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I'm a good person...right? | Christian Miller

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | To kick off our third season, we're starting with the question we've all asked ourselves: "Am I a good person?" Our guest, Dr. Christian Miller, has an answer — and it might not be what you think. Christian is a philosophy and ethics professor at Wake Forest University, and he's spent over a decade studying character and virtue. Starting in 2010, Christian led the Character Project — a research group dedicated to the advancement of the scientific study of character. Recently, he's honed in on one virtue in particular, honesty, through his direction of the Honesty Project. You can order Christian's trade book on character and virtue, *The Character Gap*, here: <https://www.amazon.com/Character-Gap-Good-Philosophy-Action/dp/0190264225/> Like what you heard? Rate and review *Beyond the Forum* on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, get updates on more ideas that shape our lives by signing up for our email newsletter here: https://mailchi.mp/veritas/newslettersubscribe_pd. Thanks for listening!

Transcript

It was Friday the 25th of November 2011, the day after Thanksgiving, also known as Black Friday. Shoppers lined up at the target in South Charleston, West Virginia, and among them was a 61-year-old pharmacist named Walter Vance, who had a known heart condition. At midnight, the doors opened, and the shoppers rushed in to take advantage of the deep discounts.

But 15 minutes later, while shopping for Christmas decorations, Walter grabbed his chest and fell to the ground in the middle of an aisle. Around him, shoppers didn't seem to notice. They kept walking around the store and loading up their carts.

Some even stepped over his body. Eventually, an off-duty nurse and an off-duty paramedic found him and administered CPR. They called an ambulance who took him to a nearby hospital.

That night, Walter died. But it was the way he died that outraged his friends and family.

One of his co-workers asked, "Where is the good Samaritan side of people? How could you not notice someone who was in trouble? I just don't understand why people didn't help.

What their reason was, other than greed because of a sale." You might be thinking, "Well, I would have done something. I would have noticed and called 911. I would have gotten help.

After all, I'm a good person." But what makes you think you're any different than the people in the store that day? For season three of Beyond the Forum, we're focusing on what it means to be a person of character and virtue. And to start our season, we talk with Christian Miller, a researcher and professor who studies philosophy and ethics. This is Beyond the Forum, a podcast from the Veritas Forum in PRX that explores the ideas that shape our lives.

This season, we're talking about character and virtue. I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews. My name is Christian Miller.

I'm currently the AC Read Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where I've been for the last 18 years. Christian became interested in philosophy and the big questions it asks when he was in high school, reading books by the Oxford Scholar in theologian C.S. Lewis, and taking a philosophy course at a local college. He majored in philosophy at Princeton and then received his doctorate in philosophy at Notre Dame.

Today, he teaches both philosophy and ethics at Wake Forest. I really care about the big questions in life. I really want to kind of move the discussion forward on questions like does, does, does, exist.

Are we good people? How should we live our lives through my research? But at the same time, I don't want to just be kind of hiding in the proverbial office or library and not interacting with people. So I really love the fact that Wake Forest also cares about interaction with students personally, and that we get to know our students, we really invest in them, and we care about them in the classroom. Christian's approach to the question, "Am I a good person?" hasn't been from a purely philosophical or theoretical angle.

He wanted his research to be something that people like you and I could put into practice. There was this really interesting debate about whether character even exists, and in light of empirical psychology, do people have character traits? How good are people? Are most people good? Are most people bad? So that was where I pivoted into my research and also starting this project called the Character Project. It was a five-year project funded by the Templeton Foundation where we were exploring the notion of

character from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and theology.

And eventually, that project led Christian to write a book called the Character Gap, where he argues that there's a significant gap between how we think of ourselves as moral characters and the reality of what we do. And he uses empirical data from psychological research to show how we can become better people, how we can close that gap. But this journey to become better people doesn't come naturally.

It takes purposeful effort, Christian says, and forces us to look at both our virtues and our vices. Virtues have three main components to them. There's a thinking component, a feeling component, and a behavioral component.

So an honest person has honest thoughts like, "I shouldn't lie. I shouldn't cheat. I shouldn't steal." They are motivated in an honest way.

They care about the truth. They don't want to disrespect other people. They don't want to take advantage of opportunities to cheat.

And those thoughts and feelings together give rise to outward expressions of honest behavior. So their behavior flows from their underlying honest psychology. That's how I think of virtues working.

