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Are You as Good as You Think You Are? | Christian Miller

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The Veritas Forum

The data says we're lying to each other about a third of the time. Philosopher Christian Miller thinks that number is actually higher. After years of researching hundreds of psychological studies that put people's character to the test, Christian concluded that a gap exists between how good we should be and how good we actually are. On our latest podcast episode, we sit down with Christian to discuss his latest book, *The Character Gap*, and what we can do to become better people.

Transcript

So in the beginning of my book, I start with a story of Black Friday in Target several years ago where a 61-year-old man collapses to the floor from a heart condition, as a heart attack, and he lies on the floor for minutes and minutes and minutes, and no one helps him. So this matters. This is really important stuff we're talking about, not just academic research that gathers dust in the libraries.

Welcome to the Veritas Forum Podcast. My name is Caleb Godhart, and I'm the online and social media manager for Veritas. A couple weeks ago, I had the opportunity to sit down with Christian Miller, a professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University, who recently released a book entitled *The Character Gap*, which attempts to answer the question, "How good are we?" After years of researching hundreds and hundreds of psychological studies that put people's character to the test, Christian came to the conclusion that we're not as virtuous as we like to think, that there is a gap between how good we should be and how good we actually are.

Over the course of our conversation, we discuss his extensive research on character, some strategies for improving our own character, and how the rituals and community of religious practice, specifically within Christianity, may help shape us into becoming better people. Christian, could you tell us a little bit how you got interested in character? My interest in character goes back many, many years, probably back even to high school. That's when I first started thinking about philosophical questions.

I was reading people like C.S. Lewis, and they presented me with the first time with questions about the meaning of life, does God exist? What's right and wrong? And what kind of person should I become? But my interest deepened much more in college. There I had a chance to more formally study the topic of ethics with some professors at Princeton University who introduced me to the question, what is character in the first place? What is the difference between good character and bad character? And what steps might we take to develop a better character? It persisted with me throughout graduate school. I went to Notre Dame, which at the time was one of the best places to study character and virtue in the country.

And then just persisted still further when I went to Wake Forest University, where I'm currently a professor. I got especially interested in a debate about the empirical adequacy of character. That means does character even exist in the first place? Yeah.

Back in the 1960s, in psychology, there was this active debate under the heading of situationism. And what people were wondering about was does a stable and consistent character trait like honesty or compassion exist in real people? I mean, we understand what the definition is, what the concept is, and the theoretical idea. But is it an empirical reality? And in particular, people were worried about whether behavior was more a product of a situation you're in and the environment and external forces as opposed to something that's internal to you as a person, as part of your character traits.

But philosophers much later got wind of it, and they got excited about it too. And I kind of reinvented the wheel a little bit. I thought there was a really interesting debate, and I had some things to say.

And so that's what really I can finalize and cemented my interesting character. Yeah. In your own words, or briefly, how would you describe this idea, the character gap? Sure, sure.

I would say it played this way. It's the gap between how we actually are and how we should be. So how we should be is a virtuous person, a really good person, someone who is compassionate, honest, kind, and so forth.

How we actually are, well, that depends on the person, but according to my reading of the research, many of us are not like that. So we're mixed back, yeah, of good and bad. So the character gap is the gap between how we actually are and how we should be.

Yeah, one of the more, I guess, startling arguments you put forward in your book is this idea that most people don't have any virtues. They haven't attained any sort of virtue, but they also maybe haven't attained any vices either. What would you say to someone who's sitting there thinking, I'm a pretty honest person.

I've lied occasionally. The last week, I probably didn't lie that much, or I'm not like a

pathological liar. What would you say to that kind of person? That's a great question.

So my view is that I was interested in the question of how virtuous or vicious are people. And I could look to different sources of information to try and answer that question. I could go to the Bible, I could go to human history, I could go to the contemporary news, lots of politics, I would give me lots of information, maybe not so helpful, but lots of sources of information.

But what I wanted to look at, in particular, were carefully controlled studies in psychology, which would put people in different environments and see how they would react to the moral dilemmas or moral questions or challenges that we're facing them. So over the course of several years of research, I read hundreds and hundreds of studies having to do with helping, harming, cheating, lying, stealing, all down the line. And I came to the conclusion, not on the basis of one study, which would be terrible inference, but the basis of hundreds of these studies, that the pattern of behavior we see in these participants is not what I would expect of a virtuous person.

