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Review of *The Character Gap* by
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The Character Gap: How Good Are We? by Christian B. Miller Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 276 pp RRP: £14.99 Hardback, ISBN: 9780190264222

As the psychologist Steven Pinker states, 'morality is not just any old topic in psychology but close to our conception of the meaning of life' (Pinker, 2008). In an attempt to understand our lives, we question them in moral terms. What types of beings are we really? Are we good or bad; virtuous or vicious? In the midst of so much vice, is it still possible to think of human nature as capable of virtue? Christian B. Miller's excellent book, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?*, written for a general readership, provides us with an interesting and persuasive viewpoint from which to answer these perennial human questions.

The central claim of the book is that our intuitions concerning our character are mistaken. Most of us tend to think of ourselves as reasonably virtuous people; we may not be saints, but we are honest, kind and trustworthy (x). According to Miller, this self-concept is not justified by evidence from psychology. In fact, 'the results of hundreds of studies' (ibid.) tell us that our character is 'decidedly a mixed bag' (xi). We have, in tandem, the capacity to do great good and the potential to do tremendous evil.

The book follows a tripartite structure. Part one introduces the concepts used in the book (character, virtue, vice, etc) and explains why they are important. Part two analyses what we know about character and virtue, using psychological studies and research. In particular, this section examines helping, harming, lying and cheating (and thus the virtues of compassion and honesty, and the vices of selfishness, cruelty and dishonesty). Social scientific evidence is used to support Miller's claims about our 'piecemeal character', which varies much from situation to situation (157). As such then, the 'character gap' mentioned in the book's title alludes to the difference between the sort of character we believe we have or at least ought to have and the type of character most people in fact possess (revealed to us through psychology). Finally, in section 3, Miller discusses strategies we could use to help us bridge this gap and improve upon our character.

In my opinion, one of the clear strengths of this book is that it is written in such a way as to appeal to a very wide audience. Academics from different disciplines, as well as intellectually minded lay readers, are likely to be interested in this book. Philosophers will find the discussion of virtue engaging, while psychologists will find the way in which the empirical evidence is used worthy of note. Moreover, those interested in character education will have much to heed. The book is written in such a way as to be accessible to so-called 'non-experts'. If one is interested in facilitating character improvement in oneself or others, then the discussion of 'role modelling', 'selecting situations' and 'getting the word out' (195-218) as promising strategies for bridging the character gap, may be a good place to start. Such strategies could be helpful to parents, educators and self-improvers alike. Appealing to such a wide audience, while not compromising on substance, is no mean feat. The book is clear and accessible, while also offering original content worthy of scrutiny.

Although the book does not sacrifice substance for style, the reader is sometimes left with the feeling that the author could have said more to unpack and substantiate his claims. For the remainder of this review, I will describe one area that seems to me worthy of clarification. Clearly, much depends on how the author defines virtue; thus I will begin my exposition of his arguments by examining what virtue means to Miller.

The author is interested in moral character traits, or moral virtues and vices. For the author, the central features of these virtues are that they lead to appropriate and good actions, done for appropriate reasons or motives. Importantly, having a virtue leads to a pattern of motivation and action that is stable and reliable over time (14). As such then, a compassionate person will be reliably altruistic in action and motivation (76); they will show a pattern of helping for the right reasons.

According to Miller, most people are not virtuous (169). Most of us do not have characters good enough to qualify as honest, compassionate, etc. Miller can be applauded for going to great effort to support this claim with a wide range of evidence from psychology. For example, when discussing 'helping', Miller uses experiments to show that, in comparison to a control group, significantly more people help others if they wish to avoid feeling embarrassed or assuage their guilt. Miller takes the low numbers of people who would help in the absence of these emotions, and the 'unflattering' pattern of motivation that is implied (75), to show that most people do not have the virtue of compassion (77). In a similar vein, the author uses empathy research to illustrate that many people exhibit reliable patterns of helping in many situations (77). This observation is taken to imply that most people do not have the vices of selfishness, indifference and apathy (78). A similar structure of argumentation emerges throughout the book. Evidence from psychology is examined and used to show that while most people are not virtuous; neither can we say they are vicious. I find Miller's use of psychology in this way engaging and appealing. Nonetheless, at certain junctures in the book, there is ambiguity about the exact nature of the contention the evidence supports, and how this works.

Staying with the example of helping; as seen above, the main thrust of Miller's argument seems to be that the evidence shows most people do not have the virtue of compassion, and most people do not have the vice of selfishness (call this the 'not virtue and not vice' claim). The studies used by the author to support the idea that most people do not have particular virtues are different from those the author uses to show that most people do not have particular vices. That is, the groups observed during the experiment on the virtue are not the same groups observed during the experiment on the vice; in fact often the experiments are run by different scientists and seem to have different methodologies. I believe this could prove a problem for the author; or, at least show more clarification is needed. I believe he can say that the evidence supports the 'not virtue and not vice' claim. The 'not virtue and not vice' claim is a different claim than 'most people are neither virtuous nor vicious' (call this the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim). To show that most people are neither virtuous nor vicious, the experiment would have to track the same people in different situations and show that most of the cohort lacked virtue in some situation but also lacked vice in another.

