

FEATURE ARTICLES

# Honesty and Character in Contention: Author Meets Cadet Critics

C1C Caden Wilson, United States Air Force Academy

C1C Marc Brunner, United States Air Force Academy

C3C Madelyn Letendre, United States Air Force Academy

Christian Miller<sup>1</sup>, Wake Forrest University

Edited by Mark Jensen

The U.S. Air Force Academy's National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) staff invited Dr. Christian Miller, the A.C. Reid Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University and a well-known expert on moral philosophy, moral psychology, and character development to participate in a unique opportunity at the 2022 NCLS. In addition to delivering a traditional presentation, he was invited to participate in an "author meets critics" session, where the critics would be cadets competitively selected as part of a contest conducted in the fall prior to the Symposium. Dr. Miller eagerly agreed. Cadets Marc Brunner, Madelyn Letendre, and Caden Wilson were selected to participate by an interdisciplinary panel of experts. The session was held on February 24th, 2022. Each cadet was given ten minutes to present their critical remarks, followed by a twenty minute response by Dr. Miller. The following article captures this event.

## **Virtue Labeling's Potential: Cadet Caden Wilson**

Last semester a classmate asked if I would consider applying for a leadership position in my squadron at the Air Force Academy. She told me she thought I had great leadership skills, and that I would be wonderful for the position. I was surprised, feeling I had displayed little leadership potential, let alone leadership skills. Yet her comment

---

<sup>1</sup> Work on this paper was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.

changed my perspective. Her labeling generated self-belief that I would be great for that position, and I began to reorient my actions to prove her right. This circumstance exemplifies what many psychologists call virtue labeling. The premise behind virtue labeling is that by verbally communicating a label, people are more likely to act in a way that aligns with their given label. Christian Miller discusses virtue labeling in his book, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (2014). But for the purposes of developing character or virtue, Miller expresses serious concerns about this technique. I will briefly address each of Miller's concerns in turn, arguing that Miller sells virtue labeling short. Furthermore, I will argue that virtue labeling has tremendous potential to inspire virtuous actions that may eventually bring about virtuous transformation.

### *Long-Term Change*

Miller's first concern is the lack of scientific evidence that virtue labeling leads to long-term change. However, as Miller acknowledges, studies regarding short-term change seem promising. Studies involving labeling 5th graders "tidy", labeling consumers "ecologically conscious", and labeling students "cooperative" all successfully demonstrate a short-term positive relationship between labeling and the demonstration of that label (Miller 2014, pp. 174, Upton 2017, pp. 374). But does virtue labeling remain effective long-term?

If virtue labeling is effective over a short period, there is reason to believe that repeated virtue labeling could be effective over a longer period. A teacher who repeatedly praises her students for good work seems much more likely to inspire her students to do good work than a teacher who doesn't. A dad who tells his daughter every day that she is destined for great things seems more likely to inspire his daughter to do great things than a dad that doesn't. While the effect of one specific labeling may fade as time passes, repeated virtue labeling and encouragement seems to present tremendous potential to be effective over a greater length of time.

### *Motives*

Throughout *The Character Gap*, Miller emphasizes that character isn't just doing the right thing, it's doing the right thing for the right reason. Thus if virtue labeling leads only to behavior modification, a change of character cannot be necessarily assumed. Miller's worry then is that virtue labeling leads only to behavior modification, and not the cleansing of motives which is required for the formation of character. While this concern is legitimate, I believe there is tremendous potential for pure motives to spring from good actions. I know this from experiences in my own life. When I first started participating in community service while in high school, my motivation had little to do with helping others and everything to do with accumulating hours to remain a member of the National Honor

---

**Christian B. Miller** is the A. C. Reid Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University, working primarily in contemporary ethics and philosophy of religion. His recent work has focused mainly on problems at the intersection of philosophy and psychology. To date, he has authored five books, edited five others, and published more than 100 articles. He has also contributed articles to dozens of popular magazines and podcasts; he is a science contributor to *Forbes*. He is currently directing The Honesty Project, funded through a \$4.4 million grant from the Templeton Foundation to study the philosophy and science of honesty. This is his third multi-million dollar funded research program. Professor Miller earned his PhD at the University of Notre Dame in 2004 and his BA at Princeton in 1999.

