



Christian Miller. Submitted photo

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

How virtuous are we?

Scientific studies reveal some challenging results

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What does it mean to be moral? What are the virtues we should cultivate and what are the vices we should avoid? What are the characteristics of true character? Does religion help us to live a moral life?

Philosophers as well as religious thinkers have asked these questions for millennia. Aristotle identified virtues that lead to good character such as courage, self-control, civility, modesty, generosity and justice. Nearly all religions have their lists of virtues that lead to good character.

The Apostle Paul listed the fruits of the spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Some Muslim commentators have identified 16 virtues that constitute good character.

Jewish writers have identified central virtues from the biblical prophets to include benevolence, compassion, humility and peace loving.

Many religions have one-sentence summaries often identified as the "golden rule." Rabbi Hillel famously said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others."

Recently, the sciences, from psychology to neurobiology, have entered the discussion with studies designed to understand how the brain makes moral decisions and how we in fact act in crises. The results are often counterintuitive and challenge how we like to think about ourselves.

Philosopher Christian Miller has been engaged in a major study looking at the issue of character and asks, "How good are we?" In his recent book "The Character Gap," he describes how most of us "tend to think of ourselves, our friends and our families as good people. We may not be saints, but we are not morally corrupt either. We are honest, kind, trustworthy and reasonably virtuous people."

Miller, however, begs to differ, and relates recent studies that show this self-image to be mistaken. In carefully controlled experiments as well as in real-life situations, the results are often quite different from what we think our basic response would be. We have some serious character flaws that "we do not even recognize... as they often fly below our conscious radar screen."

He is not suggesting that we are evil, but a mixed bag, and in certain situations we do not respond in fact the way we imagine we would. "Our hearts are not morally pure, but they are not morally corrupt either," he writes. "Rather, they are a messy blend of good and

evil." Miller also suggests that we do have the capacity to do tremendous good and that there are ways to develop the virtues and even "bridge the character gap."

Recent scientific studies have shed light on some of these issues. Since the positive psychology movement began to study characteristics like gratitude, hope and integrity, we have learned much about the positive results of these virtues. Studies report that these characteristics lead to better health, higher work satisfaction and performance, as well as decreased anxiety. This, of course, raises the complication of whether pursuing these virtues primarily for the benefits is just another form of selfishness; or, are these auxiliary byproducts but not necessarily the primary motivation?

Some fascinating controlled psychological experiments have shown that people are less responsive to situations where someone is in need when there are others around, than when one is the only person available to help. Miller describes "one of the most famous experiments in the history of psychology" called the "Lady in Distress" study. In what was purported to be a marketing survey, the subject is in a small room with a woman who is administering the survey. She leaves to get something in the next room when the subject hears a loud crash and the woman crying, "Oh my God, my foot... I can't move!" and then moans and cries for another minute." The fascinating part of the study is that some of the subjects were in the room alone while for another group of subjects there was another person in the room, an actor who is part of the study and instructed to ignore the cry for help.

The difference was remarkable. For the subjects who were alone, 70 percent responded to the cry for help, while in the case where the actor who didn't react was in the room, only 7 percent of the subjects responded.

IF YOU GO

What: Book discussion group on Christian Miller's "The Character Gap"

When: Meeting alternate Thursday evenings

More information: Sign-up at www.bit.ly/Grand-Dialogue

This embarrassment-factor experiment has been repeated in many different scenarios with similar results.

Potential embarrassment tends to lessen the inclination to respond. It could help explain the real-life situation a few years ago where on the day after Thanksgiving, "Black Friday," in a Target store one of the shoppers with a heart condition collapsed on the floor. Many people walked around him and some actually stepped over him without attempting to help. Later, some nurses administered CPR, but it was too late and he died that night in the hospital. We might think that this is unusual — and certainly we would not have acted that way — but these studies suggest this might be more typical than we would expect.

Miller would argue that we are learning that the mixture of good and bad in most people is more complicated and calls for a better understanding of how in fact people behave in certain situations. It's not that we are completely bad, but not completely good either. But there are things we can do to work at developing the moral character that we like to assume is who we are.

Miller will be our speaker here in Grand Rapids next March at the Grand Dialogue conference. A book study group will be reading his book on "The Character Gap" on alternate Thursday evenings, beginning Jan. 10. You are welcome to join in by signing up at bit.ly/Grand-Dialogue.

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Christmas is here!
Celebrate with us!

Sunday, December 23
8:15 and 10:45 am — Worship
Christmas Eve: Monday, December 24
5:00 pm — Interactive family service
7:00 pm — Candlelight and communion
9:00 pm — Meditative service

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