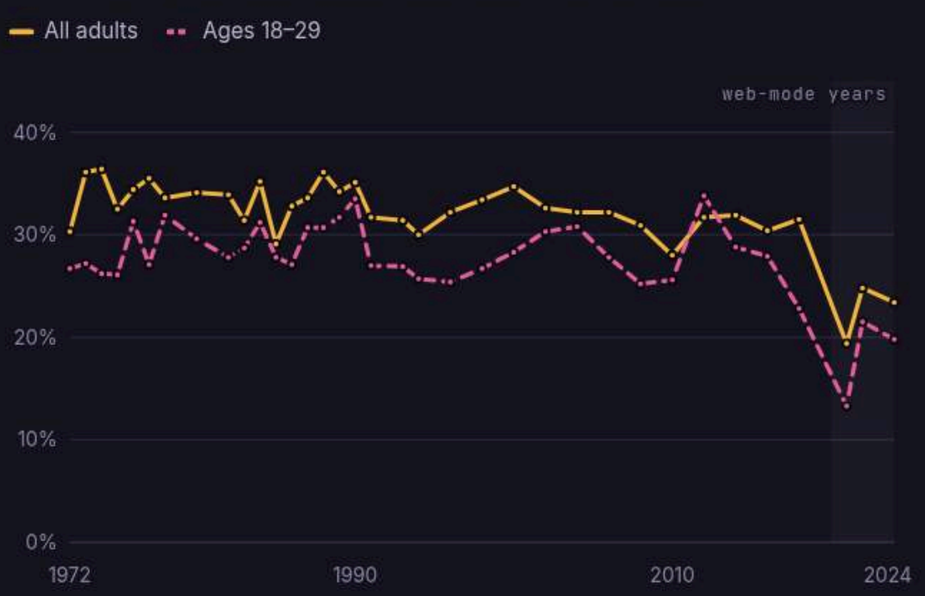
Community
Joining less, helping informally.

GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY · 1972–2024

Happiness: nearly fifty years of stability, then a break

“Taken all together… would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?”

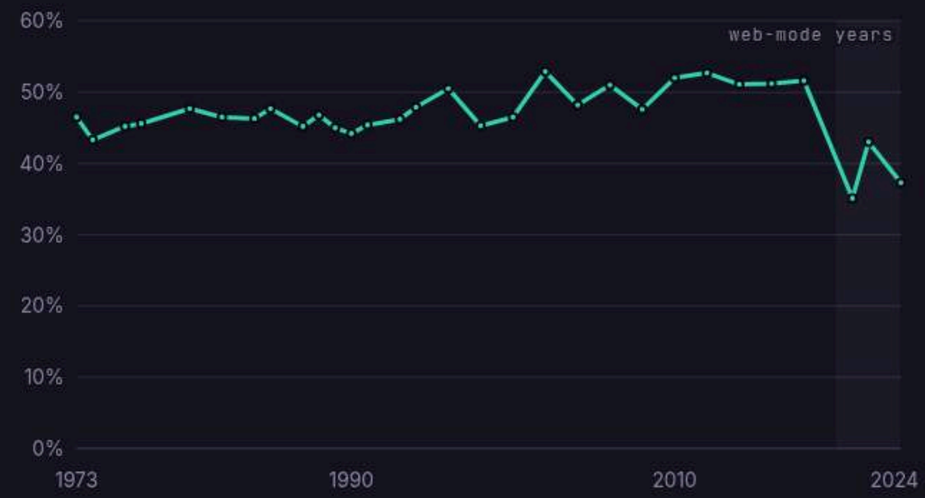
Percent saying “very happy.” Shaded years used a web/mail mode.



Source: GSS 1972–2024, tabulated for this piece, weighted [1]. Mode caution: [70].

“In general, do you find life exciting, pretty routine, or dull?”

Percent saying “exciting.”



Source: GSS 1973–2024 [1].