Society. But as I continued serving, my attitudes changed. I began thinking less about hours logged, and more about how I could better serve my community.

A similar thing happened after my classmate asked me to apply for a leadership position. My initial response was a self-interested motivation to prove her positive remarks true. But as I continued through the application process, time in self-reflection enabled me to shift my focus away from boosting my ego and onto how I might become a better servant to others in my squadron. Certainly, these are isolated examples. Pure motives don't always spring from good actions. Yet the potential for this to occur is worth acknowledging as a potential good that can come from virtue labeling.

#### *Dishonesty and Manipulation*

Finally, I must address Miller's concern about dishonesty and deception. Miller asks, "Isn't there something downright disturbing about labeling people with virtue terms when you know that they don't have any of those virtues" (2014 pp. 178)? Yes. This would be disturbing. But virtue labeling doesn't have to be this way.

Suppose someone is a chronic liar. How might the virtue of honesty be developed in them? Simply labeling them as 'honest' might not be effective since they probably already know they are not, thus leading them to rebel against a label they perceive as insincere. Instead of blanket labeling them as honest, the best means of virtue labeling may be to watch for instances where they do display some level of honesty. When that virtue is displayed, even if in only a small instance, call it out. Celebrate it. Highlight the instance where they did the right thing, and celebrate this good in them. By highlighting the good in someone, you demonstrate

that you care, that you're paying attention, and that their good actions matter to you. Through all of this, careful and intentional virtue labeling may give them the boost they need to truly develop this virtue as part of their character.

#### *Conclusion*

Virtue labeling is not perfect, and it may not always work. As previously mentioned, studies suggest that it is influential in the short term, but more research is necessary to determine its efficacy in the long run.

*Virtue labeling isn't perfect, and Miller has legitimate concerns about it. Yet if used wisely, it could be a great tool to encourage real virtuous change.*

Furthermore, virtue labeling must only be used carefully and sincerely to mitigate dishonesty and deception. However, the upside of virtue labeling is enormous. If done right, virtue labeling has the potential to inspire positive results. In my case, my classmates' positive labeling of me instilled a confidence to go after, and eventually get, the leadership position. While her words did not make me more virtuous, the process of putting myself out there and going through the application process certainly prompted serious self-reflection that I believe forced me to grow in character and leadership. Virtue labeling isn't perfect, and Miller has legitimate concerns about it. Yet if used wisely, it could be a great tool to encourage real virtuous change.

#### **Miller's Virtue of Honesty and Classical Utilitarianism: Cadet Mark Brunner**

In *Honesty: The Philosophy and Psychology of a Neglected Virtue*, Dr. Christian Miller explores what constitutes the virtue of honesty (2021). He proffers a definition of honesty which he claims carries merit because of

its ability to be used in various moral theories (2021, pp. 144). However, looking to John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism as a cardinal example of outcome-based ethics, Miller's definition fails to properly address the relationship between the principle of utility and virtues, such as honesty. Miller must forgo the assertion that his definition's derivatives can be adapted to various ethical theories; to be useful, his definition must instead assume a narrower focus of applicability.

In his book, Miller believes he can create a definition of honesty, or some "suitably altered version," which can be applied to outcome-based and motive-based ethical theories (2021, pp. 145). For outcome-based approaches, he claims that the only requirement for a definition of honesty is that it must consistently provide good outcomes and that honest behavior will always bring about such outcomes. Thus, a definition of honesty only requires consistency, without other stipulations, such as motivational factors (2021, pp. 146). Accordingly, Miller's definition for the virtue of honesty for outcome-based ethics is: "Being disposed, centrally and reliably, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them" (Miller, 2021, pp. 146). However, in his general definition for honesty, he includes a condition for practical wisdom, and he spent a whole chapter illustrating the importance for a definition of honesty to have the capability to handle situations where such wisdom is needed (2021, pp. 123). But, he does not provide a provision for this in his outcome based definition.

