At the center of Christian Miller’s chapter is the claim that most people lack the virtue of honesty. One of Miller’s main objectives is to make this and related claims “initially intelligible and suitably interesting to hopefully inspire further investigation” (XX). By this standard, the chapter is a tremendous success: Miller offers an interesting and attractive account of what honesty is, mounts a forceful, empirically-based argument for thinking that most people don’t have it, and sketches an alternative model of the kinds of character traits he thinks most people do possess. Every part of Miller’s discussion—from the purely conceptual to the primarily empirical—is worth reading and reckoning with. I think it stands more than a small chance of sparking increased philosophical attention to the virtue of honesty.

These kudos aside, I have my doubts about whether the empirical research Miller discusses provides adequate support for the conclusion that most people aren’t honest. In my estimation, Miller sets the bar for honesty too high. I argue that once the requirements for honesty are properly attenuated, the significance of the empirical data is thrown into question.

The conceptual core of honesty

Before getting to this argument, I also want to raise a couple questions about Miller’s positive account of honesty. This account goes a significant way toward unifying the various actions and attitudes we associate with honesty. It has much to recommend it. However, it also faces a challenging dilemma.

Miller specifies the conceptual core of honesty as follows: “The virtue of honesty is, centrally, a character trait concerned with reliably not intentionally distorting the facts” (XX; emphasis added). One conspicuous feature of this characterization is that it makes honesty seem largely negative. It suggests that honesty is about not engaging in a certain kind of distortion. While this covers many instances of honesty, in certain familiar contexts, honesty demands something much more positive, for example, a bringing to light or stating of certain important facts—facts that might otherwise go unnoticed or remain hidden. To illustrate, imagine a situation in which person A tells person B a web of lies about some important matter. And imagine that a close friend of B’s, person C, finds out about the lies but is reluctant to bring them to B’s attention for fear of how B might react. Honesty might require C to speak up—to tell B that he has been lied to by A. Yet, a failure to do so wouldn’t appear to involve an “intentional distorting of the facts.” Rather, in lying to B, A is the one who has distorted the facts. B would simply be withholding information.

In response, Miller would likely say that if B were to refrain from speaking up, he would in fact be “distorting the facts” in the relevant sense. He might argue, for instance, that B would be distorting to himself the fact that he is obligated to speak up. Alternatively, he might claim that
B would be distorting the facts in the sense that he would be *acting as if* he didn’t possess the information in question.

While this gloss of what it is to “intentionally distort the facts” might give Miller a way around the worry in question, it elicits a further objection. Specifically, it seems that if B’s withholding of the relevant information counts as “intentionally distorting the facts” in the relevant sense, then just about any immoral act will count as an act of dishonesty. This is because most (all?) immoral actions involve acting as if a certain falsehood were true, including many actions that do not appear to be instances of dishonesty at all. Consider, for example, an extremely vain and selfish person who thinks and acts as if the world revolves her own needs and interests. She acts as if she is the “center of the universe.” On the broader reading of what it is to intentionally distort the facts, this person’s actions do just this (she is not, after all, the center of the universe). Alternatively, consider the actions of a neglectful and emotionally distant parent. This person’s interactions with his children suggest (mistakenly) that they are unworthy of his attention and care. In both of these cases, a person intentionally distorts the facts in the relevant, broader sense; but in neither case is the person’s behavior an instance of dishonesty. Finally, there is nothing unusual about these cases. Again, for just about any immoral action, it is none too difficult to identify a false statement that the action suggests or propagates.

To summarize: at first glance, Miller’s positive account of honesty appears to be too narrow. The idea that honesty is essentially a matter of “reliably not intentionally distorting the facts” invites the objection that honesty sometimes involves something more active or positive. It sometimes requires positively stating, casting light on, or speaking up about the truth. Miller can get around this objection by arguing that when a person fails to divulge the truth, he is “intentionally distorting the facts” in the sense that he is (intentionally) acting as if certain falsehoods were true. The cost of this solution, however, is that Miller’s account of honesty then becomes too broad. It suggests that most (possibly all) immoral acts are acts of dishonesty, which in turn seems to stretch the notion of dishonesty to its breaking point.