But also, it's not what I would expect of a vicious person either. So let me give you an example of one study to see where I'm coming from. And it will also relate to your question too.

So in this study done to test cheating, there were three different groups. There was one group where people would come in, they would take a test, it had 20 problems, they would be paid 50 cents per correct answer, they would take the test, work as hard as they can, turn in their answer sheets, the person in charge would grade the answer sheets, they get paid accordingly, no opportunity to cheat, cut and dry. They would get about seven problems correct on average.

Another group, different people, would come in, they would have the same test, same incentive, 50 cents per correct answer, but they would get the opportunity to grade their own answer sheet. And when they were done, they would shred their materials and verbally report how many they got correct. So this gives lots of license for cheating and there's no way for anyone to double check what they actually got right or wrong.

So they could do whatever they want. Here, cheating doubled. No, that's not the right way to put it.

What the right way to put it is the number of answers in quotes was 14. Now it's possible that these people just were so smart that they got the test questions right on their own. This is just a much better group than the first group.

But that's doubtful. Very doubtful, very unlikely. Much more likely that they cheated.

So the number of correct in quotes answers doubled. A third group, so this is still the same kind of experimental setup. They were once and there's been different versions of

this third group.

But let's just take one where they had to first recall the 10 commandments, as many as they could. Then they were given the opportunity to take the same test and cheat if they wanted to and get paid accordingly. In this setup, there was no cheating.

And there are different versions of this. It's not specific to the 10 commandments. If this was students, if they were asked to sign their school's honor code, then that would have the same effect as well.

Cheating would disappear. So again, I don't want to draw any big conclusions from one study. But this nicely, I think, encapsulates or summarizes my thinking.

Because on the one hand, you have people behaving quite badly. They're cheating when they know they can get away with it. And I think it's worth it.

There's a reward. So that doesn't suggest honesty. On a flip side, you have people behaving quite well.

I would not expect a dishonest person to stop cheating just because they recall the 10 commandments or sign an honor code. I would think a dishonest person who sees an opportunity to cheat and get paid would cheat and get paid. They might go through the motions of signing the honor code and I ran off some 10 commandments.

But then they would just turn around and cheat some more. So here we get what I call mixed character. We have on the one hand, not good enough for virtue.

And then other again, not bad enough for vice. So now we come to your friend who says, "Well, I think I'm a pretty honest person. I may cheat on occasion.

I might fudge my income taxes from time to time or tell some lies once in a while." And I would say, great, first of all. That's much better than what you could be doing. Big thumbs up.

And I'm not here in business of judging you in particular. That's not my job. But if we really want to probe people's character, it can't just be the situations that they have been in their course of their daily routine, their habitual day-to-day life around other people, their families, their coworkers and so forth.

I also want to see how they would behave in some of these other situations where the environment is different, where some of the punishments are taken away, where some of the temptations are present that might not ordinarily be present in life. So how would that person behave if they were given the test and an opportunity to cheat? Absolutely. Well, that's where you cite this line in the book about character is this well-known maxim.

I guess that character is what you do when no one's looking. And that seems to be when our character is most put to the test. A lot of these psychological studies that you're highlighting are based on that sort of unique circumstantial presence that allows people's characters to manifest.

For you, you mentioned the cheating example as very illuminating. What are some of the most, besides the cheating example, what are some other really informative and illuminating research examples that you came across? Sure. Let's switch from cheating to helping or, as the case may be, not helping.

Sounds good. So I'll give you one, a classic one, and then we can talk about others as well. So classic one going back to 1960s has to do with the bystander effect.

So this is a situation like the following. You're a participant who signed up for a study, you're told that the study involves filling out a survey. So you come into a room, you sit at a table, you start working on the survey.

Another person comes into the room, a stranger to you, who also looks like they volunteered for the same study. They've got the same survey, they sit down at the same table. They're working on their survey, you're working on your survey.

The person in charge who gave you the survey's leaves goes into the next room. You hear that person doing some things in the next room like climbing a ladder, then you hear a big crash. And a person starts screaming in pain, saying my ankle or my leg, help me, and they're clearly something terrible is going on in the next room.