Dr. Miller's assertion that his definition of honesty can be widely applied to different ethical theories is called into question when scrutinized in the context of Mill's classical utilitarianism. Mill's utilitarianism is in agreement with Miller in that honesty is a means to the end of good outcomes. But Mill is also oppositional to Miller's assumption that honesty can be unilaterally

attached to such an end (Mill, 1998, pp. 71); virtue's usefulness only extends as far as it can promote the greatest happiness principle—the idea "that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote the general happiness" (Mill, 1998, pp. 55). In addition, Mill posits that, concerning virtue, individuals have "no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure" (Mill, 1998, pp. 84).

From Mill's writing, several conclusions can be drawn. First, although an act's moral value is indifferent to its motivations, this does not mean virtue, as a means to an end, is the same. Instead, there is a motivational aspect to virtue: "its conduciveness to pleasure" (Mill 1998, pp. 84). Having the virtue of honesty involves the desire and motivation to be truthful for the promotion of the greatest general happiness. Yet Miller's position does not warrant such a condition; instead, he appears to conflate the moral value of an action with the morality of a virtue. An action disregards all motivations that caused it, but a virtue, in utilitarianism, must account for the desires and motivations of an agent. This position makes logical sense: it would be irrational if moral actions are behaviors tending to promote the greatest happiness, and being virtuous—having the disposition to behave morally—did not entail having the disposition to promote the greatest happiness. The result of this conclusion is that there must be an added condition in his definition which includes the desire to achieve good outcomes. However, people are often affected by numerous, conflicting desires. Therefore, the desire for utility must be both present and preeminent.

Mill asserts that a proper definition of honesty must account for the desires and motivations of an agent, yet it may appear that motivation to act honestly in the interest of promoting pleasure does not necessarily follow from a desire to do so, meaning the

aforementioned stipulation for the desire for utility is incomplete. Often, desires do not translate into motivations for actions; one may desire to not repay a promised sum of money but not have the motivation to do so. However, motivation does not arise from naught but rather is the result of a desire. When the desire to maximize utility is dominant, motivation—the “child of desire”—will naturally follow (Mill, 1998, pp. 86). In this way, a preeminent desire to maximize utility will inevitably create motivation to do so. Thus, the virtue of honesty is not only incomplete without a desire for utility, its very existence is predicated upon such a desire. The motivation condition, by way of a requirement for desire, is a fundamental aspect between virtue and outcome based ethical theories such as utilitarianism.

The second conclusion emerging from Mill’s writing is that to claim a certain action can be axiomatically wrong is contrary to outcome-based ethics. While Miller argues that the most utility will always arise as a result of honest behavior and therefore the virtue of honesty only needs to be consistent, utilitarianism postulates that general rules tending to maximize happiness, such as honesty, are exactly that, general rules (Mill, 1998, pp. 69). The accommodation for exceptional behavior under certain circumstances is a key aspect to outcome-based ethics; being honest is only right as far as it tends to promote the greatest happiness (Mill, 1998, pp. 69). To create a definition for the virtue of honesty applicable to outcome-based ethics, a stipulation allowing for exceptions must be present.

The addition of motivation and exception conditions to a definition of honesty for consequentialist ethics provides amelioration to Miller’s neglect to address the functions associated with practical wisdom in his outcome-based definition. First, consider the ability of

utilitarianism to handle conflicts between competing moral virtues, a key aspect of practical wisdom (Miller, 2021, pp. 123). Because utility is the chief goal of moral actions, the greatest happiness principle can be invoked to adjudicate between incompatible duties (Miller, 2021). If another dishonest action would provide more utility, there would be only a responsibility to conduct the utility-maximizing action. To assist in the arbitration of which action is “the best means to virtuous ends” and to answer what a “virtuous end” is, two more questions answered by practical wisdom (Miller, 2021, pp. 123), the greatest happiness principle again provides an answer. As discussed *supra*, the greatest happiness principle is the virtuous end—the ultimate goal toward which all virtue works to advance. Because of the outcome-based nature of ethical action in utilitarianism, there is no “best” way to maximize utility provided it is, in fact, maximized (Mill, 1998, pp. 65). Finally, utilitarianism can align the motivation of virtue with objective reasons; the aforementioned motivation condition creates an unchanging standard: the maximization of utility. Ultimately, the exception and motivation conditions can adequately resolve the absence of functions associated with practical wisdom in Miller’s definition.

