

THE BIG IDEAS

Our Moral Exemplars

Meet the six leaders.

Moral Agency

vs. Moral determinism.

The Three Virtues

Truth + Humility + Faith.

Veritas

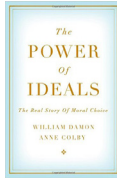
Shine the light of truth.

Humility

+ Its six defining qualities.

Moving Toward Faith

What's your ultimate concern?



The Power of Ideals

The Real Story of Moral Choice

BY WILLIAM DAMON & ANNE COLBY · OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS © 2015 · 240 PAGES

“This is a book about *moral commitment*—how it develops, why some people are able to sustain it in the face of pressure, and what it looks like when played out in large public arenas by world leaders. What is moral commitment? Although we don’t wish to begin this book with an effort as difficult and distracting as an attempt to define ‘moral,’ neither do we want to cloud our subject matter by ignoring the question entirely. We consider morality to be the vast realm of social actions, intentions, emotions, and judgments aimed at providing benefits (and preventing damage) to people, society, and the world beyond the self. It’s a multilayered system of prosocial acts, with ‘acts’ understood to mean mental and physiological as well as behavioral acts. Morality covers both the *means* and the *ends* of human activity—that is, not only *what* people aim to do but also *how* they go about doing it—and the finer the moral sense, the more likely that both means and ends will be morally driven.

As for the focus on moral *commitment*, this signifies our interest in sustained dedication to a moral cause (or causes) rather than single and isolated acts. Moral commitment can be as ordinary as a parent making sacrifices for the well-being of a child or a worker determined to conduct a job with integrity, responsibility, and a sense of public mission. It can be as heroic as a civic leader taking risky stands in favor of human rights or a charity worker undergoing years of personal privation in the service of the needy. Moral commitment can be inspired by a desire to serve God or other transcendent truths, or it can be directed toward strictly humanistic concerns. Whether ordinary or extraordinary, spiritual or mundane, moral commitment enables civilized societies to become havens of common decency for most of its members.”

~ William Damon & Anne Colby from *The Power of Ideals*

“Our ultimate hope with this book is that it will validate efforts to improve moral choice and encourage moral commitment.”

~ William Damon & Anne Colby

[William Damon](#) and [Anne Colby](#) are two of the world’s leading researchers in the field of moral psychology. They’re both Professors at Stanford and have been married for 30+ years. <— All of which is awesome.

This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book that challenges the “new science of morality”’s view that morality is essentially biologically and socially determined. Damon and Colby argue that we all have the power to cultivate our more noble, moral possibilities.

The book features “exemplar research”—six 20th century moral exemplars who show us what moral commitment looks like: Jane Addams, Nelson Mandela, Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eleanor Roosevelt. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I found the book *deeply* moving and inspiring. My copy is nearly entirely marked up. I’m excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas we can apply to our lives today so let’s jump in!

OUR MORAL EXEMPLARS

"I don't know who or what put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone-or Something-and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

~ Dag Hammarskjöld

"Jane Addams ushered in the twentieth century with her influential new ideas about democracy and her progressive zeal. Nelson Mandela drew its closing curtains with his powerful insistence on justice and his great-hearted spirit of forgiveness. In the years between these two, other moral leaders fought against the powerful tyrannies that had captured much of the world, campaigned for world peace and social justice, worked to alleviate poverty and promote public health, and built institutions that advanced all of these moral causes. Adding to our examinations of Jane Addams and Nelson Mandela, we selected four midtwentieth century leaders to represent a variety of influential moral approaches to major societal problems."

Let's take a quick look at the six moral exemplars profiled in the book.

Jane Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She created Hull House, was involved in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People + the American Civil Liberties Union and advocated for (and helped establish) *"voting rights for women, safe building codes, high standards of public health... and laws eliminating child-labor."*

Nelson Mandela also won the Nobel Peace Prize. He was the first black president of South Africa who spent TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS in prison (from 43 to 70) and, astonishingly, used that decades-long stretch of time to *"educate himself and other inmates, sharpen his capacities as a moral and political leader, and work successfully toward the overthrow of the apartheid regime."*

Dag Hammarskjöld was the second secretary-general of the United Nations and was the catalyzing force behind the organization in its formative years, creating the structure that allowed the UN to pursue the goals articulated in the charter: *"creating a firmer foundation of international order and promoting peace, freedom, equality and justice among nations."* He died in a plane crash while trying to negotiate a ceasefire among warring factions in the Congo and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously. JFK called him *"the greatest statesman of the century."*

Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the leading Jewish theologians of the twentieth century who escaped Poland just six weeks before Nazi Germany invaded his country. *"He was constantly seeing how things could and should be different and calling people to account. As his daughter Susanna Heschel noted, 'Sometimes organizations mistakenly thought they were inviting a gentle, meek rabbi to speak to them and then heard a powerful and charismatic challenge to their complacency.'"*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young, charismatic Lutheran pastor in pre-World War II Germany. He escaped as Hitler rose to power and then RETURNED to play a leading role in opposing Hitler. *"He was horrified to see both Protestant and Catholic Churches in Germany capitulate and become complicit in Hitler's plans."* He created a coalition of churches opposed to the regime and was executed for his involvement in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. *"People from both faith and secular traditions today hold Bonhoeffer as a model for conscientious moral choices in trying times."*

Eleanor Roosevelt *"may best be known as the wife of a U.S. President but in her own right she was one of the most consequential public figures of the twentieth century."* *"Her crowning achievement was the crafting and ultimate passage of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights."* Harry Truman called her the *"First Lady of the world."*

Damon and Colby use these six moral exemplars as case studies to demonstrate the three core virtues of moral commitment: Truthfulness + Humility + Faith.

But, before we jump into those virtues, let's take a quick look at the shortcomings of the "new science of morality."

"We are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life. We determine our ideals by our daily actions and decisions."

~ Jane Addams

MORAL DETERMINISM VS. MORAL AGENCY

"Although we recognize the role that gut responses can play, we reject extreme positions of biological determinism that characterize the entire human moral sense as driven by nonconscious responses."

~ William Damon & Anne Colby

"This account applies not only to people who are shining examples of moral virtue and leadership like those we profile in this book, but also to the full range of humanity. Ordinary people, too, make sacrifices and show similarly admirable qualities, even if in less dramatic and celebrated ways. Ordinary people love and care for others, both within their own families and beyond; they dedicate themselves to their work and aim to do it in ways that are socially responsible; they help people in need, often without expecting recognition or reward. Some risk their lives to rescue strangers. This kind of vital moral commitment, which uplifts the lives of ordinary as well as extraordinary people, can't be explained by a science that reduces morality to biological impulses, situational pressures, or economic self-interest. All these forces may come into play, but in the end, a moral life is guided by the nature and power of a person's ideals."

Damon and Colby spend a good part of the introduction to the book rejecting the reductionistic thinking of the "new science of morality."

In (very) short, the "new science of morality" takes a deterministic view—suggesting that our moral compass is determined by our biology and social conditioning. We're born with certain tendencies and are conditioned to have the rest.

Of course, biology and conditioning play a role in morality.

AND...

Ultimately, we have "agency"—the ability to make rational, individual choices about the types of lives we are going to live and the moral virtues we will deliberately cultivate in our lives.

The deterministic view has become increasingly more popular. This deeply concerns Damon and Colby and is one of the primary reasons they wrote the book.

They say: *"In a recent incisive treatment of these matters, the psychologist John Gibbs has written that the new science of morality is marred by a negative skew that is not only unwarranted but also defeatist and deleterious. A balanced and complete portrait of moral possibility, one that 'encourages us to be and do better,' requires an account of moral goodness as well as moral mediocrity."*

The "new science" research shows us what moral mediocrity looks like. This book is all about that better view of moral possibility and definitely encourages us to be and do better. With that, let's look at the big three virtues covered in the book!

TRUTH + HUMILITY + FAITH

"In the aspirational view of morality explicated in our studies of inspiring and admirable people, we may appear to be neglecting the real limitations in their behavior and in the moral behavior of most ordinary people, not to mention those who do real evil in the world. But in saying that inner truthfulness, humility, and faith facilitate positive moral growth, we also wish to indicate that the absence of these virtues severely limits this potential for development. When people fail to look honestly at themselves, when they are arrogant, dogmatic, and closed-minded, when they are unwilling to consider the critical feedback of others, they will be unlikely to continue learning and evolving morally over time. Beyond the lack of inner truthfulness, a thorough-going cynicism that prevents some people from finding anything to believe in or commit to also limits their capacity to reach their full moral potential. In the following chapters, we explore the developmental answer to these potentially limiting qualities, the three virtues of truth, humility, and faith."

Truth. Humility. Faith. These are the three virtues Damon and Colby believe are the most important if we are committed to reaching our moral potential.

"In judging our progress as individuals, we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one's social position, influence, and popularity, wealth and standard of education. ... But internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one's development as a human being. Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others—qualities which are within easy reach of every soul—are the foundations of one's spiritual life."