EVIDENCE

“Very happy” stayed between about 28% and 36% from 1972 to 2018. It was **19.4%** in 2021, **24.8%** in 2022 and **23.4%** in 2024. Among 18- to 29-year-olds it fell from 22.8% (2018) to 13.3% (2021) and 19.8% (2024) [1].

EVIDENCE

Gallup’s life ratings agree on direction: Americans’ “thriving” share hit a record 59.2% in mid-2021 and fell to **48.9%** in early 2025 [83] and 48.0% by the end of 2025. Optimism about life in five years hit a **record low** in 2025 [84]. The U.S. fell to **23rd** in the World Happiness Report 2026, from 17th in 2013, driven by young adults [85] [86].

CONTESTED

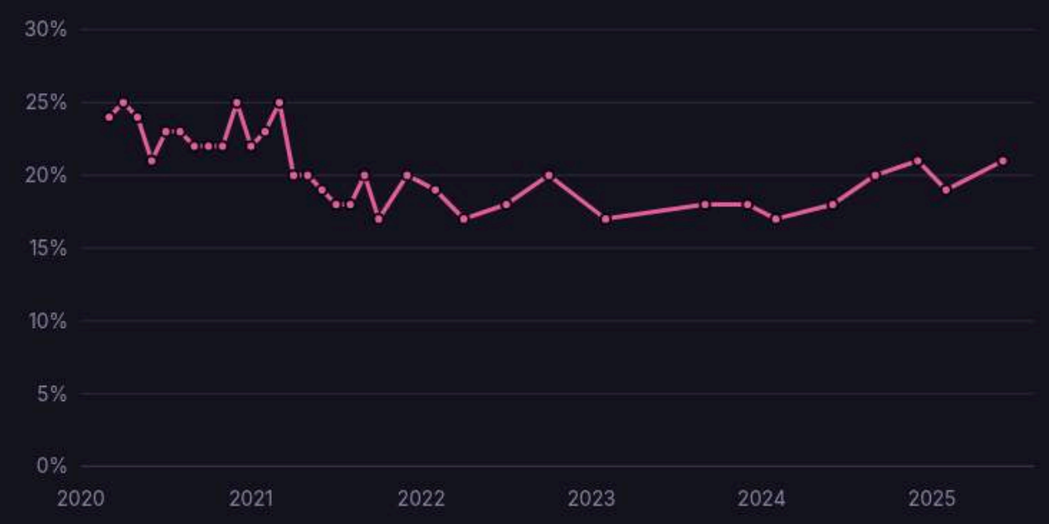
The GSS changed method in 2021, and NORC warns against simple comparisons [70]. But the young-adult decline was visible by 2018, before the switch, and Gallup and the World Happiness Report show the same direction with different methods.

CONNECTION

Loneliness, friendship and time alone

U.S. adults who felt loneliness “a lot of the day yesterday”

Percent. Gallup Panel; this series started in 2020, so no earlier baseline exists.



Source: Gallup [87] [88].

6.1 → 7.0 h

average waking hours alone per day, 2019 → 2020

BLS time-use survey [89]

~45%

more time alone for ages 15–29 in 2023 than in 2010

Our World in Data [26]

3% → 12%

Americans with no close friends, 1990 → 2021

Different surveys; see caveat [90]

EVIDENCE

The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 advisory reported that time spent with friends in person fell from about **60 minutes a day in 2003 to 20 in 2020**, with the steepest decline among 15- to 24-year-olds [24].

EVIDENCE

Gallup’s daily loneliness measure eased from about 25% early in 2020 to 17% in 2023, then rose again to 21% by mid-2025. Young adults (29%) report far more than adults 65 and older (15%) [87] [88].

CONTESTED

An “epidemic”? A meta-analysis of 345 studies (N = 124,855) found loneliness among emerging adults rose only modestly between 1976 and 2019, and its authors argued the data did not support calling it an epidemic [91]. The friendship comparison above sets a 2021 survey against a 1990 Gallup poll with different wording [90].

