

Commentary on Christian Miller's *The Character Gap* (Oxford Press)

Jennifer Cole Wright

College of Charleston

Christian's book, *The Character Gap*, is a very interesting discussion of the current state of virtue and vice, at least in the United States. Specifically, he evaluates the extant research on three virtues (compassion, proper restraint, and honesty) and their corresponding vices (selfishness/indifference/apathy, cruelty, and dishonesty) and finds that we are lacking in them all. This brings us to the main goal of his book—the evaluation of which will be the focus of my discussion on today—which is to “question the wisdom of using virtues and vices to describe other people” because, as Christian argues: **Most people do not in fact have any virtues and most people do not in fact have any vices** (p. 20).

Christian's Account of Virtue

In order to evaluate this claim, we first need to better understand what Christian means by both “virtues” and “vices”. Luckily, he is very clear about what he means by virtue. The central features of a virtue, according to Christian, are that the possession of it leads to:

- 1) the performing of good actions (i.e., actions that are appropriate to the particular situations in which they are performed), that are
- 2) performed in a variety of different situations relevant to that particular virtue,
- 3) that are done for the appropriate (i.e., virtuous) reasons or motives, and
- 4) that lead overall to a pattern of appropriate motivation and action that is stable and reliable over time.

When it comes to the different types of reasons or motives, Christian provides three alternatives: *egoistic* motivations (i.e., motivations ultimately concerned with what is good for oneself), *dutiful* motivations (i.e., those ultimately concerned with what is right or required to do), and *altruistic* motivations (i.e., those ultimately concerned with what is good for another person/other people). As far as I can tell, Christian considers the last two of these types of motivations (dutiful and altruistic) equally “appropriate” for virtue.

So, a person who possesses the virtue of honesty (i.e., an honest person) will reliably do the honest thing in a wide variety of situations in which honesty is called for, and she will do so for dutiful or altruistic reasons (e.g., valuing honesty for its own sake, wanting to be an honest person, having regard for other people and wanting to do what is best for them, etc.) even when:

- 1) the situations in which honesty is called for are different (e.g., in one situation, she is asked by her mother if she has seen her father smoking cigarettes, which he has been expressly advised against doing by his doctor—which she has; in another, she is asked if she wants to see the answers for an exam that she is taking the following morning; in yet another, she realizes that she wasn’t charged for one of the items she purchased at a convenience store).
- 2) the particular instantiations of honesty that are called for are different (e.g., in the first situation, honesty would require her to *speak truthfully*; in the second situation, it would require her refusing to *cheat*; in the last, it would require her refrain from essentially *stealing* the item she hadn’t been charged for).

While there is plenty to discuss about this account of virtue, I'm going to leave that to Nancy, who has raised/will raise in her commentary a number of important points for our consideration. I'm going to hone in on Christian's discussion of vice instead.

Christian's Account of Vice, Take 1

So, what about a person who possesses a vice—e.g., a dishonest person? Of vice, Christian says quite a bit less, though he does say that vices "...share the very same features that the virtues do. The main difference is that they are oriented in the opposite way." (p. 15)

That gives us something to work with—but what does "oriented in the opposite way" mean, exactly? In an effort to further explicate, Christian provides us with the example of Sam, a guy who has the vice of cruelty. As a possessor of this vice, we are told, Sam is likely to frequently hurt others—moreover, he will exhibit a pattern of doing harm consistently across various situations and over time. "His life...reliably exhibits the pattern of bad actions and negative motives that are the trademarks of a cruel person." (p. 15)

In other words, according to Christian, the central features of a vice are that the possession of it leads to:

- 1) the performing of bad actions (i.e., actions that are *inappropriate* to the particular situations in which they are performed), that are
- 2) performed in a variety of different situations relevant to that particular vice,
- 3) that are done for inappropriate (i.e., vicious) reasons or motives, and
- 4) that lead overall to a pattern of inappropriate motivation and action that is stable and reliable over time.

Thus, a dishonest person will reliably do the dishonest thing—that is, she will regularly lie, cheat, and/or steal—in situations in which it is *inappropriate* to do so (i.e., situations in which honesty is called for, as opposed to situations—however rare they may be—in which dishonesty is either called for, or at least not unacceptable). And she will do so for *inappropriate* reasons.