And then vices are just the mirror image in the opposite direction. So vices have thinking components. They have a feeling or emotional and a motivational component to them.

And they have a behavioral outward expression to them. But it's all in the opposite direction. It's all in the negative direction.

So there's this interesting parallel between the two. Structurally, they work the same way, but they're just oriented one case towards the good and the other case towards the bad. This three-pronged approach to virtue, thinking, feeling, and behaving makes it hard to attain a virtue.

But it becomes nearly impossible if having a virtue isn't just about thinking, feeling, and behaving virtuously in one circumstance, but in every circumstance in all of life. And that's what some philosophers and ethicists would argue. Stoicism, for example, a philosophy that traces back to the third century BC treats virtue as the only true good in life and that externalities like health or wealth or pleasure or neutral.

Therefore, Stoics held the belief that being virtuous was comprehensive. In the situation with Walter Vance, they'd say, if you want to be compassionate, you couldn't just think, feel, and behave compassionately towards Walter. You have to be compassionate toward every person in everything in every situation.

But Christian has a more nuanced take. At a Veritas form event awake for us in 2018,

Christian said that it's not really all or nothing when it comes to having a particular virtue. I think our ordinary way of thinking is a threshold and then virtues come at degrees.

Once you cross over that threshold, you have the virtue, but you can have virtues at a certain extent, so it agrees. The Stoics had the opposite view. It was all enough.

Paris, I'll add the correct view, which is that in degrees. For Christian, then, we're not wholly virtuous, nor are we wholly vicious. We're on a spectrum between the two.

Most people are not virtuous. Most people do not have good character. And this is something I arrived at on the basis of the empirical research, not just armchair speculation or not the teachings of history.

Or religion or anything like that. But actually what the studies carefully done in psychological research labs tell me that most of us are not good enough to count as virtuous people. We're somewhere in the middle.

We have a mixed character. We're a mixed bag as people for the most part. It comes in a bell curve, in my opinion.

There are outliers. There's some really good people. Your mother Teresa's, your Abraham Lincoln's, and then on the flip side, there are outliers, I think, too.

Your solids, your hitlers, put your villains there. Unfortunately, most of us are neither like the virtuous exemplars. Fortunately, most of us are not like the vicious villains.

We have some good sides to our character. We have some bad sides to our character. But cumulatively, we're a mixed bag.

One notable study that Christian looked at was the Milgram Shock Experiment Study. These experiments were done by Stanley Milgram at Yale in the 1960s, and his focus was on obedience. And for him, his research was deeply personal.

Milgram was Jewish, and aware how blind obedience led to tragedy for the Jewish people in Europe. So over the course of three years, he ran a variety of these shock experiments to test people's willingness and capacity to obey or disobey authority. Christian told us about these experiments, but instead of using obedience as a lens to view them, he used compassion.

You're a participant in the study. You come into the lab. You're told that you're going to be administering a test to someone in the next room.

When that person in the next room gets a wrong answer, you're supposed to turn up a dial in front of you. More wrong answers, more you turn up a dial. What's the dial do? It's supposed to administer a shock, an electric shock to that person, as punishment for each

wrong answer.

So initially, that shock is relatively mild. But as time goes on and there are more wrong answers, the shock is going to get more severe and more severe. You can exit the experiment anytime you want.

You don't have to stay. If you feel uncomfortable saying, "I don't want to do this anymore," you can get up and leave. But over your shoulder is standing an authority figure, somebody who looks like a scientist who's in charge of the experiments.

And when you start to show some hesitation or wondering about whether to continue, this person will give a series of prompts like, "Please continue. We need you to continue." What the participants don't know, however, is that the situation is rigged. The person who's taking the test in the other room is an actor who is purposely getting the answers wrong, and there's no electric shock.

The actor is pretending to be shocked and releasing an increasingly distressed scream as the dial is turned up. Christian didn't conduct his own Milgram studies. He used the research that Milgram had done, but he looked at the studies through the lens of compassion.

Would the participant sense of compassion for the test takers in pain overcome the pressure to obey authority? At the time Milgram did the study, some of Milgram's own psychology students at Yale thought that compassion would overcome authority. They hypothesized that only 0 to 3% would go all the way to administering a lethal shock. But they were wrong.

