

*The Character Gap: How Good Are We?*, by Christian B. Miller. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 276. \$21.95 (hardcover).

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Recent decades have seen important, even groundbreaking, work by philosophers and psychologists on moral character. In *The Character Gap*, Christian B. Miller draws on some of the most interesting of this work (including his own) to craft an accessible and fascinating presentation for non-academic readers. But Miller's book is not merely a summary of the research on offer. It is a lucid and crisply written argument defending three claims: (1) that we ought to be good people, (2) that most of us are neither virtuous nor vicious and so are not yet good people, and (3) that there are strategies we can employ to become good people. In short, and in the words of his title, we should bridge the gap between the character that we have and the character that we ought to have.

Section I of the book defends the claim that we ought to become good people. To be a good person is, on Miller's view, to have the virtues and to lack the vices. And a virtue is a character trait that (1) leads to good actions that are appropriate to the particular situation, (2) leads to actions performed in a variety of different situations relevant to the particular virtue, (3) leads to actions that are done for the appropriate reasons or motives, and (4) leads to a pattern of motivation and action that is stable and reliable over time. A vice is a character trait with the very same features, with the crucial difference that it is oriented in a morally negative direction; it thus leads to a stable pattern of bad actions done from negative motivations.

So why should we want to possess the virtues and lack the vices? Miller suggests four reasons. First, virtuous lives are admirable and inspiring; when we consider the life of a Holocaust rescuer such as Leopold Socha, for example, we are inspired to want to become more like him. Second, insofar as the virtues lead to good actions, they make the world a better place. And who doesn't want to live in a better, rather than a worse, world? Third, if you believe in God, you should want to become good insofar as God wants you to become good. And finally, even though a truly virtuous person doesn't perform good actions in order to experience positive emotions such as joy and avoid negative emotions such as guilt, experiencing such positive emotions and avoiding such negative emotions is often the by-product of a virtuous character. And who doesn't want more joy and less guilt?

Alas, if what Miller argues in Section II is correct, most of us are not yet good people. Miller builds his case for this second claim by devoting a chapter each to recounting the fascinating empirical work done by



psychologists in four areas of moral life: helping, harming, lying, and cheating. What this empirical evidence shows, according to Miller, is that most people are neither virtuous nor vicious. They are not virtuous insofar as they do not reliably help others when they ought, even when the cost is low. Nor do they refrain from harming, lying, and cheating others when they ought, even when the goods to be gained are trivial and the cost of refraining not dire. But neither are they vicious: most of us are capable of helping others, for example, on the basis of altruistic reasons, especially when our sense of empathy is activated. Vicious people would not be moved by such considerations. And even though most of us are surprisingly willing to harm others, we do so only reluctantly. Vicious people would harm others with pleasure.

So, if Miller is right, we all have strong reasons to be good and yet most of us fail to be so. But Miller does not end on a sour note by simply diagnosing our current predicament; rather, in Section III, he aims to soften the blow by describing various strategies for improving our character. Among others, he recommends emulating moral role models, carefully selecting the kinds of situations in which we place ourselves, and getting the word out about the surprising way seemingly irrelevant features of our environments might derail our attempts to behave rightly and improve our character. Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be his final chapter, in which he considers particularly Christian strategies for character improvement. Rituals such as prayer and tithing, the pursuit of moral ideals within community, and depending on the workings of the Holy Spirit are all recommended.

Some of Miller's suggestions for character improvement are of a piece with what has long been recognized: the suggestion to carefully select one's situations so as to avoid behaving badly will sound familiar to those raised to avoid the near occasions of sin, for example. But others are more novel: it is only once we know what the bystander effect is that we can mindfully try to counteract its deleterious effects. Miller does not claim that any of these strategies are foolproof, and he finds some more likely to be helpful than others. He holds out hope for more insight into such strategies as philosophical and psychological work on character continues. But, nonetheless, he ends on the optimistic note that we not only ought, but also can, become better people than we now are.

This is a beautifully written book, and it will surely accomplish its goals of introducing the general reader to a surprising, important, and growing field of research. Of course, and especially given the constraints of writing with such an audience in mind, it raises as many questions as it answers. Let me briefly discuss three that it raised for me.

The first concerns Miller's claim that most of us lack virtue and, in particular, his claim that most of us lack the virtue of compassion. His defense of this claim appeals to the many studies showing that we will often fail to help others, even if the cost is trivial. But, as Miller recognizes, the virtue of compassion does not require us to help everyone in every

circumstance. Such an aim would be excessively burdensome and, in any event, impossible to fulfill. Moreover, Miller accepts a threshold conception of virtue, according to which one can be, for instance, compassionate full-stop without being perfectly compassionate. Given these two facts, one might wonder why Miller is so confident that the empirical evidence shows that most people lack compassion rather than showing that most people are imperfectly compassionate. Of course, a lot turns on where the threshold for imperfect compassion lies and this is not a question to which Miller devotes much attention. But it is at least arguable that the kind of trivial failures to help demonstrated in many of the relevant studies do not disqualify one from reaching the threshold of imperfect compassion.

Miller considers a somewhat related objection—that trivial failures to help do not disqualify us from the possession of virtue—and offers two responses. His first response is to insist that paradigm cases of compassionate people, such as Mother Teresa, would help even in trivial cases. That might well be true. But I don't think it is relevant to my version of the objection. If virtue is a threshold concept, the fact that paradigms of compassion will help even in trivial cases is compatible with imperfectly virtuous people failing to meet that high standard.

