

Book Review

The Character Gap: How Good Are We?

By Christian B. Miller.

New York. Oxford University Press, 2018.

pp. 276. ISBN 978-0-19-026422-2 Hardcover \$20.48.

**A Review By
Theptawee Chokvasin**

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University

Is it good to know that someone you dislike so much is not that bad, and that someone you love the most is not that good? Does it mean that we are neither overall black nor white in our moral traits of character? The answer from the very present book written by Christian B. Miller for *Philosophy in Action Series* is that it is “exactly” the case (p. x).

There are roughly two moral traits of character, virtues and vices. In our daily life, there are many times that we are in conversations describing what character traits one is in (p. 3-5). It can be considered that the traits of character are necessary for our living. Moreover, to improve the character is important. From many stories that Miller has told us about people with a good heart of giving some help to others without asking for anything in return, it can be explained that this world can be a better place to live our lives if it is encouraged by good deeds and prevention of bad deeds (pp.26-48). This is a summary of what Miller introduces to us in the first part of this book before going on to the nub of the issue about moral character.

Aided by many stories told from scientific experimental research in psychology, Miller explains that majority numbers of people are neither totally good nor bad. In some situations, some people, not with a vicious mind, have a reason of avoiding embarrassing results when they act as bystanders and refuse to help the others who are in need of emergency help (pp. 55-67). From the story, it can be considered that most people in the present day are lacking compassion. However, it is not the case that they are viciously cold-hearted (pp.77-78). In the case of lying, some people tell lies because of some good reason of avoiding some loss (pp.111-114). What is a good consideration from the stories? Miller points out that they are to lead us to an idea of our own self-awareness. We have misunderstood our own self-portrayal.

* Corresponding Author +66 2579 6525 ext. 109
E-mail Address: fhumtwc@ku.ac.th

We are neither that good nor that bad as it has been portrayed in our own introspection. Miller calls this misunderstanding “the character gap” which means a gap between “a virtuous character” and “our actual character.” His question is, therefore, “how to bridge this character gap” (pp. 169-170; *Miller’s italics*).

“Getting the word out” is one of many strategies that Miller proposes us to cope with the question. It is interesting because the strategy is for us to learn ourselves whether there are any conscious and unconscious desires behind the reason for not doing virtuous things. And then, we speak them out. Moreover, it gives Miller a surprise because there are not yet sufficient research findings whether it would work out alright (pp.209-213).

When we finally decide to develop our character for us to be a better person, for us to achieve our goal of bridging ‘the character gap’ according to Miller’s suggestion, the first thing on our mind could be that we are to depend on our own self-reliance to unravel the situation. However, the last suggestion in his book is that, for us to be possible to get triumphant, we may pray for “divine assistance” (pp. 225-229). For Christian practitioners to develop their moral traits of character, they can find it in a social dimension of Christian practices. For example, the character of humility can be interpreted from the Bible. Many sufferings cannot be cured by an individual being, but can be cured by God. Therefore, no one in the entire world can be perfect on his or her own stance (pp.229-233).

Moreover, Miller explains that Christian conception of the role of the Holy Spirit in “sanctification” is in the same way of reflective thinking when one thinks about how to improve oneself (pp.244-247). For this issue of relationship between religion and ethics here, Miller’s point of view is rather different from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument in his 2009 book, *Morality without God?*, that espouses the atheist idea that we can be morally good without the belief in God (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009). While Sinnott-Armstrong conceptualizes his theory in a framework of individualistic reasoning, Miller explains that the Christian conception of development of moral character “is not a solitary process” (p.245).

Some conception in this book reminds me of the other great book written by Peter Singer and published in 2015. The title is *The Most Good You can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically*. It is about the ethical idea of “effective altruism” found in some people with strong conception of altruistic volunteering, such as in making a huge amount of donation (Singer, 2015: 4). It is an example of how to complete a living which can exactly be called “a fully ethical life” (Singer, 2015: viii). However, there are some points of differences between the two philosophers. While

Singer aims at how to perfect our altruism for an ethical living, Miller shows that although it is good for us to have good characters, we must also learn that we are not that much in the state of perfection.

This book is a book for everyone. It is not difficult and full of academic jargons. Moreover, in my opinion, it can be considered a very good academic book that could have the answer of what we are to do to bridge over many gaps not only between the academic and non-academic people but also the philosophical and non-philosophical academic disciplines.

References

Singer, Peter. (2015). **The Most Good You can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas about Living Ethically.** New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. (2009). **Morality without God?** Philosophy in Action Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

