

Character: What Is It, How Good Are We, and How Can We Become Better?

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The Character Project

(www.thecharacterproject.com)





Walter Vance, 61

"He was so excited about Christmas this year, he wanted everyone to enjoy the holiday he loved so much."

Overview

My Plan for this Afternoon

What is Good Character?

How Good is our Character?

What are Some Promising Strategies for
Developing a Better Character?

Part One

What is Good Character?

My Starting Assumptions

My Assumption: A person with a good moral character is someone who has moral *virtues*.

Examples:

Another Assumption: A person with a bad moral character is someone who has moral *vices*.

Examples:

What is a Moral Virtue?

Example of Compassion

Question: If someone picks up some dropped papers only once, is that sufficient for being a compassionate person?

Looks like there needs to be some frequency to one's helping.

More on Compassion

Question: If someone frequently helps, but only when it comes to picking up dropped papers, is that sufficient for being a compassionate person?

Looks like there needs to be some diversity (cross-situational consistency) to one's helping.

Still More on Compassion

Question: If someone is being reliably helpful in various situations, but only for purely self-serving reasons like making a good impression on your significant other or putting oneself in a good mood, is that sufficient for being a compassionate person?

Looks like there needs to be some good motivation (virtuous reasons) behind one's helping.

Summary

In general, a moral virtue looks like it leads to behavior that:

- Is morally admirable
- In a diverse range of situations relevant to the virtue
- Stably over time
- Primarily for good and admirable reasons and motives

(What about moral vices?)

Part Two

How Good is Our Character?

(i.e., How Virtuous is Our Character?)

(i.e., Do We Tend to Have the Virtues?)

My Answer

For most of us today, it is not virtuous...at all.

Most of us today do not have any of the moral virtues.

Question: How did I come to that conclusion?

Two Examples from Research on Helping
An Example from Research on Cheating

Baron (1997)

22% (men) and 17% (women) helped who had passed clothing stores.

But...

45% (men) and 61% (women) helped who had passed Cinnabon's and Mrs. Field's Cookies.



Latané and Rodin's 1969 "Lady in Distress" Study

"... if they were listening carefully, [participants] heard her climb up on a chair to get a book from the top shelf. Even if they were not listening carefully, they heard a loud crash and a woman's scream as the chair fell over. 'Oh, my God, my foot ...' cried the representative. 'I ... I ... can't move ... it. Oh, my ankle. I ... can't ... can't ... get ... this thing off ... me.'" (Latané and Darley 1970: 58).

Suppose that the participant is in the room with another survey taker, and this other person does not respond to the crash.

Latané and Rodin's Results

7% helped (!)

Similar Results for....

- Hearing a man have an epileptic seizure
- Hearing a maintenance worker fall off a ladder in another room
- Hearing a man cry out in pain from what seemed to be a serious electric shock.
- Seeing a stream of smoke coming into the room where one or more participants are seated.
- Watching a thief steal cash from a receptionist's envelop
- Observing young men steal a case of beer from a discount store
- Hearing a bully beat up a child.



Shu et al. 2011

In the **control condition**, participants took a 20 problem test and knew that the experimenter checked the answers and oversaw payment of \$.50 per correct answer.

In the **“shredder condition,”** a different group of participants took the same test, but got to grade it themselves and then shred their materials.

No Opportunity to Cheat

7.97 problems answered correctly (group average)

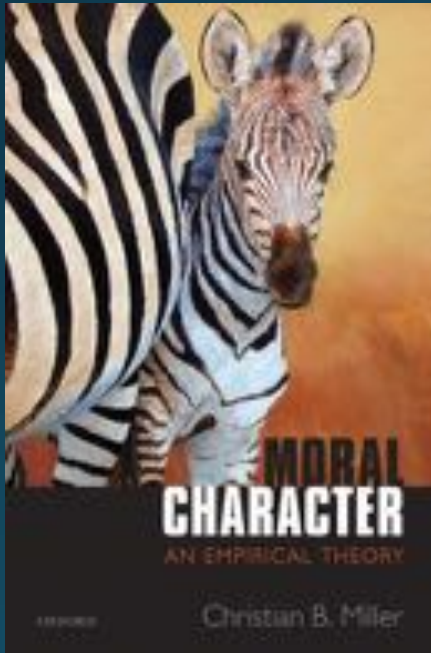
Opportunity to Cheat

13.22 problems answered correctly (group average)