Miller's second response is more promising: that studies of the so-called bystander effect show that many of us will not help even in serious cases if surrounded by a crowd of people who are also not helping. And failures to help in serious cases are arguably more virtue-undermining than failures to help in trivial ones. But even here, there is a problem. The studies of the bystander effect cited by Miller are one-off studies. What they show is that many people fail to exhibit compassion in certain serious circumstances. But they don't show that such people continually, or regularly, fail to show compassion in serious circumstances. Iterated empirical studies would be necessary to show that. But given a threshold conception of virtue, one or two failures in compassion, even if they are relatively serious, are plausibly compatible with the possession of imperfect compassion. So we would need to know more about how often such bystander effects are operative in the lives of real people to know if they lead to enough bad behavior to disqualify someone from possessing (imperfect) compassion. But the psychological studies on offer do not yet meet this evidential bar.

In fairness, Miller himself often notes that the study of character is still in its infancy, and we should be carrying out more and better research on it. That is certainly correct. Moreover, suppose I am right that more of us may be (imperfectly) virtuous than Miller allows. One might then argue quite plausibly that anyone who is imperfectly virtuous ought to aim at becoming more virtuous than they currently are, and hence Miller's strategies for cultivating the virtues would still be relevant. Of course, the moral importance or urgency of employing these strategies might seem less if we were already (imperfectly) virtuous. But in any event, the existence of a somewhat larger class of imperfectly virtuous people need not fatally undermine Miller's call for most of us to improve our character.

A second question I had for Miller concerns his argument for the claim that most of us lack the vice of cruelty. It may well be true that most of us lack that vice, but I am not sure it is true for the reasons Miller thinks. The Milgram Experiment famously showed that ordinary people are disturbingly willing to seriously injure an innocent person simply because an authority figure asks them to. Miller thinks the Milgram experiments are evidence that most of us lack virtue. But Miller denies that the Milgram Experiments are evidence that most of us are cruelly vicious. In the first place, most of those who were willing to injure an innocent person did so reluctantly, and experienced pain while doing so. Moreover, when the experiment was varied so as to allow them to determine how much harm to do to others, most happily took the chance to do a minimal, rather than maximal, amount of harm. Miller concludes that most of us are therefore not viciously cruel.

Even setting aside concerns about whether one-off experiments can license conclusions about character, I had worries about the moral claims underlying Miller's analysis of these kinds of cases. Consider a non-laboratory kind of case. Here's one thing that sometimes happens in families: one spouse is a very bad parent indeed, bullying and perhaps even abusing his or her children. The other spouse is fully aware of this behavior, finds it painful to observe and, were their spouse to stop bullying the children, would find it a relief. But nonetheless, they do nothing to stop it and, when pressed, make excuses for it. They are, in short, enablers of their spouse's bullying behavior. In evaluating such a case, it seems obvious that the bullying spouse is vicious. And it is at least plausible that the bullying spouse is worse than the enabling spouse. But what shall we say about the enabling spouse? My own view is that, at least in certain cases, the enabling spouse is *also* vicious, even if less vicious than the bullying spouse. While the mere toleration of the bullying might be less bad than actively desiring the bullying, it could still be bad enough to rise to the level of vice.

But why, then, aren't the reluctant Milgram experimenters vicious (or at least behaving viciously in this instance)? Like the enabling spouse, they would rather that harm didn't occur and are pained to see it occur. But also like the enabling spouse, they are perfectly willing to let the harm go on (indeed, they are causing the harm!) and make excuses for its continuation. True, they would be even more vicious (or at least behaving even more viciously in this instance) if they heartily endorsed their harming behavior and sought out opportunities to increase it. But that doesn't show they are not at all vicious when they "merely" participate in it at someone else's direction.

Finally, let me raise a question concerning Miller's claim that we can do something to improve our characters. Miller is rightly cautious in his suggestions here; given the paucity of long-term studies of character development, he offers no guarantee that these strategies will work. But even so, I did not quite understand why he was so optimistic about some of them.

Consider, in particular, his suggestion that we might select our situations in order to improve our character. Here, he approvingly cites John Doris's famous example of being invited to a secluded dinner party with a flirtatious colleague while one's spouse is away. Obviously, going to the dinner and trusting your virtue to rescue you from cheating is not the smart thing to do; the smart thing is to decline the invitation (*Lack of Character* [Cambridge University Press, 2002], 147). Miller agrees. And, of course, so should we. Avoiding the dinner may well help us avoid acting badly.

But Miller is making the further claim—a claim for which Doris himself was not arguing—that avoiding the dinner may also help us to become better people. And it is not obvious to me how that is supposed to work. The alcoholic who avoids bars is surely wise; he is almost just as surely still an alcoholic. Merely avoiding the “near occasion of sin” hasn't cured him of the desire to drink alcohol. Likewise, the partnered person who avoids candlelit dinners with colleagues is surely wise; but she is not thereby made a more virtuous person—at least not if virtue is a disposition of the heart, as Miller thinks that it is. Perhaps the hope is that simply avoiding adultery eventually makes it less attractive. But it isn't as if avoiding forbidden fruit always makes the fruit less attractive. Quite to the contrary. So I think we need to hear more about how this strategy would work.

Of course, none of the three questions I have raised are intended as decisive objections to Miller's project; they are instead invitations to further elaboration. It is a mark of a good book to raise more questions than it can itself answer. And this is a very good book indeed. A final note on audience: while this book is not written for professional philosophers or psychologists, it would nonetheless be appropriate for use in certain academic contexts. My own university, for example, has recently begun offering interdisciplinary seminars to first year students with the aim of exemplifying how the methodologies typical of empirical science and ethical thought, for example, can fruitfully interact. *The Character Gap* could serve as an ideal text for such a course.

*God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*, by Mark C. Murphy. Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 224. \$70.00 (hardcover).

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In *God's Own Ethics*, Mark Murphy argues that traditional formulations of the problem of evil rely on unwarranted presumptions about the ethics of the God whose existence they purport to disprove. The argument has two