The author acknowledges a similar problem in a different context. Given Miller's view that to have a virtue is to be reliably virtuous in motivation and action over time, the experiments cannot really show that individuals are, in fact, virtuous. As Miller states, to show this we would need longitudinal studies, which 'follow the same people around in many different moral situations in their lives and see what they end up doing' (77). Such studies are almost non-existent in psychology as they are expensive and ethically ambiguous (ibid.). As such, Miller is careful to caveat his approach by stating that there may well be 'a fortunate few' (ibid) who have a virtuous character. Presumably, these fortunate few would be in the minority of all the studies cited by Miller and exemplify virtuous behaviour and motivation reliably.

Coming back to my contention that the 'not virtue and not vice' claim is different to the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim; Miller does not caveat his argument here. In fact, in relation to the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim, Miller takes the research to support the idea that 'for most of us, we will behave admirably in some situations and then turn around and behave deplorably in other situations' (146). Can we imply this from the contention (supported by evidence) that 'most people are not virtuous and most people are not vicious' (the 'not virtue and not vice' claim)? To answer this, let us imagine an experiment wherein 100 people are tested to see if they show 'helping' behaviour and motivation. It is found that only 35 of these 100 show this, so it is concluded that only these 35 might have the virtue of compassion (and thus 'most people do not'). Another experiment is conducted with these same 100 people, wherein the virtue of compassion is observed amongst 65 participants, as opposed to the vice of selfishness. Here only 35 people do not act compassionately, and as such might have the vice of selfishness (and thus 'most people do not'). At this point in the experiment, the data would seem to support the 'not virtue and not vice' claim. As such, taken

together, these experiments show that most people are not virtuous and most people are not vicious. To show that a (hypothetical) experiment might provide data that supports the 'not virtue and not vice' claim, while failing to support the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim, pretend that, of the 65 that act compassionately in the second experiment, 35 also acted compassionately in our first experiment. That means that only 30 people acted compassionately in one experiment and failed to act compassionately in another experiment. Thus, we cannot infer from this that most people are neither virtuous nor vicious and the data does not support the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim. In fact, not only are longitudinal studies needed to support the idea that people are capable of being virtuous (exemplify virtuous behaviour and motivation reliably), they are also needed to support the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim (and the idea that most people have piecemeal characters).

At various points in the book, Miller takes it that the evidence he has presented supports that view that most people are neither virtuous nor vicious. Miller uses terms like 'highly fragmented' (154), 'piecemeal' (157) and 'mixed' (160) to describe our character. He uses the hypothetical construct of Frank throughout the book, as a typical person, or 'one of us' (163). Frank has participated in all the studies presented in the book (hypothetically). Unsurprisingly, given Miller's piecemeal character hypothesis, Frank's character is 'all over the map' (159); he presents as compassionate sometimes, but not others, etc. Nonetheless, Miller's conclusions about Frank's character are ambiguous. Frank's character may be unstable, but it would seem it is predictably unstable. Frank is likely to be virtuous in situations similar to those he has shown virtue in the past. If we come to understand his character, we can predict his behaviour (virtuous or vicious). As Miller states, 'once someone understands *my* character well, he can predict when my good moments will be. Past results are a reliable guide to future success and failure – at least when it comes to our characters' (163). Perhaps clarifying how Frank's character is fragmented, but his behaviour can be predicted would help the reader comprehend what underlies the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim. Moreover, perhaps clarification here would help the reader understand the relationship between the 'not virtue and not vice' claim and the 'neither virtue nor vice' claim.

As it stands, it is not clear to me how 'typical' Frank really is. I do not think the evidence Miller presents straightforwardly shows that most of us have unstable characters. Moreover, it is not obvious that this instability could be predictable. I think these concerns are answerable. I realise that much of my concern emerges from the lack of longitudinal studies, and I accept Miller's explanation that such studies are not forthcoming. I also accept that the lack of such studies should not hold us back from theorizing about character, and in particular using psychology to do so. As pointed out in the introduction of this review, such theorizing is unavoidably human. In fact, I believe *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* progresses this theorizing substantially. Moreover, as highlighted above, the fact that Miller engages with a topic that has so much sway over the lives of so many, in a way that is accessible and interesting is a clear strength of the book. On reading the book, I was often reminded of the swan metaphor on expertise; the graceful movement of the swan belying the energetic activity beneath the surface. The clarity of Miller's exposition plainly relies on a well thought out, coherent theoretical foundation. Nevertheless, I, for one, would benefit from the author making this foundation more explicit and providing a little more clarification on how the evidence supports the piecemeal character hypothesis, and how this hypothesis is consistent with the idea that we can predict virtuous behaviour.

References

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