But what does it mean to do so for *inappropriate* reasons? Remember that, according to Christian, these have to be reasons that are “oriented in the opposite way” to the virtuous person. And we know that the honest person is honest (at least in part) because of a desire to do what is right. So, does this mean that the dishonest person is dishonest (at least in part) because of a desire to do what is wrong? That is, in order to be vicious, does the dishonest person have to *desire* to bring about a bad outcome—does she have to *desire* to deceive/cheat/steal? Does she have to value being dishonest for its own sake, to *want* to be a dishonest person?

When we imagine examples of vicious people, the ones that most easily come to mind support the view that such desires are certainly possible—we think of people who desire to hurt (even kill) others, to promote fear and suffering; who desire to bring about others’ ruin, to dominate and control, etc. And Christian himself brings up examples such as Dahmer, a well-known serial killer responsible for at least seventeen gruesome murders between 1978-1991 (p. 155-156), and an unnamed Nazi commander who threw children off his veranda and then shot them, as well as randomly shooting off the ears, noses, and fingers of prisoners working on a nearby parade grounds (p. 40-41). But thankfully for rest of us, Christian concludes, the prevalence of such extreme cruelty is likely to be fairly small. And indeed, if we relied only on the research discussed in Christian’s book, we might be

persuaded like him to believe that, on the whole, while people are not particularly virtuous, they are not particularly vicious either.

But what if that conclusion is too quick? Consider, for example, the alarming prevalence of two different forms of arguably vicious behavior, behavior aimed at—and if not aimed at, then largely insensitive to—the suffering of others. While both of these are arguably global phenomena, I will focus here only on statistics for the U.S.

The first form of vicious behavior I'd like us to consider is *bullying*. According to the National Bullying Prevention Center, a recently meta-analysis of 80 studies examining bullying rates within 12-18 year old students found a mean prevalence rate of 35% for traditional (physical and verbal) bullying, 15% for cyberbullying (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014), with 33% reporting being bullied at least once or twice a month (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016).

As anyone involved in this research will tell you, it's hard not to notice how terribly cruel bullies can be—their actions often inflicting significant mental and emotional health damage, putting those who are bullied at risk for depression, anxiety, PTSD, poor performance in school, stress-related physical illness, and self-harm behaviors, including suicide (Center for Disease Control, 2017).

To make matters worse, the kids and young adults most often targeted are those already struggling with issues that tend to isolate them from their peers—for example, coming from a poor family, being a member of the LGBTQ community (9 out of 10 openly LGBTQ students report being bullied), suffering from physical or learning disabilities, etc. (www.stompoutbullying.org).

And it is not as if bullying stops once people reach adulthood. Indeed, according to the 2010 Workplace Bullying Institute, which surveyed over 4,000 working American adults, 35% (an estimated 53.5 million people) directly experience bullying—which was defined as “repeated mistreatment, sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, & humiliation”—at work.

While it is important to recognize that there are a variety of reasons and motives involved in bullying behavior, the enjoyment gained from causing others to suffer is certainly one of them. This is not to say that all bullies are budding sociopaths—most experience difficult home lives where they themselves have been bullied, they suffer from insecure relationships and low self-esteem, and are often in a lot of pain themselves—but it can nonetheless make them feel better (more secure, more powerful, more respected, etc.) to cause other people to hurt in the same way they do.

The second form of vicious behavior is *sexual violence*. As a college professor, I’m particularly sensitive to its prevalence on US campuses. Among undergraduate students, 23.1% of females (and 5.4% of males) experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation; just under 5% of those students report being stalked ahead of time by their assaulters (providing clear evidence of intent). College females are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted as they are robbed. And, once again, 21% of LGBTQ, compared to 18% of non-LGBTQ, college students are assaulted (2014 National Crime Victimization Survey, NCVS). While some assaults occur spontaneously, and under the influence of alcohol and other substances (which in no way excuses them), many are premeditated and are carried out with the clear understanding of, and disregard for, their

consequences—which, like bullying, can be devastating both in the immediate aftermath and in the long-term for the person who was assaulted.

Of course, one could argue that an essential piece that is missing is the *stable and reliable pattern of inappropriate motivation and action over time*. This raises an important (and difficult) question: how much of these arguably vicious behaviors are needed before we can say someone possesses a vice? Obviously the frequency of these behaviors matters—but it's tricky. How many people must be bullied, and how often, before someone is considered a bully? How many people must be raped, and how often, before someone is considered a rapist?