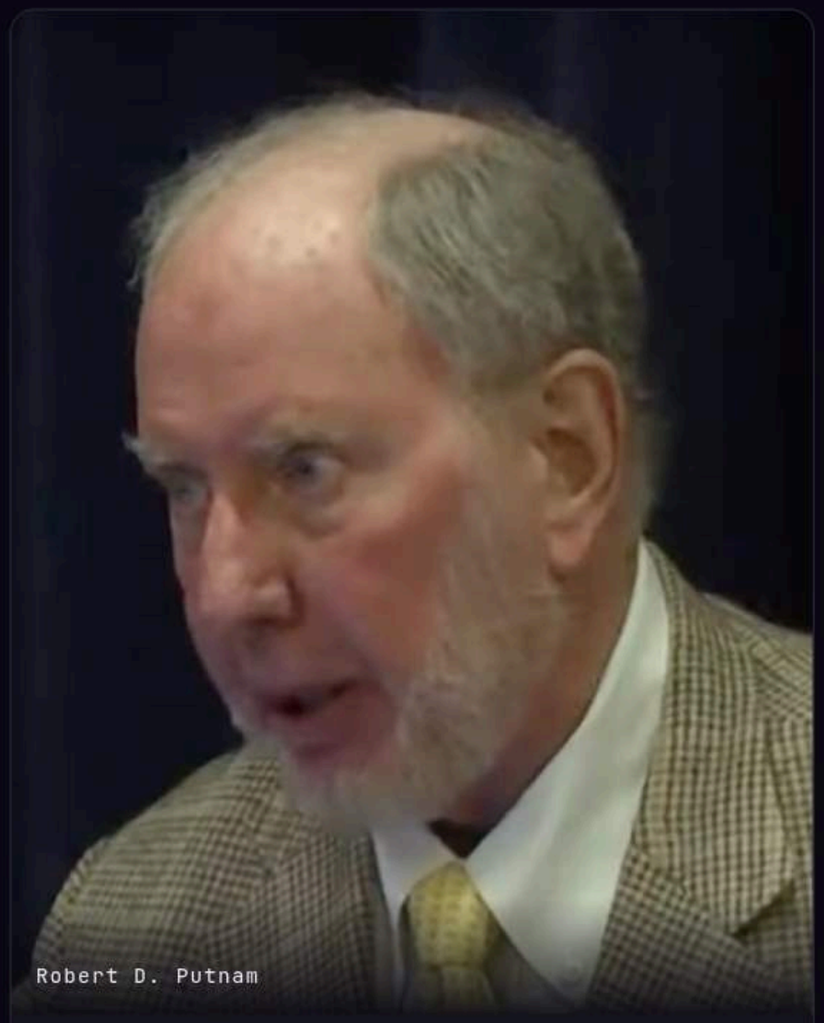


WATCH

Surgeon General on the health risks of loneliness · PBS NewsHour · Open on YouTube ↗

JOINING IN

Bowling alone, and voting together



Robert D. Putnam · CC BY 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons



WATCH

Robert Putnam on polarization and what can unify the nation · PBS NewsHour · Open on YouTube ↗

EVIDENCE

In 1995 Putnam noticed that between 1980 and 1993 the total number of American bowlers rose by 10% while league bowling fell by 40%: more people bowling, fewer bowling *together* [22]. In *The Upswing* (2020) he and Shaylyn Romney Garrett describe a century-long "I–we–I" curve: rising community from 1900 to the 1960s, then a long decline [92].

70% → 45%

U.S. adults belonging to a church, synagogue or mosque, 1999 → 2023 [93] [94]

30.0% → 28.3%

formal volunteering, 2019 → 2023 (23.2% in 2021) [95]

66.4%

voter turnout in 2020, the highest since 1900; 64.3% in 2024 [96]

EVIDENCE

Formal volunteering through organizations dropped sharply in 2021 and only partly recovered, and volunteers gave fewer hours. But **informal helping**, such as assisting neighbors, rose from 51.7% in 2019 to 54.2% in 2023 [95].