Miller believes his definition of honesty has merit because of its applicability to various ethical systems. However, upon comparing his application of honesty to outcome-based ethics with the tenets of classical utilitarianism, his definition falls short. As it stands, it fails to address virtue being a means to good outcomes and the resulting necessary motivational condition, does not include a condition permitting exceptions, and neglects the functional needs of practical wisdom. While Miller acknowledges that his definition is only a starting point, the scope of his application is too broad; the relationship between virtue and ethical theories is too widely varied to create a single definition that can

be readily adapted for motive-based or outcome-based ethics. As an alternative, a revised definition of honesty for outcome-based ethics, which includes the necessary conditions, could be:

Being disposed, centrally and with the primary desire to maximize good outcomes, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them, provided doing so will maximize good outcomes.

### How the Honor Code fits into Virtuous Honesty: A Reflection on Miller's "Motivation and the Virtue of Honesty": Cadet Madelyn Letendre

*"We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does."*(USAFA, n.d.)

With a foundation in the virtue of honesty, the Honor Code at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) stated above is the cornerstone of military and academic life. It binds all members of the cadet wing to a single moral code. In Miller's paper, *Motivation and the Virtue of Honesty* (2020), he argues that honesty as a virtue is not simply the principle of being truthful to avoid punishment. Rather, it requires an internalized motivation to be honest for virtuous reasons. This conclusion raises a number of concerns for the Honor Code, the USAFA honor system, and cadet wing character as a whole.

To explore why Miller's definition of honesty could pose a challenge to the current honor process at USAFA, I will briefly outline how he arrives at his definition. Miller begins with the premise that honesty is a demonstration of one's underlying psychology. The appearance of honesty, however, is not enough to be deemed an honest person. A person's motivations must align with an intrinsic, moral honesty. While a

wide breadth of acceptable motivations exist, Miller claims that if someone is virtuously honest, they must be motivated by virtue, not punishment. Thus, Miller arrives on a definition of honesty: "a character trait concerned with reliably not intentionally distorting the facts as the agent sees them, and primarily for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds (...) of sufficient motivating strength, along with the absence of significant conflicting motivation to distort the facts as the agent sees them" (Miller, 2020, p. 359).

According to Miller's definition of virtuous honesty, USAFA's honor system creates a set of incentives for honesty, shifting cadet motivation for honesty from virtuous to external. If the cadet wing is truly virtuous and possesses the virtue of honesty, the concept of honor probation<sup>2</sup> would be irrelevant. The Honor Code and honor system, however, remain key institutions in USAFA culture. In contrast to Miller, I argue that while the Honor Code provides an external, unifying motive for honesty. It does not nullify the quality of honesty at USAFA and, in fact, helps to cultivate a shared heritage of honesty and integrity. While USAFA character education can be improved upon using Miller's definition of virtuous honesty, the existence of an honor code and external incentives does not degrade the moral quality of honesty at USAFA.

Miller's definition of honesty has repercussions for USAFA and the Honor Code. The honor process at USAFA creates an external set of standards and repercussions for lying, stealing, and cheating, thus encouraging extrinsic motives for honest behavior. It can be argued that cadets are intrinsically motivated toward the virtue of honesty, and the honor system

<sup>2</sup> In the U.S. Air Force Academy Honor System, cadets found guilty of an Honor Code violation face one of two consequences: disenrollment or honor probation. Cadets who receive honor probation embark on a remediation program that includes loss of privileges, mentoring, reflection, and journaling. Cadets who successfully complete this program are restored to good standing.