With respect to this last question in particular, there are intuitively at least some situations where it only takes once. This introduces another important factor in determining vice: the severity of the harm(s) to others that could result from the behavior (whether or not in fact it actually does). Is the potential harm caused by a person hiding her father's smoking, by doing better than her (non-cheating) fellow classmates, or by shorting the cashier (and the convenience store) money for an item significant enough by itself for her dishonest behavior to count as vicious? Perhaps not—but you only have to commit rape once to be considered a rapist, a title that arguably comes with a presumption of viciousness.

This implies that there are some actions so heinous that they automatically count as evidence of vice. And though this may seem out of alignment with our current working model of vice, it is important to recognize that there is a parallel to this when it comes to virtue as well—some actions (such as risking one's life to save others) are so admirable

that the people that commit them are recognized as moral exemplars, even when that may be the only thing remarkable they have done.

An example of this is the Canadian *Medal of Bravery*—“a civilian award that recognizes individuals who have risked their lives to save others and who have persisted in their rescue attempt despite considerable danger”—which can be awarded for a one-time heroic event, in contrast to the *Caring Canadian Award*, which “recognizes volunteers who have shown extraordinary and long-term commitment in providing care to individuals or groups, or who have supported community service or humanitarian causes” (Walker & Frimer, 2009, p. 848: for more information, see Governor General’s web site at <http://www.gg.ca>). While the latter award is typically given for someone’s extended expression of good will towards others (consistent with our working model of virtue), the latter can be given—as I’ve already stated—for a one-time expression of heroic dutiful or altruistic behavior, at risk to oneself.

Christian’s Account of Vice, Take 2

Nonetheless, perhaps my suggestion that we should consider the prevalence of bullying and sexual assault as evidence for a particular kind of vice—i.e., actions for which the underlying reasons or motives involve some sort of desire to cause harm (or at least some sort of pleasure taken in the act of harming itself)—goes too far. Maybe Christian is right to conclude that vice, at least of this kind, is rare.

But it is important to recognize that this is not the only kind of viciousness possible—not the only way that our reasons and motives can go astray. Remember that Christian identifies two distinct forms of virtuous motives: the *dutiful*, which we discussed

above, and the *altruistic*. In the latter case, the honest person is honest (at least in part) not out of a desire to do what is right, *per se*, but instead out of a desire to do what is good for others. And this would mean that the dishonest person can correspondingly be dishonest (at least in part) out of a desire to do what is good for only herself—for reasons that benefit her—despite potential harm to others.

This would imply that it is enough for dishonesty that someone not desire to lie/cheat/steal, *per se*, but rather simply desire something else—such as benefitting herself—the gaining or accomplishing of which can only (or most easily) occur through lying/cheating/stealing. And arguably this would make sense of much of the dishonesty we encounter in the world, the lying/cheating/stealing that is motivated (as well as rationalized) by the benefits it brings to ourselves—e.g., avoiding a family fight, getting a better grade, and not having to pay for something we want—even though it may result in bad outcomes for others, and even though (if asked) we would agree that dishonesty is bad, and that we would never want to be considered dishonest.¹

Maybe this is one of the reasons why in the experiments Christian explores in the book, people cheat less than they could (which he refers to as the “*puzzle of limited cheating*”), and sometimes not at all when expectations of honesty are made salient (such as in what he calls the “*puzzle of the honor code*”) and/or they feel like they are being watched (e.g., when there is a mirror or face on display in front of them). All are the

¹ There’s yet another option, which is that someone could desire something she mistakenly believes to be good. It seems likely that many of the terrible things people do, or allow to happen, are the result of actions warped by false beliefs (such as the belief that the Jewish community is corrupt and committed to the downfall of non-Jews) and distorted values (such as valuing the ideal of a “pure” society, safe from the corrupting influence of other cultures).

consequence of the fact that dishonesty (and vice more generally) must remain unseen—by other people, yes, but even more so, by ourselves.

This also jives well with Christian's discussion (p. 16 and elsewhere) that people will hide their viciousness—and even act admirably—when other people are watching. I would add to this that they are likely to do so when it is made obvious that good behavior is expected and the chances of getting caught or otherwise exposed are high. But if a major predictor of dishonesty is the likelihood of getting away with it (which includes keeping it hidden from self and from others), why should this count against people's dishonesty—i.e., against the conclusion that they possess a vice? If people both lie/cheat/steal for self-benefitting reasons and don't lie/cheat/steal for self-benefitting reasons, this seems pretty awful all around.