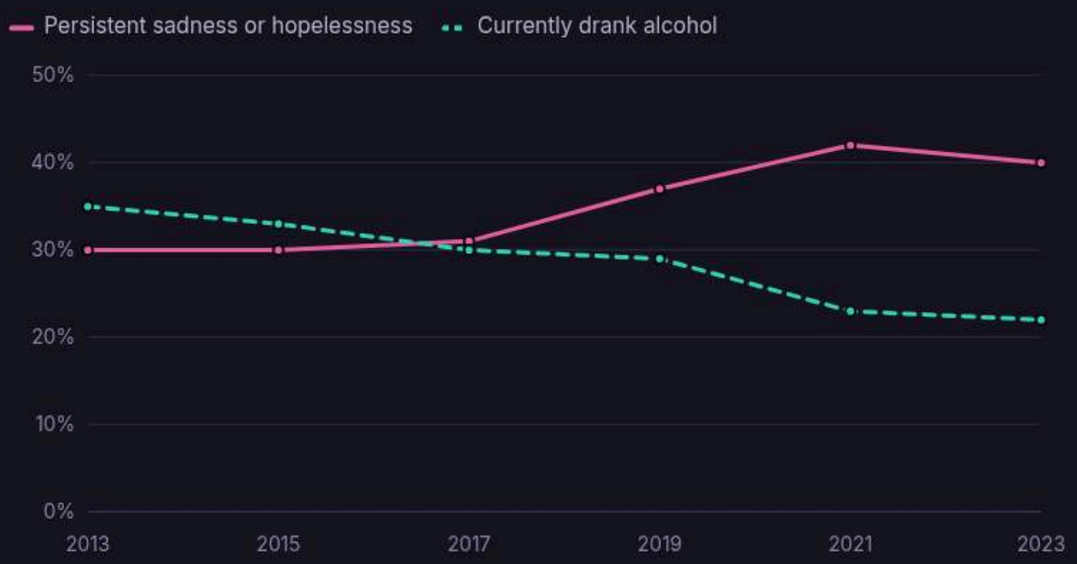
ANALYSIS

Community life has not simply vanished; it has changed form, from membership to participation. Americans join fewer organizations but voted in 2020 at a rate not seen in 120 years, and help neighbors informally more than before.

Teens and screens: what changed, and the fight over why

U.S. high-school students, 2013–2023

Percent. CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey.



Source: CDC YRBS Data Summary & Trends Report 2013–2023 [25].



WATCH

iGen: The Smartphone Generation · Jean Twenge · TEDx · Open on YouTube ↗

EVIDENCE

The share of high-schoolers reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness rose from **30% in 2013** to **42% in 2021**, then eased to 40% in 2023. Alcohol use fell over the same period [25]. Today's teens are, by several measures, both less reckless and less happy.

CONTESTED

The case for a causal link. Jonathan Haidt argues the move to smartphone-based childhood around 2010–2015, together with declining free play, caused a large share of the rise in adolescent anxiety and depression [27].

CONTESTED

The case for caution. Candice Odgers argues the research mostly shows small correlations, that causation has not been established, and that other explanations deserve equal attention [28].

ANALYSIS

Note the timing: the teen decline began around 2013, several years before 2020. Whatever happened, it was already under way.

An empty Praça do Comércio, Lisbon, 2020 · Jules Verne Times Two, CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

VII

PART VII · THE PANDEMIC YEARS AND AFTER

Did things slip faster than normal after 2020?

A common feeling is that something broke around 2020: people became more isolated, less motivated, less trusting, more passive, and the slide sped up. This part tests that hunch indicator by indicator.

The marker
2020 is used only as a dividing line in time.

The test
Compare the post-2020 change with the trend before it.

The verdicts
Supports, contradicts, mixed, or too early to tell.