~ Nelson Mandela

Truth relates to not just speaking the truth but being willing to have an “inner-truthfulness.” It’s IMPOSSIBLE to grow morally if we aren’t willing to be honest about where we are falling short. That’s inner-truthfulness. Truth involves 6 themes we’ll touch on in a moment.

Humility is a willingness to see our roles in the bigger picture such that we are not primarily concerned with self-aggrandizement or self-importance. (We’ll talk more about this in the context of being a moral exemplar rather than a fanatic.)

Faith involves a commitment to something bigger than ourselves that guides our actions. It sustains us in the long struggle that is at the heart of true moral commitment and, for it to be a positive force for good rather than evil, it must be combined with truth and humility.

Truth. Humility. Faith. Each of those virtues has its own chapter. Let’s explore more.

SHINING THE LIGHT OF VERITAS

“When individuals are described as persons of integrity, this generally means that moral values and goals are central to who they are and, at least as important, it means that they don’t often rationalize their violations of those values in order to let themselves off the hook. The avoidance of rationalization (which we call inner truthfulness) is widely recognized as a central feature of strong moral character.”

~ William Damon & Anne Colby

“Traditionally, honesty has had a secure place in the pantheon of moral virtues. To the ancient Romans, who believed that the illuminating sunshine of truthfulness engendered honorable behavior of every kind, the goddess Veritas (Latin for truth) was considered ‘the mother of virtue.’ The Romans had lots of company in this view. Confucius considered honesty to be the primary source of love, communication, and fairness in human relationships. In the Western tradition, the Bible prohibits bearing false witness as one of its Ten Commandments. In the United States, the two most heralded presidents (George Washington, who ‘could not tell a lie,’ and Abraham Lincoln, known as Honest Abe) were widely known for their truth telling. The world’s literature is so packed with tributes to honesty that literally thousands of immortal quotations on the matter can be gathered by a quick online search.

These public celebrations of honesty stem from a universal recognition: A basic assumption that most people can usually be taken at their word is required for all sustained civilized dealings. No civilization could tolerate for long a general expectation of untrustworthy communications. Human relations require the trust that people will, as a rule, try to tell the truth. This provides both a practical and a moral demand for truth telling.”

That passage is presented in the context of how our current culture does not cherish the truth as much as it could and should.

Veritas. We must shine the light of truth on our lives if we want to live honorably.

Here are the six aspects of truth we want to think about (each of these themes is highlighted via the lives of our six moral exemplars):

- 1. Inner-Truthfulness.** As discussed above, truth starts with an “inner”-truthfulness. We can’t lie to ourselves if we hope to grow morally. Begs the question: How are you doing this and what do you need to be honest about?
- 2. Discernment.** You can’t live in integrity with your deepest values if you don’t know what they are. So, we must have discernment. We must take the time to turn off the internet and plug in to the “innernet”—seeking clarity on what truly matters to us.
- 3. Resolve.** After gaining clarity, we must have the resolve to LIVE in integrity with those truths. We use “micro-occasions” to strengthen our resolve such that we have the moral fortitude for the challenging times. Note: This resolve “*is the defining feature of extraordinary moral commitment.*” We must be moral when it matters most. (Are you?)
- 4. Truth As a Public Obligation.** In addition to an inner truthfulness, our moral exemplars were committed to public truthfulness in their own lives and in the institutions they served. They “*eschew tradeoffs between effectiveness and honesty. They understand truth to be essential to the long-term advancement of their goals.*”

5. **Open-mindedness.** If you want to avoid being a fanatic, make sure you maintain open-mindedness. Moral exemplars remain open-minded to many different perspectives. They hold deep certainty in their convictions WITH deep open-mindedness and a desire to consider other perspectives to craft an even deeper wisdom. (Fanatics, on the other hand, are certain they're 100% right and everyone else is 100% wrong. Not helpful.)
6. **The Evolving Nature of Truth.** Moral exemplars didn't believe they had the one, absolute, abiding truth on the matter. Rather, *"they understood that searching for the truth is an ongoing, evolving process that never ends."*

How is your commitment to Truth? Take a quick (or longer) inventory on how you're doing with each of those themes. Let's shine the light of veritas as we optimize + actualize.

P.S. Longer philosophical chat, but, of course, there are times when the higher good is served by *not* telling the truth—but these (obviously) should be the exception rather than the rule.

HUMILITY & IT'S SIX DEFINING QUALITIES

"The virtue of humility lies at the heart of all major world religions. The recognition of the limited, transitory, and ultimately powerless nature of human activity in relation to God (or some other transcendent reality) is one of the core messages shared by spiritual teachings.

The Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament both contain a multitude of references to humility—such as 'Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow' and 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' Hindu scripture (the *Bhagavad Gita*) urges its followers to 'Be humble, be harmless. Have no pretension . . . Serve your teacher in true obedience'; Hindu teacher Ramana Maharshi tells his followers to 'Take no notice of the ego and its activities, but see only the light behind.' The Sioux tradition depicts spiritual seekers humbling themselves and remembering their nothingness in the presence of the Great Spirit. Muslims often acknowledge their place in the order of things by attaching 'Insha'Allah' (if god is willing) to their intentions and predictions. The Dalai Lama expresses a core idea of Buddhism in this way: 'The common enemy of all religious disciplines is selfishness of mind—for it is this which causes ignorance, anger and passion, which are at the root of all the troubles of the world.'"

Humility. Our second virtue. There are six defining qualities of humility. Here they are:

1. **Humility As Moral Ideal.** Our moral exemplars were not primarily self-seeking. The fame they achieved was instrumental to their broader goals—fuel for their mission rather than the focus. They modeled humility.
2. **Humility As a Sense of Perspective on the Self.** Our leaders saw the bigger picture and laughed at their shortcomings. Heschel said: *"It's always important to look at things from horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation."*
3. **Humility As Human Solidarity.** Although popular and powerful, our moral leaders were deeply connected to and respectful of everyone—regardless of social class or power.
4. **Humility As Material Simplicity.** Our leaders had opportunities to bask in opulence but often refused to accept special privileges. For example, Mandela chose to live in his own modest home rather than one of two Presidential mansions.
5. **Humility As Awareness of One's Limitations.** They deliberately practiced checking their egos and asking for frank feedback on how they can serve more effectively.
6. **Humility As Open-mindedness.** Aware of their limitations, our leaders had a *"striking juxtaposition of humility and conviction."*

P.S. C.S. Lewis brilliantly captures the spirit of humility: *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less."*

"Benjamin Franklin wrote, 'In reality, there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, it is still alive... For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility.'"

~ William Damon & Anne Colby

"This is a central thread of world wisdom throughout the ages. Fulfillment and peace of mind come not from trying to create the most attractive possible self but from taking the focus off the self: not thinking less of oneself, but thinking of oneself less."

~ William Damon & Anne Colby

"I have no illusions that anyone can change the world in a short time... Yet I do believe that even a few people, who want to understand, to help and to do the right thing for great numbers of people instead of for the few can help."

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

MOVING TOWARD FAITH (WHAT'S YOUR ULTIMATE CONCERN?)

"Noted psychiatrist and author George Vaillant recently wrote that the absence of faith is nihilism, not atheism. Faith means believing in something. Without faith of *some kind*, it isn't possible to have a sense of meaning, direction, or purpose in life. Without faith, it wouldn't make sense to expect (or keep) commitments. Some say that, without faith, even science is impossible since science depends on a basic faith that 'things lie together in a harmony which excludes mere arbitrariness.'

... we described humility as a habit of placing one's central focus outside the self, a mitigation of ego and self-absorption. If the self is not the best place to put one's central focus, where does that focus belong? In trying to answer this question for themselves, individuals need to discern what they believe is most important during their deepest, wisest, most thoughtful moments. If they succeed, they are moving toward faith."

Faith. It's the third of our three virtues.

We're not (necessarily) talking about faith in one particular religion—although that was a key aspect of each of our moral exemplars. Rather, we're talking about a faith in what we find most important during our *"deepest, wisest, most thoughtful moments."*

What **really** matters to us. Our ULTIMATE CONCERN.

What is that for you?

Here's to living with integrity to that ideal as we strive to cultivate Truth + Humility + Faith in service to a noble purpose worthy of us,

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[Noble Purpose](#)

[The Road to Character](#)

[Primary Greatness](#)

[Flourish](#)

[Motivation and Personality](#)

[Ego Is the Enemy](#)

[Mindset](#)

[Self-theories](#)

About the Author of "The Power of Ideals"

WILLIAM DAMON & ANNE COLBY



William Damon is Professor of Education at Stanford University and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace. He is an author of eighteen books, including *Greater Expectations*, which won the Parents' Choice Book Award. Damon's research has been covered in many national publications, including the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Connect: williamdamon.com.



Anne Colby is Consulting Professor at Stanford University. Previously, she was Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and director of the Murray Research Center at Harvard University.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.