

# Learningguild

(03) 9380 5892  
[learningguild@gmail.com](mailto:learningguild@gmail.com)  
 learningguild.org.au  
 ABN 90 664 094 378

23 Fallon Street  
 Brunswick  
 Victoria 3056

President: Dr John Howes OAM

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Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

This is an invitation to think about the theme we've taken for Second Term's Sunday Meetings, "**Character and Identity**", and, whether or not you propose to come to any of those meetings, to contribute in writing some responses of your own, at any time in May or June. They might be questions, or perhaps quotations, with comments. I propose to devote much of *Learningguild Letter* 1.2018 to numerous articles related to this theme, some of which could be developed from initial responses. It would be good to receive the articles by the end of July.

What was to have been the first meeting of the term, on April 15th, had to be cancelled because on the 8th I had contracted shingles, from which I am making a good recovery. The four remaining meetings are scheduled for May 6th and 20th and June 3rd and 17th, all of them here at 23 Fallon St. People are welcome to arrive from 2.30 on, and meetings run from 3 to 4.30, when we have afternoon tea.

I'll write here about three different relevant meanings of the noun 'character', then three of 'identity', and end by offering three links one might make between character and identity, given particular meanings of the words. I have recommended the much-praised book of David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (Random House 2015), and would gladly hear of proposals of particular chapters for discussion and/or written comment. I especially invite attention to his section "The Humility Code", in the last chapter, which I regard as certainly thought-provoking, but exaggerated in its emphasis on moral struggle and lacking precision.

Brooks's index gives p.263f (part of his code) at "Character: what it is". Crucial sentences are these from the seventh paragraph: "Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment." We should add, from the eighth paragraph, "The things we call character endure over the long term – courage, honesty, humility." In fact we call them, individually, **moral virtues**, and 'character' in Brooks's sense of the word (not, I think, a common one, other than in 'character-building') could perhaps be defined by 'possession of a set of moral virtues'. In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, it is not until the eleventh entry, the last, that we reach this use of the word, there defined as "Moral strength, esp. if highly developed or evident". But how is the adjective 'moral' to be explained?

There are two other uses of ‘character’ which the *SOED*, at 7, does not clearly distinguish in the definition “the distinctive mental or moral qualities of an individual, a people, etc.”, illustrated by a quotation from C.G.Seligman concerning a West African people: “In character the Tuareg are independent, brave, impulsive, and mendacious.” Here ‘moral qualities’ means the same as ‘qualities relevant to moral appraisal’, whether they deserve approval or not; and it is noteworthy that mental qualities, such as a passion for study, can also be included. This second use of the word is in itself neutral, so that a person may be said to have a conscientious or a depraved character, a vigorous or an inert one. The third adds to the second the qualities of being clear-cut, at least somewhat unusual, and self-developed. We can distinguish the two senses other than Brooks’s in Mill’s indictment of the conformist tendency of the England of his time: “Its ideal of character is to be without any marked character” (*Liberty* Ch. 3, para. 16), and with ‘marked character’ we may link the sentence in para. 5 “A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character.” Here we may note the value of the etymology of ‘character’, whether in Brooks’s use or Mill’s preferred one: the Greek word ‘*kharactēr*’ could mean an engraved image, and came from the verb ‘*kharassein*’, often ‘to engrave’. As we have noted, Brooks does use the verb ‘engrave’ in talking of character in his sense of the word, but without any implication of originality or extraordinariness; in the third sense, one might say, the accompanying adjective ‘marked’ is understandable but redundant.

Brooks puts in Sec. 6 of his Code what seems to me an inordinate emphasis on moral struggle: “Once the necessities for survival are satisfied, the struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama of life. ... This struggle against, say, selfishness or prejudice or insecurity gives meaning and shape to life. ... This struggle against sin is the great challenge, so that life is not futile or absurd.” I think of moral goodness mostly in terms of recognizing and seeking to make the most of obligations and opportunities to help others and to cooperate with them.

Along with whatever else may occur to readers concerning character in any of the three senses I have distinguished, I venture to invite them to think about (a) what is wrong with the use of ‘moral’ in the sentence in Sec. 1 of the Code “As John Stuart Mill puts it, people have a responsibility to become more moral over time” (I know of no such remark by Mill); (b) whether the adjective ‘moral’ is indispensable in explaining the word ‘character’, as well as how best to explain its use or uses; (c) whether it would be better to say “Self-centredness is the central vice” than “Pride is the central vice” (Sec. 5) ; (d) what they want to say about the opening remark of the Code “We don’t live for happiness, we live for holiness”; (e) how they are to respond to the sections on sin and on character in the chapter (3) on Eisenhower, the US General and President, and his parents; and of course (f) what has especially contributed (examples? ideals?) to the development of their own character, in any of the three senses of the term.