The person next to him starts saying things like, "Ouch, this really hurts." Or, "I have a heart condition. Please stop this." Or, "They start pounding on the walls." Get me out of here. They're screaming in pain.

Nevertheless, the participants continue to turn up the dial. They continue to administer higher and higher levels of shock. As the dial gets turned up more, there's a level at the end, which has XXX, implying a lethal level of shock.

And 65% of participants ended up going all the way to the XXX level. At which points there was silence. It was so severe that it sounded like the person had collapsed or maybe even died.

So the majority of normal people were willing to administer lethal shocks to someone else under pressure from an authority figure. That's not what I would expect of a virtuous person, in particular a compassionate person. This study has been replicated many times, and each time it has ended up the same way.

Compassion doesn't went out. The majority of participants administer what they believe

to be lethal shock. But Milgram ran variations of the study too that revealed that character and virtue is a bit more complicated, that most of us are somewhere between virtuous and vicious.

He did all kinds of modifications to it too to see what factors would be relevant and what factors wouldn't. So for example, what happens when there is no authority figure standing behind the participants? And it's just the participant and the shock dial and the test taker in the next room. Well, in that version, the amount of shock is much, much lower.

People aren't willing to shock in general nearly as high. If they were cruel people, that shouldn't make a difference. So if our character was fundamentally cruel and vicious, then we would take advantage of this opportunity to do harm to the person in the next room, and the absence of the authority figure wouldn't have made a difference.

But it did. What about when the authority figure is in the next room and you talk to the authority figure over the phone as opposed to standing behind you? Well, level of shock goes way down as well. What happens when there are two authority figures who are giving contradictory instructions? Level of shock goes way down as well.

So all these other wrinkles are giving a different picture. They're giving a picture of a better behavior than what I would have expected if most people were cruel. And there's plenty of other experimental literature telling me the same thing.

[MUSIC] Hi all, this is Carly Regal, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum. If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue engaging in these important conversations by signing up for our newsletter. Each month, you'll receive thoughtful content about the ideas that shape our lives, updates from our student and faculty partners, and other Veritas news and events.

You can sign up today by visiting veritas.org. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show.

[MUSIC] In recent years, Christian has deepened his research on character and virtue by focusing on one virtue in particular, honesty. It's a stunningly neglected virtue.

A stunningly neglected in the sense that academics like philosophers are not paying attention to it. It's also neglected in society as well. I think it's pretty rare that you see this virtue of honesty.

In 2018, Christian launched the Honesty Project, and once again he looked at empirical research to inform his conclusions about how honest or dishonest we are. For him, the Shredder studies have been super informative. Done in many variations over the past ten years, these studies try to tease out the factors that contribute to honest behavior, and they do so by focusing on one main question.

If the average person is given the opportunity to cheat, will he? Here's how it goes. You're taking a test, but this test is not like your normal test. You're going to get paid 50 cents per correct answer.

In the control group, you take the test, you do as well as you can, you turn it in, the person in charge grades it, and you get paid based on your performance. Cut and draw. In one version of the study, people get seven correct out of 20, on average.

But there's a second group taking the test too. They take the same test and are promised the same 50 cents per correct answer, but there's one hitch. They get to grade their own tests, then verbally report their scores to the test administrator, then shred their answer sheet.

Hence the name, the Shredder studies. While the average person in the first group got seven out of 20 right, the average person in the Shredder group got 14 out of 20 correct. Knowing there was no chance of getting caught, they chose to cheat.

But there was a third group too. Since the Shredder studies focused primarily on behavior, researchers created variations to see what factors may or may not reduce cheating and encourage honesty. In this third group, they introduced an honor code for participants to sign before they took the test.

And it worked. The average was back down to the control level. There was no evidence at the group level that cheating actually happens in this situation.

This is stunning. If people were dishonest, it should not have mattered whether they signed the honor code or not. They would sign the honor code as a formality, and then they would just, from their go ahead and take advantage of that opportunity to cheat.

So on the one hand, evidence of lack of honesty, on the other hand, evidence of lack of dishonesty, more support for the kind of beyond trying to develop here, a mixed bag of character when it comes to honesty. The honor code variation of the Shredder studies is evidence that we can change our behavior if we want to. But even that variation leaves an open question.