is simply a safekeeping for honor. Although this may apply to some cadets, stories about the strictness of honor probation infiltrate cadet life, creating an underlying external motivation to adhere to honesty. While some cadets may be purely motivated by internal sanctions, the Honor Code makes it infeasible to avoid institution-imposed motivations for honesty. If cadet honesty is reliant on mainly external motivations over virtuous reasons, Miller's definition of honesty would conclude that the cadet wing lacks the virtue of honesty. Following Miller's definition, the Honor Code could provide a framework for discouraging dishonesty, but may simply result in acts of honesty rather than the virtue of honesty, creating a complicated moral environment. In the Honor Code, the phrase "nor tolerate among us anyone who does" requires the existence of external sanctions. This toleration clause is an important part of USAFA culture, as it reinforces the standard of integrity. Without external inhibitors, the toleration clause would be ineffective, as the clause stems from group accountability. In a military setting, standards such as not lying, stealing, or cheating, are a necessity. By developing a standard for behavior, cadets, and members of the military as a whole, are bound to a common culture. At USAFA, this culture of honesty is self-reinforcing. Since the standard of integrity is universal and is one of the three Air Force Core Values, every cadet knows the consequences of dishonesty. When a cadet goes through the honor process, they discuss their mistakes, other cadets learn from the experience and are discouraged from the negative external consequences of cheating, and the virtue of honesty is reinforced. If the virtue of honesty were merely internal and individual, cadets would lack the community and accountability that stems from the external sanctions of the Honor Code. Given the nature

of the military profession, it is impossible to completely rescind external inhibitors to cheating. A common standard of behavior is important to ensure the mission is accomplished and cadets adhere to universal character expectations; thus, punishments and incentives must be in place. This is not to say that honesty shouldn't be motivated by moral reasons. Rather, honesty, when encouraged by moral institutional standards that are ingrained in the Honor Code, is virtuous. Thus, I propose an amendment to Miller's definition: virtuous honesty can be motivated "primarily for good, virtuous, or *institutionally dedicated* motivating reasons."

*If cadet honesty is reliant on mainly external motivations over virtuous reasons, Miller's definition of honesty would conclude that the cadet wing lacks the virtue of honesty.*

Still, there are ways character development at USAFA can improve to more closely resemble Miller's definition of honesty. A more effective character development program would emphasize the innate goodness of virtuous honesty, using leadership development time to teach virtue principles. Rather than the current focus on the external repercussions of dishonesty, honor lessons would teach honor from a philosophical and psychological perspective. As noted by Miller, most people want to think of themselves as honest. With this understanding and a study of the external factors that incentivize cheating, cadets and faculty can develop a more complete understanding of honesty as a virtue. Character development with a focus on the innate virtue of honesty can be preventative, alleviating the dependence on external sanctions. If virtue-based honesty pervades throughout the general consciousness

of the cadet wing, honest actions become second-nature, therefore reducing the decision making process to arrive at an honest action. With a basis of honor education in virtue, the honor process can move away from a punishment-based model to more holistic and positive character development. This shift will benefit character education, as it initiates genuine conviction in virtuous honesty, which endures beyond the threat of punishment. Moving toward virtue-based honor education would align USAFA's definition of honesty with the definition Miller provides, vastly improving the honor process and cadets' commitment to virtue-based honesty.

While these improvements can be made to better align honor education with Miller's definition of honesty, military life is inherently distinct from civilian life, and therefore, the working definition of virtuous honesty will be different. The Honor Code is a necessary and enduring aspect of Academy life, but it introduces external standards. These external sanctions bind all cadets to a professional and moral standard, yet they do not degrade the moral quality of honesty at USAFA. Rather, Miller's definition of virtuous honesty is too narrow in the military context, and must be extended to consider honesty with institutional motives as virtuous honesty.

### Replies to Cadets Wilson, Brunner, and Letendre: Christian B. Miller

I am very grateful to Caden, Marc, and Madelyn for engaging with my work in such a thoughtful and careful way. They make a number of very good points that I wish I had thought about before my claims were already in print. In what follows, I say a few things briefly about each of their commentaries.

#### *Cadet Wilson and Virtue Labeling*

In my book, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?*

(2017), I discuss six different strategies for trying to improve our character and become better people. One of these strategies is virtue labeling, or the idea that we should label people with virtue terms like 'honest' or 'kind' in the hope that they will come to internalize the label as something that they are expected to live up to, and so over time actually behave more honest or kind. Caden rightly notes that I had three main reservations in the book about this approach. The first one was just an expression of ignorance, since we do not have empirical studies which track the impact of labels over time. As I wrote, "We also do not know whether a virtue label encourages more virtuous behavior only in the short run, or whether the effect persists" (2017, pp. 178).