METHOD

The hypothesis, and a fair way to test it

Since 2020, things have slipped faster than normal.

The hypothesis

“Slipped” can mean many things, so we break it into measurable parts: happiness, loneliness, trust, civic participation, mental health, work, and independence in early adulthood. For each, we ask three questions:

1. **Was there a trend before 2020?** If a measure had been falling for decades, a further fall is not necessarily “faster than normal.”
2. **Did the change after 2020 exceed that trend?** A sharp break suggests something new; a continuation suggests an old story.
3. **Did it last?** A spike that reverts is different from a new, lower normal.

Verdict key

SUPPORTS The decline after 2020 was faster or deeper than the earlier trend and has not fully reversed.

CONTRADICTS No faster decline, a recovery, or an improvement.

MIXED Some parts support it and some don’t, or the decline began well before 2020.

TOO EARLY Too few years of data or no comparable baseline.

CONTESTED

Caveats. Several surveys changed method around 2020. The GSS moved online and by mail in 2021 [70]. Some series, like Gallup’s daily loneliness, only began in 2020 [88]. Six years is a short time in social data.

SCORECARD

Fourteen indicators, before and after 2020

Sparklines show each series; the faint line marks 2020. An asterisk means the survey changed method around 2020.

INDICATOR	BEFORE 2020	SINCE 2020	TREND	VERDICT	SOURCE
Happiness (“very happy”)	Flat: 28–36% every year, 1972–2018	31.5% (2018) → 19.4% (2021) → 23.4% (2024)		SUPPORTS*	1 70
Young adults “very happy” (18–29)	Falling by 2018 (22.8%)	13.3% (2021) → 19.8% (2024)		MIXED	1
Optimism about life in 5 years	Rising in the 2010s	68.3% (2020) → record low 59.2% (2025)		SUPPORTS	84
Daily loneliness	No Gallup baseline before 2020	~25% (2020) → 17% (2023) → 21% (2025)		TOO EARLY	87
Time alone	Rising since at least 2010 (young adults)	6.1 h (2019) → 7.0 h (2020)	—	MIXED	89 26
Trust in other people	Slow decline: 46.6% (1972) → 33.8% (2018)	26.2% (2022) → 24.8% (2024)		SUPPORTS*	1
Trust in federal government	Long decline; 17% in 2019	22% (2020) → 17% (Sept 2025)		CONTRADICTS	20
Voter turnout (eligible voters)	60.1% (2016)	66.4% (2020, highest since 1900) → 64.3% (2024)		CONTRADICTS	96
Formal volunteering	Stable: 30.3% (2017), 30.0% (2019)	23.2% (2021) → 28.3% (2023); fewer hours		MIXED	95
Informal helping (neighbors)	51.7% (2019)	54.2% (2023)		CONTRADICTS	95
Religious membership	Steady fall: 70% (1999) → 50% (2018)	47% (2020) → 45% (2023): no acceleration		CONTRADICTS	93 94
Teen sadness / hopelessness	Rising since 2013: 30% → 37% (2019)	42% (2021) → 40% (2023)		MIXED	25
Employee engagement	Rising for 20 years to 36% (2020)	29% (Q3 2026), lowest since 2011		SUPPORTS	71
Men 25–34 living with parents	Rising: 16.4% (2010) → 20.4% (2019)	22.0% (2020) → 19.2% (2025)		CONTRADICTS	68

4
Support the hypothesis
happiness, trust in people, optimism, engagement

5
Contradict it
government trust, turnout, informal help, religious membership, living at home

4
Mixed
young-adult happiness, volunteering, time alone, teen sadness

1
Too early to tell
daily loneliness (no baseline)

WHAT THE SCORECARD SAYS

Verdict: private life slipped; public life mostly did not

ANALYSIS

The hunch is partly right. The indicators that best support "faster than normal" are about *inner and private life*: how happy people say they are, whether they trust strangers, how optimistic they feel about the future, and how engaged they are at work. Several of these had been stable for decades and then broke after 2020 without fully recovering.

