

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

How does our self-image stand up to scientific study?



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A person collapses on the floor of a busy store. What would you do?

Most of us think we would respond and provide help. But psychologists have studied this, seeking to understand why in many cases people do not respond the way we imagine they would. There is a well-documented case in a West Virginia Target store where a 61-year old pharmacist collapsed and shoppers just walked around him. Some even stepped over him without helping. Finally, an emergency room nurse, assisted by an off-duty paramedic, did stop to help and get him to a hospital, where he later died.

In the social psychology literature, it is called the “bystander effect,” and experiments have shown how it is related to whether other people are present. Some fascinating controlled 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.

A famous experiment called the “Lady in Distress” illustrates this phenomenon. In what is 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 study is set up so some of the subjects are in the room alone, while for another group of subjects there is 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 was in the room who didn’t react, only 7 percent responded. This experiment has been repeated in many different scenarios with similar results.

Many explanations are offered about this dramatic difference in response. Some call it the “embarrassment factor.” People don’t want to embarrass themselves when others are not responding. Others describe a “diffusion of responsibility,” where one assumes others are responsible and they do not help, so it lessens my responsibility as well. The larger the nonresponsive group, the more one’s moral disengagement occurs.

Experiments in understanding moral behavior have increased significantly in recent years and are the subject of a book by Christian Miller, “The Character Gap: How Good Are We?” Miller is a philosophy professor at Wake Forest University and the director of a multimillion-dollar effort called “The Character Project.” In his book, he examines hundreds of studies of human behavior in such areas as lying, cheating and helping or harming behavior. The picture emerging is that we are a mixed bag of virtues and vices, with most people having a gap in how they perceive themselves compared to how they actually behave.

Miller will be our main speaker at this year’s Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion on March 16. His topic, “The Character Gap and How We Can Become Better,” will explore the studies in moral psychology, as well as reflect on ways we can bridge the gap and live lives more consistent with our aspiration to be moral and virtuous.



Christian Miller is author of “The Character Gap: How Good Are We?” and is a professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University.

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?

Miller 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.” His review of the studies shows that this self-image is 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.”

Since the positive psychology movement began to study characteristics such as 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?

Miller would argue that we are learning that the mixture of good and bad in most people is more complicated than we think and calls for a better understanding of how, in fact, people behave in certain situations.

In his book, he also discusses strategies for closing this character gap, including the ways in which religion can contribute. He will also include this in his presentation March 16. We hope you will join us.

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IF YOU GO

Grand Dialogue Conference

What: “The Character Gap and How We Can Become Better”

When: March 16

Where: Loosemore Auditorium, GVSU Pew Campus Grand Valley State University Pew campus, 401 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

More information and free registration: interfaithunderstanding.org