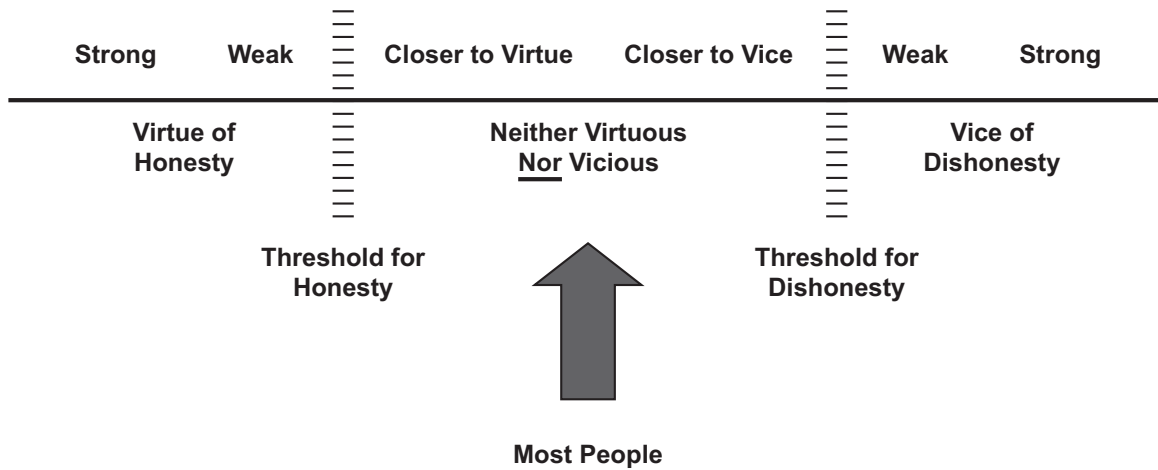
In reply, Caden acknowledges the lack of empirical support, but makes the following prediction: "virtue labeling, if done repeatedly and sincerely, should not lose significant effectiveness over time." To this I say – good point. When I wrote the book, I was thinking more about cases of one-time virtue labeling. But sustained virtue labeling is a different story. We have to wait and see what the studies will end up showing, but I share Caden's hunch here.

My second concern with the virtue labeling strategy was about whether it would be effective as a way to develop actual virtues, and not just promote better behavior. How, after all, does virtue labeling work? I said it is likely because the labeled, "want to live up to the label they have been given...that is hardly a virtuous kind of motive. It is self-interested, with the focus on making a good impression or not disappointing someone, which is not where it needs to be for virtue" (2017, pp. 178-179). Here Caden makes two main points. First, while the motives might not start out as virtuous, they might develop that way later on. And second, "Behavior modification is not the goal. Virtue



Figure 1

*Most People are Intermediate between Honesty and Dishonesty*



formation is. However, if we fall short of this goal and only reach behavior modification, this still might be a net positive.”

To these I say – good points again! After all, there is no reason to deny that one’s motivation can change over time after being immersed in a pattern of action. What might start out as wanting to live up to social expectations, can evolve into an appreciation of the goodness or value of a way of life. This is analogous in certain ways to how Pascal thought about his Wager.<sup>3</sup> Someone convinced of Pascal’s argument might start out believing in God (or at least trying to believe) for the sake of potential rewards in the afterlife, but Pascal

thought that immersion in a religious way of life could open up better grounds for believing in and following God than just pure self-interest. Moreover about Caden’s second point, I’ll take improved behavior any day, even if it is just for social expectation reasons, over worse behavior.

Finally, the most serious concern I raised in my book was about the ethics of using virtue labels. For instance, I asked the question, “Isn’t there something downright disturbing about labeling people with virtue terms when you know that they don’t have any of those virtues?” (2017, pp. 179). Caden is not convinced that there would be anything disturbing going on. As he writes, “virtue labeling does not require the person to completely possess the virtue. They just need to possess some degree of the virtue. And since most of us possess some degree of nearly every virtue, I do not believe we should be overly concerned with the dishonesty of virtue labeling.”