**The threshold of honesty**

I turn now to the main focus of my remarks, which is Miller’s argument to the effect that most people lack the virtue of honesty.

It is important from the outset to be clear about exactly what Miller is and isn’t claiming. Miller is not saying that no one possesses the virtue of honesty. Still less is he claiming that no one could possess this virtue. Nor is he saying that most people possess the vice of dishonesty. On the other hand, neither is Miller claiming merely that most people fall short of perfect—or even robust—honesty. Rather, Miller’s contention is that most people fall short of even weak or minimal honesty. He thinks most people fail to meet the baseline or threshold for the possession of this virtue.

We must, then, look carefully at how exactly Miller is thinking about the “threshold requirements” for honesty. I will focus here on the two requirements he explicitly identifies and discusses (XX). As noted above, I will argue that these requirements are too demanding. I will
then suggest an alternative way of specifying honesty’s threshold. Finally, I will consider the relevant empirical research in light of this alternative account.

Miller proposes the following two threshold requirements:

(C1) A person who is honest will reliably refrain from cheating in situations where he is a free and willing participant and the relevant rules are fair and appropriate, even if by cheating he is assured of acquiring some benefit for himself. (XX)

(C2) A person who is honest will reliably refrain from telling everyday lies which are not morally justifiable. (XX)

At first glance, these requirements seem reasonable enough. Indeed, they may seem obviously correct. However, on closer scrutiny, questions emerge.

I begin with two points of clarification. First, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that (C1) and (C2) are requirements for minimal or weak honesty. They are not aimed at capturing the higher normative dimensions of this virtue (XX). Second, each principle invokes the notion of what we might refer to as an “honesty-relevant context,” that is, a context in which a manifestation of honesty is morally called for. (C1) says that an honest person will refrain from cheating in contexts where the person is “a free and willing participant and the relevant rules are fair and appropriate.” Were the person not a free or willing participant, or were the rules either unfair or inappropriate, then presumably this person wouldn’t have an obligation to act honestly. Similarly, (C2) says that an honest person will reliably refrain from telling “everyday lies” that are not “morally justifiable.” Were lying morally justifiable in a given situation, then here as well acting honestly presumably wouldn’t be a requirement.

For the sake of simplicity, I propose the following reformulations of (C1) and (C2):

(C1*) When in an honesty-relevant context, a minimally honest person will reliably refrain from cheating.

(C2*) When in an honesty-relevant context, a minimally honest person will reliably refrain from lying.

When clarified and simplified in this way, Miller’s threshold requirements invite further scrutiny.

We may begin with (C1*). First, is it really the case that any person who is minimally honest must reliably refrain from any kind of cheating? And must any minimally honest person refrain from any kind of cheating in every possible honesty-relevant context? Or, on the contrary, might there be certain (fairly trivial) forms of cheating that are consistent with the possession of weak or minimal honesty? Or certain (“low stakes”) honesty-relevant contexts relative to which a person might be less than reliable at refraining from cheating while still being weakly or minimally honest? Further, might not the answer to these questions depend in part on how the person in question behaves with respect to other (more serious) forms of cheating or in other (more “high stakes”) honesty-relevant contexts? If, with respect to a relatively low-stakes
honesty-relevant context, a person is less than reliable at refraining from a relatively minor form of cheating, but is extremely reliable at engaging in more important and challenging forms of honesty across many (or all) high-stakes honesty-relevant contexts, shouldn’t we allow for the possibility that this person is at least minimally honest?