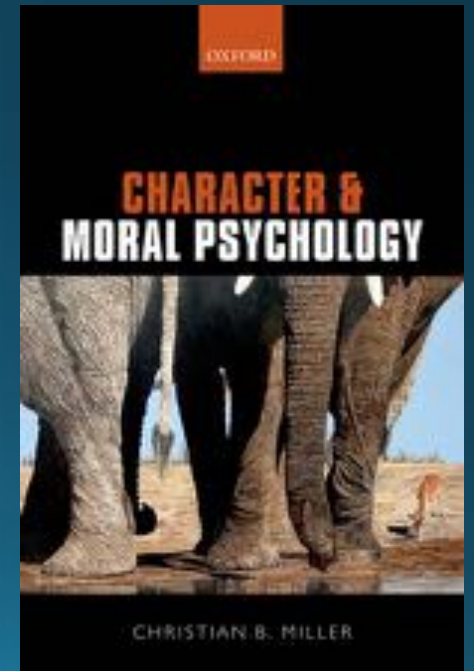


My Conclusion

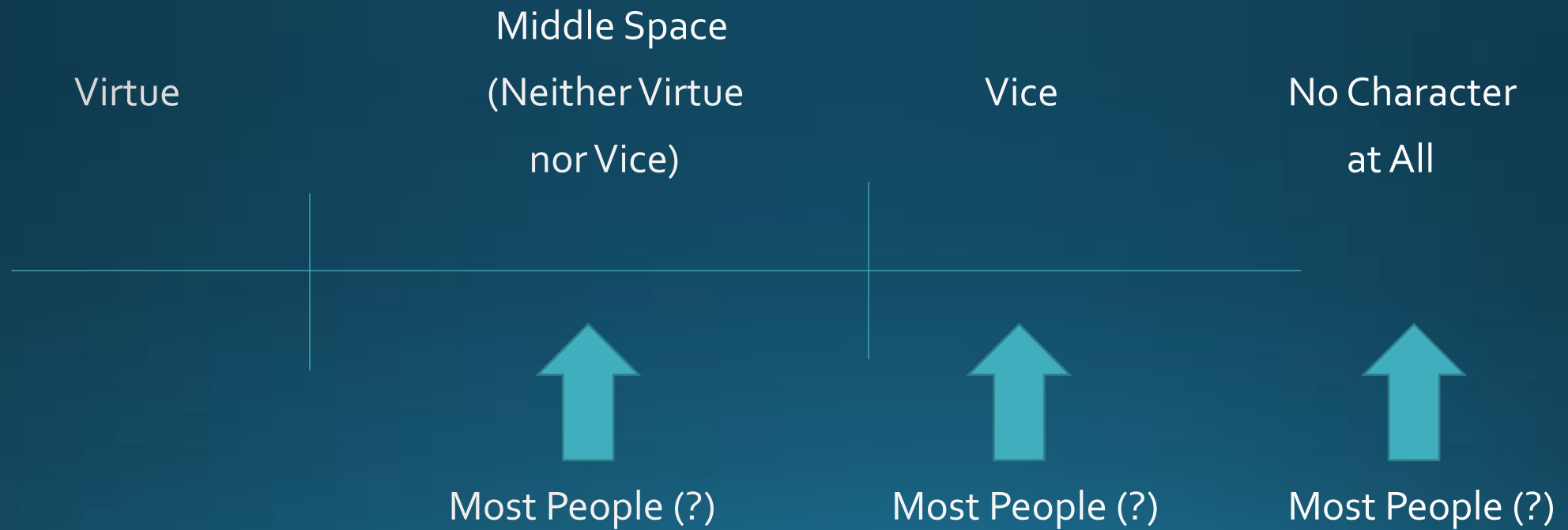
When I read hundreds of studies in moral psychology like these, I conclude that the experimental evidence does not show the patterns of virtuous behavior and virtuous motivation that I would expect if we were virtuous people.



So I conclude that
most of us are not good people.



What is the Correct View?



The Character Gap

A Virtuous Character

Our Actual Character



The Character Gap

Part Three

What are Some Promising Strategies for
Developing a Better Character and
Reducing the Character Gap?

Strategy #1: Role Models



The Idea: There are people who we can admire for their good characters. When we admire them, we can also want to be like them, to emulate them. We can be inspired to be more like them, not in every way, but in the ways that count for developing a good moral character.