3 French thinker Blaise Pascal (d. 1662) argued that religious agnostics should consider the following matrix of possibilities: if they reject God but God exists, they face eternal damnation. If they accept God and God exists, they gain eternal (infinite) rewards. If they reject God and God does not exist, they gain temporal rewards. If they accept God and God does not exist, they face temporal restrictions. Given these four possibilities, they are better off “wagering” on God. For a technical discussion, see the entry on Pascal’s Wager in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/#ArguGeneExpePascWage>).

Now I think this is a good reply, if we grant the key premise that most of us are virtuous to some extent. But here is where I am going to put up some resistance. In two earlier books, *Moral Character: An Empirical Theory* (2013) and *Character and Moral Psychology* (2014), I looked in great detail at empirical studies in psychology pertaining to helping, harming, lying, and cheating. While this is certainly not every area of morality, at least for these central domains I drew the conclusion that the results of the relevant studies do not fit with what we should expect to find if most of us were virtuous people. Instead, I concluded that most of us have a mixed character, which is intermediate between virtue and vice. Figure 1 illustrates this idea using the virtue of honesty as an example.

Whether you end up agreeing with my picture of mixed character or not, the key claim is that most of us fall short of being virtuous to any extent at all. Hence if we are supposed to label most people as virtuous, then our labels are erroneous descriptively.

If this empirical picture of lack of virtue is correct, and we come to accept it, then my reservations about the ethics of using virtue labels remain. In particular, there seem to be two ways that dishonesty might become manifest. First, you are intentionally distorting the facts and so being dishonest (2021) in telling someone that she is honest when you know that she is not. Even if you don't have an idea one-way or the other about her honesty, it would be dishonest to still label her as an honest person in order to try to get her to internalize the label. In addition, you need to keep your practice of using erroneous labels a secret in the long run, and so continue to deceive and/or mislead the target and other third parties so as to maintain their false views. Hence, I still can't get on board with the virtue labeling strategy just yet.

### *Cadet Brunner on Honesty and Utilitarianism*

Marc focuses on my work on honesty, which was developed in greatest detail in my book, *Honesty: The Philosophy and Psychology of a Neglected Virtue* (2021). Over the course of the book, I develop an increasingly complex account of this virtue, which ends up becoming this mouthful:

Honesty is the virtue of being disposed, centrally and reliably, and as dictated by the capacities associated with practical wisdom, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them, and primarily for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds K1 through KN of sufficient motivating strength and modal robustness and scope to encompass all human beings, along with the absence of significant non-virtuous motivation to distort the facts as the agent sees them (2021, pp. 132).

Fortunately for our purposes we can neglect most of this. The key bits are that an honest person does not intentionally distort or misrepresent the facts as she takes them to be, and she is motivated in a virtuous way.

Marc is quite right that I don't want my approach to be off-limits to any reasonable ethical theory. In other words, I hope that advocates of Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, divine command theory, and other approaches could adopt it. But Marc thinks that my approach is in tension with utilitarianism, particularly of the kind developed by John Stuart Mill. He holds this for two main reasons. First, Marc claims that I have left utilitarian motives off the list of good or virtuous motivating reasons. As he writes, "Having the virtue of honesty, to a utilitarian, involves the desire and motivation to be truthful for the promotion of the greatest general happiness. Yet Miller's position does not warrant such a condition...there must be an added

condition in his definition which includes the desire to achieve good outcomes.”

To be honest (which seems appropriate), I have to admit that I didn’t give much thought to utilitarianism when I was developing my account, in part because I have deep reservations about the theory. Fortunately, though, I can still accommodate the approach into my view. In chapter four of the book, I develop a pluralist theory of honest motivation. I note that many different kinds of motives could count as virtuously honest including loving motives, friendship motives, dutiful motives, and justice motives. So if Mill’s view is reasonable, then we can simply add utility maximization to the list of virtuous motives. What I am mainly concerned to exclude from honest motivation are self-interested motives like telling the truth to avoid punishment or to get rewards in the afterlife. But a motive to maximize overall utility is a far cry from a self-interested motivation.

