



We say we want a renewal of character in our day, but we don't really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels. This price is too high for us to pay (as a culture). We want character without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt and shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist on it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. *In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it.*<sup>5</sup>

What, then, can be said about this thing we call character? The most basic element of character is *moral discipline*.<sup>4</sup> Its most essential feature is the inner capacity for restraint—an ability to inhibit oneself in one's passions, desires, and habits within the boundaries of a moral order. Moral discipline, in many respects, is the capacity to say “no”; its function, to inhibit and constrain personal appetites on behalf of a greater good. This idea of a greater good points to a second element, *moral attachment*. Character, in short, is defined not just negatively but positively as well. It reflects the affirmation of our commitments to a larger community, the embrace of an ideal that attracts us, draws us, animates us, inspires us.<sup>5</sup> Affirmation and interdiction, the “yes” and the “no”—what Henri Bergson called the morality of aspiration and the morality of obligation—are merely two aspects of the same single reality. In the latter instance, it is an affirmation of commitments we have to the larger community. Finally, character implies the *moral autonomy* of the individual in his or her capacity to freely make ethical decisions. The reason, very simply, is that controlled behavior cannot be moral behavior for it removes the element of discretion and judgment. Thus, character enacts moral judgment and does so freely.

At one level, the passing of character in our day is a consequence of larger, impersonal forces of history within our particular society, in which any one individual is mostly a passive participant. The term “character,” as Warren Sussman has argued, achieved its greatest currency in America in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> It was frequently associated with words like “honor,” “reputation,” “integrity,” “manners,” “golden deeds,” “duty,” “citizenship,” and, not least, “manhood.” Character was always related to an explicitly moral standard of conduct, oriented toward work, building, expanding, achieving, and sacrifice on behalf of a larger good—all those “producer values” embraced within Max Weber’s famous phrase, “the Protestant ethic,”

At his trial before the Diet of Worms, in the presence of Charles, the Holy Roman Emperor, Martin Luther offered the same lesson:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without, horns and without, teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word, of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

Character, therefore, resists expedience; it defies hasty acquisition. This is undoubtedly why Søren Kierkegaard spoke of character as “engraved,” deeply etched, graven, “changeable rarely and least of all in extreme situations.” In this he was simply following the Greek etymology—“a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise formed.”<sup>14</sup> In ethical terms a person of good character would be steadfast in wisdom and dependable in commitment. The very idea of character in this historic sense ridicules the “ethical fitness seminar” or the “ten steps to character” now hustled by the merchants of direct-mail morality.<sup>15</sup>

In biblical cultures, character was defined in relation to God’s distinctive property, His holiness. The expectation was as clear as it was demanding: as God said to Moses, “You must be holy, for I am holy,”<sup>23</sup> This was not a matter of outward appearances but rather a holiness that penetrated to the core of one’s inner life.