What if there's no external motivation, like an honor code, for being honest? Can we change our behavior then when there's only an internal motivator, like wanting to change? Or are we stuck with being who we are on the spectrum? The good news is that we're not stuck with the character we have. Unfortunately, the psychological evidence backs up common sense and I think also religious teaching that we can improve our characters over time. Christian offers three concrete ways that we can grow in virtue.

One is to look to exemplars and role models. So those are people who have succeeded. They've gone ahead and accomplished what we're trying to accomplish.

So in a case of honesty, it might be someone like Abraham Lincoln. In a case of courage, it might be someone like Harriet Tubman. In the case of all the virtues, it might be someone like Jesus.

What's relevant here is that they've succeeded, we can admire them for their success, and we can also be moved powerfully emotionally to once emulate them. We're inspired by the example that they have provided for us. So that our character can be elevated to better map onto a mirror their character.

It needn't be these kind of giants or these famous figures from the past. It can be, maybe even sometimes, more effective if it is a neighbor, a friend, a co-worker, a community leader, someone who's in your life on a daily or regular basis who you can actually converse with who is relatable and is connected to you in a relationship. The second way of growing in virtue is simply to be reminded more of what virtue is or looks like.

It sounds simple, but as Christian points out, studies show that it works. It's not like we're ignorant about whether cheating is wrong or lying is wrong or so forth, but we often get our attention distracted to self-interest and what would benefit us in the moments. And these can include things like starting your day with a reading, religious reading, secular reading, ending your day with a diary reflection, having throughout the day emails or text messages that give you some reminders, having things on your wall, so that they can take lots of different forms.

The final way to grow in virtue that Christian offered in our conversation is to pursue greater self-awareness. Then the last one is greater self-awareness. Our psychology isn't always transparent to us.

Sometimes we deceive ourselves, sometimes we're just unaware of some parts of our minds that are holding us back. And so if we learn more about who we are, we can be on guard against these tendencies. One tendency that we're often unaware of in the moment is our tendency to avoid feeling shame or embarrassment.

It may be at least partly involved in the situation with Walter Vance or in the Milgram experiments. Going against what's socially acceptable is hard to do, whether that's stopping to help when no one else is helping or disobeying the instructions of an authority figure. They can teach us how powerful fear of embarrassment is, which we might not have been aware of that.

We might have been aware of that, but not to that extent. And so we can be more cognizant of that when we're in groups less not just to refer to the group, let's be aware of the needs of those people in the situation and be willing to go against our fear of embarrassment if the situation demands. These three ways of growing in virtue, having moral exemplars reminding yourself of the virtues and pursuing greater self-awareness,

can happen in a number of ways.

But one way that in Christians you is extremely valuable is pursuing virtue in the context of community. And one type of community that you can do that in is a religious community. At the Veritas Forum event, he said that belonging to a religious community and engaging in spiritual practices is a way to grow in virtue.

This happens in community socially, together with other people. So, the way to hear is strategically, that's a fancy religious language. What does this mean? Together, Christians pray, they read scripture together, they confess together, and even disobeying.

That's a strange stop these days, but discipline each other together. That matters because the individual Christian is not on his or her own trying to solve all these character problems or obstacles without it being helped at all. All kinds of resources that surround this person.

A community, other believers in the church, the family members, doing things like giving advice, sharing experiences, providing mobiles. And talking about their own mistakes, and giving warnings. Virtue development through practices and rituals.

It is social communion. It can be a very powerful way to improve what's character. Experientially, Christian knows the most about his own religion, which is Christianity.

He says there is something unique about the pursuit of virtue in Christian theology. It's something that goes beyond what can be observed in a scientific study. A hand goes beyond what we, by our own sheer, will can accomplish.

And that is the Holy Spirit, the part of God that lives within Christians, changing their hearts, closing their character gaps. There's an idea of Christianity though, that's unique, that you don't see any locks in other planets. And that has to do with the role of Holy Spirit.

So, if you'll remember a little bit of teeth and a beauge, just a little bit. In Christianity, there's an idea of the truth. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

One God, three persons. So, that very person, the Holy Spirit, was Holy Spirit too. One of the things the Holy Spirit is supposed to do in Christianity is work in the life of Christians to improve their character.