Marc’s other concern with my view is that it appears to make dishonest behavior wrong without exception. But as Marc notes, “The second conclusion emerging from Mill’s writing on virtue is that to claim a certain action can be axiomatically wrong is fundamentally contrary to outcome-based ethics.” My response is - I agree! On my view, intentionally distorting the facts is always going to be dishonest. But intentionally distorting the facts is not always going to be wrong. Whether an action is wrong or not is going to depend on what the wrong-making features of the act are, such as relevant rules, relevant virtues, or – for the utilitarian – what maximizes utility overall. In some cases these factors can outweigh the contribution provided by dishonesty to the wrongness of a given action. To take the classic example here, lying to the Nazi in order to protect a Jewish family is still a failure of honesty. But almost everyone thinks that it is all-

things-considered morally permissible, and may even be morally obligatory.

So, I think that my account of honesty gets things exactly right. In cases like the Nazi one, there is still an act of dishonesty involved. But it doesn’t follow that the act is thereby automatically wrong. I think Marc can welcome this result.

### *Cadet Letendre on Honesty and Honor Codes*

Finally, Madelyn takes my work on honesty and connects it to the role of honor codes, with a specific focus on the USAFA Honor Code. I have to say that overall, I think we are mostly in agreement, and I basically just want to affirm what she said. Let me focus first on two points of potential disagreement.

Madelyn is worried about whether my approach to thinking about the virtue of honesty is at odds with how the Air Force Academy is implementing its Honor Code. In particular, the Honor Code emphasizes punishment for Honor Code violations, and punishment avoidance is not virtuous motivation. I agree. Not cheating only to avoid getting caught and punished, is not going to foster the virtue of honesty, at least in the short run. But taking our lesson from the discussion of virtue labeling above, three points are worth emphasizing. First, if enforcing the Honor Code helps to bring about lower rates of cheating, then it is worth it, even if the motivation is not great. Again, I’ll usually take better behavior with self-interested motivation, over worse behavior with self-interested motivation.

Second, as Caden pointed out, motives can change over time. So even if punishment avoidance starts out being the motive for most students to not cheat, hopefully over time their motivation can change into something more virtuous. And finally, there can, and

often are, multiple motives behind our actions. Hence students can be partially motivated to not cheat both because they don't want to be punished and because they think it is the right thing to do. Hopefully, over time the second motive grows in strength, which will also lead in the direction of the virtue of honesty.

Madelyn is also worried about my approach to thinking about honesty for a different reason. She writes that I “invalidate a Kantian, duty-based, approach to honesty. Miller claims that duty cannot be the ultimate motivation for honesty as it could be misaligned to egoistic motivations. This raises concerns over honor-code-based honesty. If cadets are honest simply because it aligns with their duty or the honor code, this could devolve into egoistic motives, such as avoiding punishment.”

Fortunately, it turns out that there is nothing for her to worry about here. For as we saw in the previous section, I am a pluralist about honest motivation. And one of the motives I am just fine with is Kantian, duty-based motivation, along with several other kinds. I also am convinced that dutiful motivation is distinct from self-interested motivation, and does not have to devolve into the latter. It potentially could devolve, but can also remain separate as well.

Let me end by affirming two important points that Madelyn makes:

- 1) “It is simultaneously possible to cultivate morally-motivated virtues, such as honesty, while maintaining the external sanctions from the Honor Code.” and,
- 2) “If virtue-based honesty pervades throughout the general consciousness of the cadet wing, honest actions become second-nature...”

These claims seem to me to be exactly right, and capture worthy goals that all of us in education should strive toward.

♦ ♦ ♦

## References

- Miller, C. (2013). *Moral Character: An Empirical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, C. (2014). *Character and Moral Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, C. (2017). *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, C. (2020). Motivation and the Virtue of Honesty. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 23, 355-371.
- Miller, C. (2021). *Honesty: The Philosophy and Psychology of a Neglected Virtue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mill, J. S. (1998). *Utilitarianism*. Oxford University Press.
- Upton, C. (2017). Meditation and the Cultivation of Virtue. *Philosophical Psychology*, 30(4), 373-394.