It is also partly wrong. Measures of *public and practical life* did not slide faster: voter turnout hit a 120-year high, informal helping rose, religious membership continued its pre-existing decline at the same pace, and the jump in young adults living at home reversed.

And much of the story is older than 2020. Teen distress, young-adult unhappiness, rising time alone, and falling trust in government were all under way in the 2010s or earlier. For those, 2020 looks less like the cause of a decline and more like an accelerant, or simply a point on an existing slope.

CONTESTED

Two cautions keep this verdict modest. The GSS changed method in 2021, so the largest drops are partly uncertain [70]. And six years is short; some measures may still be recovering or still sliding.

INTERPRETATION

Read through the thinkers: Taylor's "malaise" is about inner life flattening while outward freedom grows. Kierkegaard warned that losing oneself happens "quietly." A decline that shows up in mood, trust and motivation, but not in voting or helping a neighbor, is the quiet kind.

Remember the base rate. People have believed in moral decline for millennia →. The useful finding here is not that things are "worse," but *which* things changed and which held.

VIII

PART VIII · SYNTHESIS

So... what *is* wrong with people?

Probably less than the headline suggests, and something different from what most people assume. Here are the popular assumptions, tested, and what has stayed the same for 2,700 years. (Apologies to anyone who came here looking for ammunition for the next family dinner.)

Tested
Ten common claims, each with a verdict.

Constant
What hasn't changed at all.

You
The guiding question, one more time.

MYTH VS. EVIDENCE

Ten popular assumptions, tested

“People are more conformist than ever.”

MOSTLY FALSE

Asch-type conformity fell in the U.S. after the 1950s and individualism has risen worldwide →. New, private forms of crowd pressure are harder to measure.

“Every generation thinks the next one is worse.”

TRUE

From Hesiod and Horace to surveys in 60+ countries, the feeling is constant, while people’s ratings of those around them have not fallen →.

“Nobody trusts anybody anymore.”

LARGELY TRUE

Trust in other people roughly halved since 1972; trust in Washington fell from 77% to 17% →.

“Young people are less independent.”

MIXED

Milestones come later and teens take fewer risks, but timing is not character, and costs and education changed too →.

“We are in a loneliness epidemic.”

CONTESTED

Time with friends fell sharply and time alone rose; measured loneliness rose more modestly →.

“Smartphones broke a generation.”

CONTESTED

The timing fits; causation is fiercely debated by serious researchers →.

“People used to be happier.”

ONLY RECENTLY TRUE

Happiness was remarkably flat for 46 years; the break came around 2018–2021 →.

“Nobody cares about community.”

MOSTLY FALSE

Membership is down, but turnout and informal helping are up →.

“Too much choice makes us miserable.”

WEAK EVIDENCE

Average choice-overload effect is close to zero →.

“Earlier generations had more purpose.”

UNKNOWN

There is no long-run measure of purpose. Purpose clearly matters for health →, but whether it has declined is untested.

THEN AND NOW

What changed, and what stayed the same

What really changed

- **Options exploded.** Longer lives, far more education, and the freedom to choose work, partners, beliefs and places.
- **The script disappeared.** Roles once inherited must now be chosen, which is liberating and demanding.
- **Trust fell.** In institutions and in strangers, steadily for 50 years and more sharply since 2018.
- **Time together shrank.** Especially for young people, and especially in person.
- **Adulthood stretched out.** Later marriage, longer education, more years in the family home.
- **Belief in personal control weakened** among young Americans from 1960 to 2002.
- **Reported happiness broke** from a half-century plateau, around 2018–2021.

What stayed constant

- **The need to belong.** It shapes conformity in every era, from the village to the feed.
- **Most people resist pressure most of the time.** Even in Asch's room, most answers were independent.
- **Relationships predict a good life.** From Aristotle to the Harvard Study.
- **Purpose matters,** for well-being and apparently for longevity.
- **Comfort tempts us to outsource thinking.** Kant described it in 1784.
- **Every generation fears the next is worse,** and remembers its own youth generously.