Okay, so let me stop there. It seems clear a compassionate person would do something to help at this point. You would help so.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just hope I would expect. It seems like a bare minimum.

So now here's the complexity. If you were in the room by yourself, as a participant, so not like I described it, but you would just buy yourself 70% of the time, people would help. Which that in and of itself is not a great number.

I mean, I would, you know, I would hope that for 100% there, but 70% did help whether that was calling and saying, do you need help or going into the next room and checking on the person 70% out. However, if you were in the original setup that I described with the stranger and the stranger does nothing after the crash, just continues to fill out that survey, you are very likely to do nothing yourself. In fact, in that original study, only 7% of participants did anything to help.

My goodness. So 7% versus 70%. In the same situation with the only difference being the stranger in the room, not doing anything to help with you.

So this has been very influential. There have been all kinds of replications. There have been different versions of it.

So instead of someone falling off a ladder, there's one where a person's getting an electric shock, like, like, electrocuted trying to repair an outlet. There's another one where a bully is beating up a child. And the question always is, will a participant in a group of non-helpers do anything to help? And usually answers no.

So this is very discouraging, right? And it's not just a relic of the lab, either, or of psychological research, because sometimes you might say, well, this is just because they were in a study and it's very artificial and they know it's not real life. So how can you really extrapolate from that? Well, we've actually seen over the years real world analogs of this happen. So in the beginning of my book, I start with a story of Black Friday in Target several years ago in this Target store in West Virginia, where a 61-year-old man collapses to the floor from a heart condition, he has a heart attack, and he lies on the floor for minutes and minutes and minutes, and no one helps them.

And people continue to shop. They turn around and go the other direction, or in some cases, they even step over his body to continue to shop. Why? Well, same phenomenon is going on.

No one else is doing anything, so I'm not going to do anything. It was only after quite a while that some nurses came along, they tried to give him CPR and resuscitate him, but it was too late on the way to the hospital. He died.

So this matters. This is really important stuff we're talking about, not just academic research that gathers dust in the libraries. Well, let's maybe transition into some strategies for becoming better people, to if we've read up to this point, we're discouraged.

We're putting ourselves in the shoes of the target shopper and realizing we might have not done something either, and we're grappling with that. For you, as you develop this research, would have been some of the more encouraging or more tenable ways to go about developing good character. Sure, good question.

You could be discouraged at this point. You could be slightly encouraged, too. I always have to, people like to go right to the depressing studies and we talk about them.

They're very famous, they're very interesting. But remember, it's a story about mixed character. So it's meant to have a good side to it, too.

We're not nearly as bad as we could be. There are not many, as far as I can tell from this research dishonest or cruel or hateful people, again, from the studies. So nevertheless, it's still a character gap.

It's still a big character gap. I think that gap exists in my heart, too. I want to try and take steps to try and bridge that gap.

One strategy that shows lots of promise, I think, is trying to find people in your lives, who can serve as moral role models. Not just role models of athletic success or academic success, those are really important, too. But role models of moral excellence.

So that can go in a variety of different directions. It might be reading a biography of Abraham Lincoln and learning about his life and then trying to adapt some of the things he did to your current situation. Or it might be just looking to your grandmother and learning about her life and talking with her and trying to see the world the way she sees it.

So that becomes more of the way you see the world. So those moral role models can provide examples of how to act. They can also provide advice.

They can provide support and comfort. And they can be just a source of general wisdom to think about becoming a better person. It's interesting, too.

So you talk about these more kind of secular strategies for character improvement, but you also dive into religious strategies, particularly a framework within the Christian worldview for becoming a better person. Could you talk a little bit about how that makes sense for you? Sure. So in the last chapter, what I wanted to do was spend some time on religious ideas.

And I did that for one obvious reason, which is that the majority of the world is religious. The world religions have lots to say about character. It seems just surprising to not tap into that, look into it a little bit and see what it is available to maybe use to help bridge the character gap.

And I chose Christianity for a couple of reasons. One, it's personal relevance to me. So I was one, also, was more informed about and I could speak maybe a little bit more, you know, helpfully about that religion.

Two, it's the world's largest religion. Three, it has a long history of talking about character. So it's just very rich materials about character development and improvement.