Holy Spirit is connected to character. In the way Christians think about things. For his God, who works in you, is talking about the will of the deed for his own chosen purpose.

This is from the text in the New Testament of the Bible, Philippians. So, God adds the Holy Spirit, working in the believer to improve the first character. Does this mean that all

Christians are better or more virtuous than other people? No.

Turning to C.S. Lewis, the author who first interested Christian in philosophy, we read a question that he poses in his book, "Mere Christianity." If Christianity is true, why are not all Christians obviously nicer than all non-Christians? To answer that question, he parses out two things. First, he says, "Not all people who claim to be Christians are, in fact, Christians." He writes, "If conversion to Christianity makes no improvement in a man's outward actions, if he continues to be just as snobbish or spiteful or invidious or ambitious as he was before, then I think we must suspect that his, quote, "conversion" was largely imaginary. The outer world is quite right to judge Christianity by its results.

Christ told us to judge by results. A tree is known by its fruit, or as we say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. When we Christians behave badly or fail to behave well, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the outside world." End quote.

Second, Louis says, that behind that question there lies an illogical way of demanding results. Some people, he says, "Don't just look to see whether an individual Christian has improved herself, but rather they divide the world neatly into two camps, Christian and non-Christian, and all the people in the first camp at any given moment should obviously be nicer than all the people in the second." He says this way of thinking about growing in virtue is unreasonable on several grounds, and one of them has always stood out to me as very compelling, and compelling both for Christians and non-Christians alike. Louis says that we need to show grace to others in their pursuit of virtue, because we don't know where they started.

Compared to people, he says, "One is very kind, the other is not." The first one might owe her kindness to her natural disposition, not to any pursuit of virtue or love of God at all, while the other person, the unkind one, might have had a very unkind disposition since birth. But she, who remains less kind than the kind person today, might be far kinder now than she was ten years ago. She's grown.

She's fought against her nature, and she's changed. Perhaps I've always been compelled by this reasoning because I identify with it. I'm naturally outspoken, opinionated, and blunt.

Even when I was young, I was independent, challenging, and frequently disobedient. Today, if you judge my virtue against someone who is perhaps more outwardly and naturally virtuous than I am, you may not be impressed. But at the same time, you don't know where I started.

The naturally nice person may not have grown much at all. But I may have grown leaps and bounds, even though I still am less nice than her. And perhaps this type of reasoning is encouraging to you, too.

After all, the person you know the best, the person whose faults and failures and shames and insecurities you know most deeply, is you. You know your struggles, and you know your own character gap, the gap between who you are and who you want to be. And you also note that it's not fair to you to compare you today with someone else who started in a different place.

What you need to do today is look at yourself and ask, "Have I grown from where I was? Am I more virtuous today than I was two years ago?" If so, celebrate that and continue to press on. And if you're a Christian like me, give thanks to God and humility that he has seen fit not to leave you where you were, but to change you. If you haven't grown in virtue, what plans will you make to grow? What moral exemplars might you admire? How can you remind yourself of the virtues? How can you become more self-aware about your tendencies? If you feel like you're starting off the journey at the bottom of the barrel, be encouraged.

Be encouraged at least by Christian teaching. Lewis warns the nice people that they may be nice owing to their natural disposition, which isn't a gift they give to God, but a gift God gives to them. For the nasty people, though, he says, it is very different.

"If they make any attempt at goodness at all, they learn in double quick time that they need help. It is Christ or nothing for them." All of us are mixed bags. We have both vices and virtues at varying degrees in all of us.

The only question is, what do we do with them? For our next episode, we talk with Megan Sullivan, a philosophy professor at Notre Dame. She just came out with a new book on virtue ethics called "The Good Life Method" and we talk to her about just that. How can we live a good life? You won't want to miss it.

Hi again, this is Assistant Producer Carly Riekkel. To end our episode, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this show together. Our first thanks goes to our guest, Dr. Christian Miller.

Thank you for joining us, for talking us through such great research, and most importantly, for giving us tools to become better versions of ourselves. We also want to thank our production team at PRX. Genevieve Sponseler provided us with fantastic edits on our narration, and Jocelyn Gonzalez and Morgan Flannery worked on the audio to make this episode sound great.

And of course, we want to thank the students who host and plan these forum conversations, as well as the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for their generous support of our conversations. Alright, that's all for this episode. Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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