If we expand our notion of viciousness to include those inappropriate actions regularly done for self-benefitting reasons/motives, what implications does this have for Christian's claim that most people do not possess any vices? There are a number of different ways we could explore the implications, but in the interest of time, I'll choose one. Specifically, I would like to re-evaluate the prevalence of a particular vice, or set of vices, which Christian discusses in his chapter on helping: namely, *selfishness*, *indifference*, and *apathy*.

Christian only discusses them briefly, and without defining them. But a quick look at Merriam-Webster suggests that we can understand *selfishness* as being “concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself; seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others; arising from concern with one's own welfare or advantage in disregard of others”; *apathy* and *indifference* as

experiencing “a lack of feeling or emotion; lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern; no special liking for or dislike of something; no importance or value one way or the other; the absence of a compulsion to or toward one thing or another” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>).

In comparison with other vices, such as flagrant cruelty or deceitfulness, it might seem like apathy/indifference are less worrisome—but as Elie Weisel (a well-known holocaust survivor) is famous for having stated, “The opposite of love is not hate, its indifference” ([https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Elie Wiesel](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Elie_Wiesel)). Combine it with the sort of selfishness openly encouraged in a culture such as ours—an inordinate focus on ones’ own wellbeing, pleasure/satisfaction, and advancement, combined with a healthy dose of entitlement—and you get a what I would consider a fairly significant vice.

Case Study: Animal Agriculture

Here is just one example of this, one that is near and dear to my heart—people’s overwhelming indifference towards the suffering of animals; in particular, the plight of factory farmed animals. According to ASPCA, over 95% of the nearly 10 billion farm animals raised in the US each year (around 70 billion globally) are raised in factory farms, where the majority experience unnatural, inhumane conditions and abusive treatment. Indeed, they are likely to suffer in one way or another for the entirety of their artificially shortened lives, during which they produce things (eggs, milk, etc.), and/or after which they are killed, for our consumption (<https://www.asPCA.org/animal-cruelty/farm-animal-welfare>, among a wealth of other resources).

Despite overwhelming evidence of the suffering produced through factory farming, and the widespread availability and easy access to this evidence, a recent Gallup poll found that only 5% of people in the US report being vegetarians (a rate that has remained the same since 2012, after a drop from 6 percent in 1999) and 3% report being vegans (up from 2% in 2012), the highest percentage of which are under 50 years of age, politically liberal, and lower class (less than \$30k annual income). And while there has been an increase in an intermediate dietary strategy—known alternatively as being a “flexitarian”, “climatarian”, and “reducetarian” (which is driven largely by health and environmental considerations)—according to another poll recently administered, 51% of Americans don’t think a meal is complete without meat (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/08/06/who-are-americas-vegans-and-vegetarians-infographic/#66e19d1a211c>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2018/08/03/you-might-think-there-are-more-vegetarians-than-ever-you-d-be-wrong/?utm_term=.fcf08c1229ad).

This means that the other 97% of people continue to consume all animal products and 95% continue to consume meat at least part of the time—and most on a daily basis. Again, all despite overwhelming evidence that doing so contributes to the inhumane treatment and suffering of other sentient beings on a global scale.

Perhaps it could be argued that while the evidence is indeed out there, most people nonetheless remain ignorant of it—and, therefore, cannot be considered indifferent to it. And while in the presence of great evils, it is important to carefully consider just how far, and for how long, ignorance can excuse people’s behaviors, even if we grant it as a “get out of vice free” card in this particular instance, there is still

evidence that actively educating people about the problem—exposing them to the reality of the suffering going on in factory farms—leads to a dismally small amount of change.

In order to better illustrate this, let me speak about my own experience as a long-time educator in this area. I have been hosting a campus-wide monthly documentary series on this and related issues since the early 2000's, showing a wide variety of films and documentaries, including the most recent *Dominion* (which captures the current state-of-the-industry horror of life as a factory-farmed animal, as well as the suffering generated by other human practices—e.g. the leather and fur industries, animal experiments, etc.—the trailer for which can be watched here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgMWqAuQDKs>).

In addition to that, since 2009, I have shown a documentary every semester in my Introduction to Psychological Science courses, as a part of the section on social psychology, in order to expand their understanding of prejudice and discrimination by exposing them to the problem of *speciesism*. In addition to watching a film, we walk carefully through the logic of the argument for why speciesism counts as a form ethically-problematic prejudice and discrimination. So, they get both the visual (and auditory) evidence of the suffering involved in factory farming and other practices, and the argument for why this counts as an immoral set of practices, on par with racism and sexism.²

² By “on par”, I mean in terms of its status as a form of prejudice/discrimination. One could argue that in terms of the sheer amount and severity of the suffering inflicted over time, and the number of living beings adversely effected by it, speciesism is actually morally worse than racism and sexism.