So that's my thought process. While making it clear that I'm not saying that Christianity is the only religion that has anything valuable to offer about character and not using this as a kind of apologetic to try and convince people to become Christians, it's just selecting one religion for the reasons I outlined and seeing what it has to help us to teach us. I take three lessons from Christianity.

First is that religious and specifically Christian practices can help a lot in developing a

better character. I'll come back to that in a second. Secondly, for Christianity, character development happens best in a social environment.

And third, Christians can't make themselves perfect or improve their character dramatically on their own. They need divine assistance. So on the first point, Christianity has embedded in lots of practices, religious practices, which can make their followers better people.

Prayer, for example, can foster humility, can foster honesty with oneself, can foster forgiveness. Confession can foster, again, similar traits like honesty, forgiveness, humility, and combat things like pride and guilt and self-reliance. So these practices are others like tithing and working with the poor and reading the Bible.

These Christian practices have in them the resources to develop a better character. Secondly, Christians don't think of this as something that happens kind of monastically. Oh, they can.

Of course, it's a monastic tradition. But normally the way it's thought of is these practices are carried out in community with other Christians, whether that's in a church or a small group, whether that's in a formal institutional environment or whether it's in the in the comfort of one's own home. The idea is that with other Christians around, that can provide further support, guidance, wisdom.

It can, again, foster things like humility, need for help for others, develop a sense of forgiveness, and so forth. And of course, the biggest social relation of all is between the Christian and God. The social relationship is at the very heart of Christianity.

But then finally, the third point that I focus on this chapter has to do with divine assistance. And this is an element that is distinctive in certain ways to Christianity that you don't see exact analogs in other religions. So in Christianity, there's the idea that God's a Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

And we'll spend the next 20 minutes discussing that. I would love to. I got all the time in the world.

But one part of that is this idea of the Holy Spirit, one of the persons of the Trinity, who in the life of the believer, the Christian believer, is supposed to be contributing to character development, too. So it's not just the Christian, even with other Christians, kind of through his or her own strength, making this happen. It's, yes, maybe some of that, but it's also God in the form of the Holy Spirit assisting the process of what's called sanctification in Christian lingo, the process of character improvement to restore that person to the way God wanted that person to be all along.

Mm. Slow, gradual process. Unlikely it's ever completed in this life, but ultimately will be completed in the next life.

I really found that part of the book really fascinating to introduce this idea of the Holy Spirit as a vessel for character development. What about, I think I'm thinking of a lot of people who maybe left a religious practice or left Christianity, and would cite this guilt that God is angry with them, that their actions are not good enough, and it was just this guilt and shame was actually a prime motivation to leave this sort of religious system. How do we maybe reframe this idea of divine assistance in a way that's not like God's watching you and he's making sure you don't mess up? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

That would be really unfortunate. And if that's something that people took away from the end of the book, I would be very discouraged. Yeah, so I want to be very emphatic that the idea is not that God is now more involved in one's life in such a way that God's keeping an extra scorecard.

And you've got to be on your best behavior now, because if you start making up, make mistakes at this point, you've got to get an even worse punishment, or it got me extra special, angry or upset with you. That's not the picture at all. I'm not a theologian, I'm a philosopher.

I don't want to speak very authoritatively about these matters. But my sense is the picture is in becoming a Christian in the first place. Those issues are taken care of.

Forgiveness is bestowed. Grace is received. There is no condemnation anymore.

The life one lives is not to be fear of punishment. It's meant to be celebration of a new life. That's free of guilt and free of anger and free of retribution and full of love and full of grace and full of forgiveness.

And that's another thing that the Holy Spirit could contribute to one's life is a reorientation and a sense that this is what it's all about. And not a matter of anger, retribution and punishment. That's really good.

How about a secular humanist who comes to say, I can basically take these ideas in religious practice and modify them in a way without ascribing to some belief in God. Is there something that a religious framework or maybe specifically a Christian framework adds to the process of character development that isn't seen in a more humanistic lens? Well, first I would say to that, the secular humanist Grace, if you're really thinking about the idea of character and kind of convinced by some of these arguments that developing character is important and you're looking for strategies to improve, hey, it's awesome. And you see something of value in religious frameworks in particular Christianity that maybe could be translated over to a secular context, go for it.