The noun ‘identity’ (from the Latin ‘*idem*’, ‘same’) can be used in three ways about persons. ‘We don’t yet know the identity of the burglar’ means no more than that we don’t yet know who he or she is or was. Though compatible with a good deal of memory loss, continuity of personal identity over the years, and what is often called the sense of it, means much to most of us. In the third use of the word, “What is my identity?” is like “What am I, fundamentally?”

or “How, fundamentally, am I to describe myself – to myself and perhaps to others?” We may wish to consider why we do or do not regard that as an important question. I hope that the next three paragraphs, in which I give some answers to it in my own case, will stimulate others to formulate and share their own answers to it.

One way in is to ask “To which groups or types do I fundamentally belong?”. Though I am an Australian citizen and resident and as such have obligations and opportunities, I am not “a dinkum Aussie”. I not only lived in England until I was 13½ and was shaped by my upbringing, schooling, reading, and the BBC Children’s Hour, but also, after about 8½ years at Melbourne High School and the University of Melbourne, had a further four years in England, two as a student at Oxford and two as a teacher at Loughborough Grammar School. Others may like to write about their response to the question with which this paragraph begins, to which I have so far given a mainly negative answer.

For many years I would join in Isaac Watts’s hymn that begins “I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath, And when my voice is lost in death, Praise shall employ my nobler powers”. Now I no longer sing it or hold the beliefs it expresses, though it and other hymns still persistently “run through my mind”, especially in early hours in times of anxiety. Has my identity changed, in sense 3 of the word? I don’t think so, because from young adulthood in my Christian and post-Christian and post-theist years I have sought to be an enquirer, asking what it is reasonable to believe. (Some might wish to consider here my editorial letters in *Learningguild Letter* 2.2013 and 2.2016.) But many people, including some of our members, would, I think, want to say concerning their religious affiliation or orientation that it is indeed fundamental to their identity. Professor Basil Mitchell, a friend and a lifelong Christian, with whom I led an Oxford graduate class in philosophy of religion in 1969, told me in about 1974 that he thought I had too little sense of belonging to a religious tradition.

It is fundamental to me that I am a husband and father, and grandfather and friend, with the delights, concerns and obligations, and, in my case, shortcomings, that pertain to these relationships; ‘roles’ is too weak a word. I have certainly not given here a complete answer to the question “What do I regard as my identity?” (Some hints for a further answer are in our words “Membership of Learningguild is open to everyone who wants to go learning and to help others learn”, and I’ll mention my editorial letters in *Lg L* 1.2008, 2.2014, and 1.2016.) But I have said enough already, I hope, to stimulate similar introspection in others.

What relation has character, or, we might more clearly say, goodness and strength of character, to identity in sense 3? If you have a firm but undogmatic grasp of the ideals of love, help, service and development that are typical of the kind of person that it belongs to your identity to want to be, that must make a great difference. Those concerns can be so engrossing and so satisfying that they are incompatible with anything that would weaken them, such as a preoccupation with entertainment or thrill-seeking, or a desire to get drunk or try “mind-altering” substances, or any fixation on the latest gossip or fashion, or supposition that what a person is “worth” is expressible in terms of his or her wealth, income or bonus.

“What kind of person do I fundamentally want to be?” That question, which requires patience and encouragement from parents or teachers or friends, and leaves room for non-conformist, counter-cultural answers that will themselves need amplification or revision, is not prominent in present-day upbringing (to use an unfashionable word) or education, which is seldom biographical enough to display a wide range of character in the second and open sense of that word. Plato’s *Gorgias* is the best example I know of a philosophical examination of different characters and consequent ways of living and their implications.

In spite of the variety of persons portrayed in Brooks’s biographical chapters, his Humility Code is too preoccupied with “successful moral struggle” (para. 1) and he has things the wrong way round when he writes the sentence I have already quoted from para. 6 “This struggle against sin is the great challenge, so that life is not futile or absurd”. A child, or a young man or woman, or an older one, may well need above all to find aspects of life that are far from futile or absurd, and so come to identify himself or herself with the endeavour to share in and enjoy them, and along those tracks, not always consciously, to develop a strong and virtuous character.

Whether or not they read and wish to comment on anything in Brooks (I should gladly send copies of his last ten pages, including the Humility Code), I again warmly invite responses from readers of this letter to our theme “Character and Identity”.

I am keenly aware of the fact that no issue of *Learningguild Letter* for the year 2017 has yet appeared. There are a range of causes, including factors related to physical and mental health, some change in domestic responsibilities, and the difficulty of a major concern, to respond adequately in a lengthy editorial letter to Martin Seligman’s positive psychology and the related flowering of Positive Education. I intend to devote much of May to others’ contributions already received or invited and to completing that editorial letter.

With best wishes to you all,

John Howes