Recently, I sent out a survey to students from these classes going back as far as 2011³ to inquire about the impact of this programming on their dietary choices, both immediately following the film/discussion and at multiple time points afterwards, up to their current dietary choices.

Of the 424 students emailed, 115 (27%) responded (43% of the students still in college, 12% of the students who have graduated). Ten of the students who responded reported being vegetarian or vegan before taking my class. The remaining 105 (91.3%) regularly—most of them, daily—consumed animal meat and other products. We could assume that the percentage was this high because of their lack of knowledge—certainly, students regularly tell me that they had never heard of the problems associated with factory farming and animal agriculture before taking my class. But what happens after they have been exposed to programming designed to engage both their cognitive (logical argument and statistics) and their affective (feelings of horror, sympathy, and compassion) systems?

Of those 105 students, only four (3.9%) reported becoming vegetarian/vegan immediately after this programming, though an additional three (4.2%) became vegetarian/vegan over time (within a year after my class). And this change appears to have held stable: based on their reports of current eating habits, the number of current vegetarians/vegans remained steady at 7 + the original 10 = 17 (16.2%), even though as much as six years had passed.

³ There was a change in the college's email platform in 2011, making emails before that time impossible.

While this is certainly higher (indeed, 2x) than the national average of 8%—suggesting that education can help to change things (thank goodness!)—it still means that, of the students who were not vegetarians/vegans coming into the class, only 8.1% stopped consuming meat and/or all animal products. And of the other 91.9%, only 42.1% reported reducing their consumption of animal meat and products at some point during the survey time window—though, of these, only about half did so primarily for ethical reasons (the rest cited environmental and health reasons).

This left 49.8% (basically half) who failed to make any changes at all. In other words, half of the students' eating behaviors were unaffected by the knowledge that they were contributing to unethical practices, perpetuating the life-long suffering of other living beings at a massive scale.

Of those students who did not become vegetarian/vegan, 5% reported it was because they did not believe speciesism was a problem that warranted their attention. And while the rest agreed that it was a problem that warranted their attention, nonetheless, 36% reported that changing their eating habits would be too expensive, 33% reported that it would be too inconvenient, and 35% reported that they simply liked animal meat and products too much to give them up.

In light of the significant harm those eating habits contributed to, it is hard not to see these responses as distressingly insensitive, even callous. What is more, they strike me as evidence for a fairly widespread *indifference*—i.e., a failure to feel (an adequate level of) compassion, a lack of interest in the plight of factory-farmed animals, a failure to recognize the ethical importance of their suffering, a failure to feel compelled to act, etc.

Now, it may sound overly harsh of me to accuse my students of being indifferent to the suffering of factory farmed animals—especially when many of them were moved to tears during the film and expressed feelings of distress and sympathy when we discussed it in the days following. Such reactions would suggest that they were not, in fact, indifferent to it (at least not completely, when it was right there in their face and they could not ignore it).

Rather, the indifference set in once the evidence of the suffering was removed—out of sight, out of mind, as they say. And perhaps this suggests that the indifference was located elsewhere—not in their reaction to the suffering of other beings (at least when forced to reflect upon it), but in their failure to act in accordance with the moral obligation generated by that suffering.

To see this, consider Singer's famous argument: "...if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance,⁴ we ought, morally, to do it". According to this, the suffering of factory farmed animals generates a moral duty—insofar as it is possible for us to take reasonable steps to stop (or reduce) that suffering, then we ought to do so. Shifting from a diet of meat and other animal products to a vegetarian (or even better) vegan diet is something that most of us could easily do without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance—therefore, we ought to do it.

⁴ Or, in the more moderate version, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant.

This was a part of the larger argument that I reviewed with my students after watching the film—an argument that, to date, no student has found a way to successfully challenge. And yet, only 8.1% responded accordingly. And while all but 5% openly acknowledged the fact that morally speaking, they *ought* to do something to reduce the suffering of factory-farmed animals, only half of them did anything at all. The other half remained disturbingly indifferent to existence of this moral duty—arguing that changing their diet would be too expensive, inconvenient, or would otherwise go against their dietary and gustatory preferences.

Evidence of Vice? Or Something Else?