Some Empirical Support for #1

Role Models and Cheating: Cheating in a shredder condition occurred when a stranger was observed to cheat first, but it increased dramatically when a stranger was observed to cheat and participants knew beforehand that they shared the same birthday as the stranger (Gino and Galinsky 2012).

Role Models and Helping: Two people heard a crash in the next room and cries of, “Oh, my foot. Damn, I think it’s broken. Oh, Jesus, it hurts. Ow-ow-ow...” (Wilson and Petruska 1984).

Helping was rated a 6.21 out of 10 when the stranger did nothing versus a 9.05 out of 10 when the stranger acted quickly to help.

Strategy #2: Moral Reminders

The Idea: Often we know the right thing to do, but we get distracted or lose sight of what really matters.

Moral reminders help get us back on track.

And the more often we are reminded, the more natural it will be to think of what is right and wrong the next time.

Some Empirical Support for #2

Mazar and Colleagues (2008)

(\$0.50 per correct answer)

Control Condition	3.4
Shredder Condition	6.1
Shredder + Honor Code Condition	3.1

(\$2 per correct answer)

Control Condition	3.2
Shredder Condition	5.0
Shredder + Honor Code Condition	3.0

Strategy #3: Getting the Word Out

The Idea: Let's try to educate ourselves and others as much as we can about the surprising psychological tendencies we have to do morally problematic (and morally admirable!) things.

Then we can be more mindful when in situations in which they might be activated, and we can work to compensate for, correct, or encourage them.

An Example: The bystander effect on helping

Some Empirical Support for #3

Beaman et al. 1978

Students heard a social psychology lecture explaining how groups can inhibit helping.

Later that day they were presented with a staged emergency and a nonresponsive bystander (really a confederate).

67% of the students helped

Only 27% of controls who did not hear the lecture helped

A second study had the emergency occur two weeks later:

42.5% helped

Only 25% of controls helped

Stepping Back – Two Final Questions

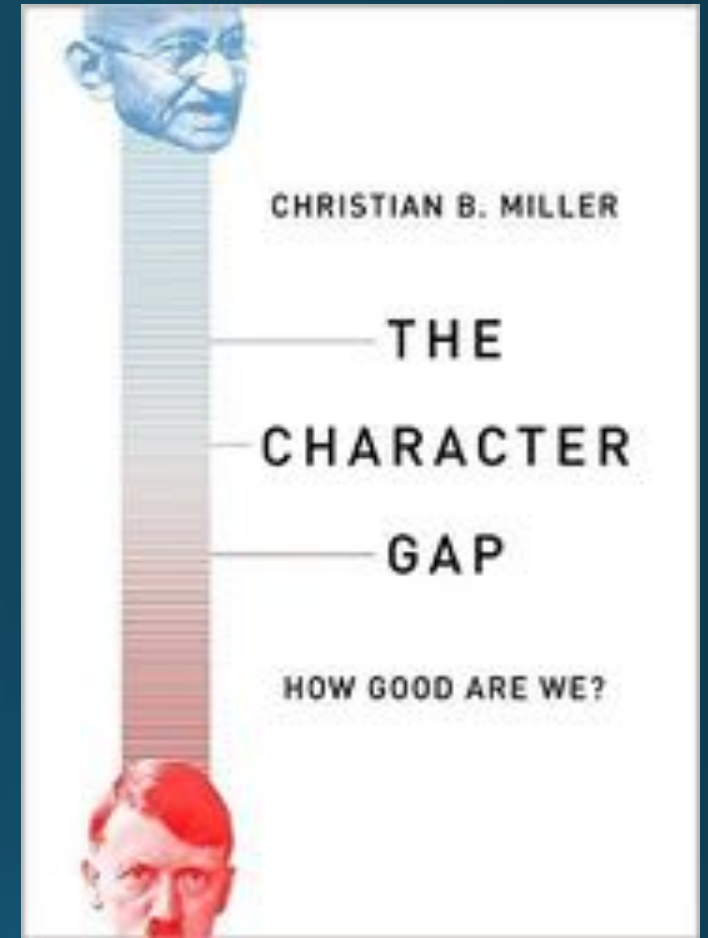


First Question: Do any of these strategies sound promising to you?

Second Question: Are there other promising approaches besides these three?

Thank you!

I talk more about all these ideas in
The Character Gap: How Good Are We?
(just out with Oxford University Press).



Very grateful to the John Locke Foundation
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