ANALYSIS

A balanced answer to the central question. People today have more capacity to live independent, purposeful lives than any generation before them. The evidence does not show that they have become broadly more conformist. It does show weaker trust, thinner social ties, a reduced sense of personal control, and recently, lower reported happiness. The modern risk is less that society forces a script on us, and more that, with no script, it is easy to drift, adapting to whatever is in front of us, which is the passive existence the philosophers feared.

CHECKPOINT 2

The question, one more time

Are you consciously building the life you want to live, or simply adapting to the life society has placed in front of you?

The same eight statements as the start. Rate them again and compare with your first answers.

In the last month, I made at least one important decision mostly on my own judgment, not because others expected it.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I could explain, in a sentence or two, what I am trying to do with my life right now.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

Most of my free time goes to things I chose on purpose, not things that just happened to be in front of me.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

When something goes wrong in my life, my first instinct is to ask what I can do about it.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I hold at least one opinion that most people around me do not share, and I can say why.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I have people I could call at 2 a.m., and I am that person for someone else.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

I regularly do something that is hard, slow, or unrewarded today because it matters to me later.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

If my phone, feeds and news apps disappeared for a week, I would still know what I value and what to do next.

Not me 1 2 3 4 5 Very me

Five questions the evidence suggests

1. **Name one choice you made because it was expected.** Would you make it again? (Mill)
2. **Pick one hard thing to do yourself this month.** Efficacy grows from mastery. (Bandura)
3. **Who are your 2 a.m. people?** Call one this week. (Harvard Study)
4. **Write your "why" in one sentence.** (Frankl, Nietzsche)
5. **Find one opinion you hold only because your feed does.** (Kierkegaard)

A note to yourself

What would building, rather than adapting, look like for you this year?

KEEP GOING

Further watching, reading and links

For anyone whose honest answer to "are you building your life?" was "right after one more video."

Watch

- Aristotle & Virtue Theory · CrashCourse
- John Locke · The School of Life
- John Stuart Mill: On Liberty · Academy of Ideas
- Søren Kierkegaard · The School of Life
- Nietzsche · The School of Life
- Why to Believe in Others · Viktor Frankl, 1972
- Erich Fromm interview, 1958 · The Mike Wallace Interview
- Inside the Psychologist's Studio: Albert Bandura · APS
- The Malaise of Modernity (1/5) · Charles Taylor
- Asch conformity experiment · archival
- Milgram experiment, 1963 · archival
- What makes a good life? · Robert Waldinger, TED
- The new era of positive psychology · Martin Seligman, TED
- Promoting motivation, health and excellence · Ed Deci, TEDx
- On polarization and unity · Robert Putnam, PBS NewsHour
- Health risks of loneliness · Surgeon General, PBS NewsHour
- iGen: the smartphone generation · Jean Twenge, TEDx

Read the originals

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
- Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"
- Mill, *On Liberty*
- Kierkegaard, "The Crowd is Untruth"
- Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*
- Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
- Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*
- Putnam & Garrett, *The Upswing*

Explore the data

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy ↗
- General Social Survey (NORC) ↗
- Gallup News ↗
- Pew Research Center ↗
- Harvard Study of Adult Development ↗
- Our World in Data ↗
- Center for Self-Determination Theory ↗
- World Happiness Report ↗
- Quote Investigator ↗

SOURCES

Sources, in order of first citation

Click any numbered chip in the text to see its source. Where a figure was computed for this piece from public microdata, the source entry says so.

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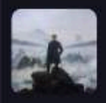

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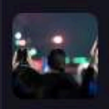

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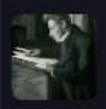

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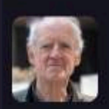

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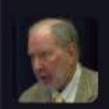

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