I mean, who am I to say no to that? I mean, give it a try. Hopefully it works. And it's effective.

And I certainly also want to say that religion is not necessary for becoming a good

person. On my view. So there are examples of honest atheists or agnostics, compassionate atheists and agnostics and so forth.

So I want to be very clear about that. What we're talking about here in this last chapter is more kind of averages or general trends. And the suggestion I want to make is that yes, on average, having these religious resources and implementing them is a good thing and contributes towards character improvement.

And there are various reasons for that. When we go back to things like the practices and the community that we talked about, religion provides kind of lots of institutional and social mechanisms to reinforce these practices and these institutions, that's a very abstract point to make. But the more concrete point to make is look, a particular religion will have a building, say, where a church meets and where you go once a week or more and where you do certain things.

And when you start doing those things over and over and over again, week after week, year after year, they become habit forming and they become character building. And it just becomes part of one's daily life and weekly life because of the structures that are in place with that religion. It's almost as if within the DNA of certain religious practice, you have this character forming, like, I think of like Jamie Smith who would say that like this, it's a liturgy.

This liturgy is what's forming you as you participate over and over again in sending you in a good direction. That's right. So I think I agree with everything you just said.

You put it better than I did. As you embarked on this project, what has been most surprising to you as you've been researching character? I would say the most surprising thing when I was researching the topic of character was learning about the temptations and other psychological influences on my behavior that I didn't know about in the first place. So the ways in which unconsciously I might be led to behave in certain ways that I would not have expected.

So going back to our earlier discussion, for example, of the bystander effect, before I learned about that, I never would have thought that fear of embarrassment might play such a big role in my life. Then I read this research about how people were not doing anything in emergencies because in part, they were afraid of embarrassing themselves. That would apply to me too.

In the famous Milgram shock experiments from the 1960s, where participants were willing under pressure from an authority to turn up electric shock dial all the way to the XXX level and shock to death a test taker in the next room, I never would have expected those kind of results. What explains those results are deep desire to obey authority figures. Also part of our minds, which we might not have appreciated.

In another experiment, people helped or not in a shopping mall based upon whether they had passed Mrs. Fields cookies or cinnabuns. So think about that for a second. People who were just passing by clothing stores tended to not help.

Same task, helping task. But if you had passed by Mrs. Fields cookies or cinnabuns and gotten that smell, you're much more likely to help. What was going on there? A good mood was induced by the smell and helping provide you with an opportunity to maintain your good mood.

I wouldn't have appreciated that either. So these, I don't want to dwell on the particular studies, but the underlying point is that this research on character has taught me about a lot of ways in which our minds are more complicated than we might have thought. And there are lots of inclinations and desires leading us in different directions on moral matters that we might not have recognized before.

And that's really important to know about and pay attention to and sometimes to combat and work against. The upshot might just be installing more cinnabuns. It's not happening while you might get tired of it.

It might lose their effect. As you look maybe more inwards towards yourself, how do you, as you've gone on writing this book and maybe during the reception of it, are there any traits that you have been particularly motivated to seek after and develop in yourself? Yeah, that's a great question because I wouldn't want this just to be an academic exercise. Yeah.

I mean, of course, I want it to be helpful for people who read it and not just academically help interesting but helpful in their lives. But I also want, respectively, to be helpful for me too. And I have three children.

So these questions are very much at the forefront of my mind. I think it's done two things, probably more, but two things come to mind right off the bat. One, it's taught me how far I fall short as well.

I kind of reinforced areas of my own life where the character gap is true of me and where I need to make a lot more progress. Secondly, it's introduced some dangers too, I think. Going around speaking about this and doing interviews and writing about it and so forth, that comes with some potential character pitfalls as well.

Character pitfalls having to do with pride. And maintaining humility and making sure I'm very restrained in what I'm saying and not overreaching and not promising too much and not saying that I've figured it all out. And just emphasizing that we know so little here.

And this is really just the first, there's so much more that needs to be done to unlock some of these mysteries of character. And so I've got to continually remind myself that my research is just kind of beginning. It's a lifelong endeavor for me.

That's great. Thank you so much Christian for being here. It's been a delight to talk to you.

Well thank you so much for having me on. Find more content like this on baritas.org. Be sure to follow the baritas forum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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