As depressing as this state of affairs might sound, does it count (as I have suggested) as evidence of vice—or, is it, as Christian maintains, merely the absence of virtue? Arguably, in some respects, it hardly seems to matter. After all, as Elie Weisel has also famously stated “What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander” (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Elie_Wiesel).

Nonetheless, perhaps Christian’s account of virtue and vice could be meaningfully enhanced (and the results of my student survey best explained) by introducing another layer to his model of virtue—the notion of *incontinence* (what Aristotle referred to as *akrasia*). As I understand it, the incontinent person is not vicious, any more than she is virtuous—instead she is something in between. While aware of what is right, of what would be good for others, of what she ought to do, the incontinent person lacks the self-control to act on it. She is either “weak”, unable to act on her reasoning—which is telling her act honestly, compassionately, bravely, etc.—or she is “impetuous”, acting without

reasoning, but instead motivated emotionally to achieve some self-oriented end (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics>).

According to Aristotle, both forms of incontinence are driven by one of two “passions”: the pursuit of pleasure or anger. In our case study of factory farming, the passion most likely at play would be pleasure—i.e., the pursuit of enjoyment and the lack of desire to curtail that enjoyment, even for moral reasons. And perhaps people’s overall failure to respond to the suffering of others generated by their consumptive behaviors more generally (whether factory-farming or something else—e.g., fast fashion, etc.) can be best explained as a form of incontinence. But this means that a robust philosophical and empirical exploration of incontinence (and, for that matter, continence) is very much in order.

Whether or not what we are talking about is incontinence, however, this brings me back to Christian’s goal of the book to “question the wisdom of using virtues and vices to describe other people”. In one of his sections on strategies for improving virtue, he briefly discusses research that promotes the potential benefits of “virtue labeling”—e.g., people who are labeled as “generous and charitable” donated more money than those who were not; people labeled as “kind and thoughtful” helped pick up more cards that were dropped for longer than those who were not, etc. (p. 176-177).

What about the opposite—is there any advantage to labeling people’s crappy behavior as vicious? Could it possibly prompt people to change their behavior in a positive direction? There is some evidence to suggest that warning people to not possess a vice (“Don’t be a cheater!”) reduces unethical behavior significantly more than advising them against vicious behavior (“Don’t cheat!”)—an effect found in both face to face and online

settings (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013). And so, perhaps there are times when treating people's unethical behaviors as being indicative of vice—whether accurate or not—would be beneficial, insofar as it could facilitate the positive change we so desperately need.

The Role of Society

This brings me to Christians' suggestions for how to promote virtue development. While I appreciated all of his suggestions—virtue labeling (which we've already discussed), as well as other strategies such as nudging, introducing moral role models, selecting our situations, and getting the word out—they were all oriented towards what individuals could do to improve their own character. And I was surprised by the lack of discussion about the role (and responsibility) of society at large, of the need for robust longitudinal education and training (and by this, I mean something more comprehensive than our typical character education programs).

Understanding the difficulty of becoming proficient in reading, math, and the sciences, we expend a tremendous amount of money and effort to train our young people over years, even decades, of their lives. And why think that learning calculus and physics is hard and requires these years of effortful training, but learning to be virtuous is, and does, not?

Our youth train for thousands of hours to become skilled chess players, musicians, artists, and athletes. Where, then, is the parallel training in virtue? Where is the programming committed to helping our youth become skilled at something arguably even more valuable—i.e., becoming good people?

While I understand that working out the details of such programming would be fraught with difficulties (to say the least)—including, among other things, agreeing upon the list of virtues worth developing—it seems like Christian’s book provided a great opportunity to raise the issue and get a national discussion about it going.

Having just recently attended a lengthy panel discussion about how universities should best respond to the latest IPCC 2018 climate change report, I am struck by just how critical this discussion has become. If Christian is correct that most people reside within the “between zone”, neither virtuous nor vicious, then we simply cannot count on them to make the very hard choices and sacrifices before us, unless (and until) the consequences of not doing so are worse. And we have seen (for example, through our War on Terrorism and our War on Drugs) how ineffective purely legal/economic incentives, punishments, and penalties can be for encouraging good behavior and discouraging bad. What we need more than anything are people who are internally motivated to do the right thing—to act on behalf of the well-being of other people (and not just their friends and family, but globally), as well as other sentient beings, and the living planet at large—even when it is inconvenient, even hard, and maybe even risky, to do so. Because it is the right thing to do. Without this, I fear we are lost.

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