To illustrate, consider the following examples:

(E1) Smith is a self-employed money manager who caters to an extremely wealthy and trusting clientele. Because he works for himself, there are very few people looking over his shoulder, which means that if he wanted to, he could cheat his clients out of hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. However, out of a high sense of personal integrity and responsibility, and a desire to do right by and provide excellent service to his clients, Smith behaves in an uncompromisingly honest manner. Even when his own finances are tight, and despite the encouragement of several of his friends in the finance industry to do otherwise, Smith refuses to cheat his clients out of a single dollar. Smith also manifests this sense of integrity and responsibility in several other areas of his life. For instance, as a former CPA, he is privy to various low-risk forms of tax fraud that could save him thousands of dollars on his annual return. However, in this domain as well Smith always conducts himself in an upright manner. His tax returns are a model of thoroughness and accuracy. These impressive behaviors notwithstanding, it is also true of Smith that when he takes his family to the movies, he sometimes purchases a “child” ticket for his thirteen-year-old daughter, even though the cut off for these tickets is twelve. Similarly, when going out to eat, he sometimes allows his daughter to order from the kids’ menu, though she should have stopped doing so a year ago. Smith doesn’t always game the system in this way. And he doesn’t feel especially good about it when he does. Nevertheless, on account of this behavior, Smith cannot be said to “reliably refrain” from engaging in the relevant kinds of dishonest activity in the contexts in question.

It seems unfair and counterintuitive to think that Smith cannot be considered even weakly or minimally honest. Faced with many opportunities to behave dishonestly, opportunities from which he stands to gain handsomely, Smith reliably takes the high road. Yet, in a relatively narrow range of circumstances, he behaves in a way that a fully honest person would not. The latter indiscretions, while sufficient for denying that Smith is perfectly honest, hardly seem like a good reason for denying that he is minimally so.

A further, similar example:

(E2) Jones is a veteran journalist employed by a magazine whose first priority is building up its subscriber base. As such, the goal of reporting the truth regularly takes a back seat to publishing a story that might attract new readers. Thus the culture at the magazine is often at odds with honest journalistic practice. Against this grain, and by contrast with many of her colleagues, Jones displays the utmost honesty in all areas of her work. From conducting research, to selecting sources, to checking facts, Jones’s fidelity to the truth is deep, consistent, and admirable. Jones’s honest attitude and behaviors extend into many other areas of her life as well. When interacting with her spouse, children, and friends, she reliably resists telling the kinds of half-truths or outright lies that would often make
her life easier. She is regarded in these circles as a person who can be counted on to refrain from distorting or obfuscating the truth. Nevertheless, when Jones encounters solicitors and salespeople of various sorts (e.g. telemarketers, people in the supermarket parking lot inviting her to sign up for some product or service, religious missionaries who appear at her front door), she often finds herself telling half-truths or white lies, for example, that her budget is too tight to afford what they are selling, that she is in hurry, and so on. Accordingly, Smith fails to reliably refrain from intentionally distorting the facts in certain honesty-relevant contexts.

Here again I submit that it would be a mistake to think that the person in question cannot be minimally or weakly honest. While she could be more honest than she is, Jones appears to manifest a significant—even an admirable—degree of this virtue.

These examples suggest that Miller’s threshold requirements for honesty, modest as they might initially appear, are too demanding. They fail to account for the apparent compatibility of weak or minimal honesty with certain relatively limited and minor forms of moral unreliability or wrongdoing. They also fail to accommodate the importance of a person’s reliability relative to other (potentially weightier) forms of honesty-relevant behavior or honesty-relevant contexts.

In fact, Miller’s threshold requirements appear to be even more demanding than what has been suggested thus far. Recall the point that honesty has many dimensions, including not lying, stealing, cheating, or promise-breaking (XX). Presumably, to possess minimal honesty on Miller’s view, one must meet the threshold requirements for all of these dimensions. Therefore, if a person reliably refrains from any form of cheating, stealing, and promise-breaking across all honesty-relevant contexts, if the person’s character in these areas is flawless, but the person also somewhat regularly distorts the truth to solicitors or similar acquaintances, this person apparently cannot be considered even weakly or minimally honest on Miller’s view. This is a further implausible implication.

The objections just rehearsed underscore the need to weaken (C1*) and (C2*). I propose the following alternative threshold requirement:

(TR1) A person who is minimally honest will reliably refrain from engaging in dishonest activity (e.g. lying or cheating) of a significant “magnitude” and “variety” across a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts.

“Magnitude” here refers to how morally problematic the action is. A white lie would be a “low magnitude” act of dishonesty, while lying to a friend or spouse about an important matter would be a “high magnitude” act. “Varieties” of dishonest activity correspond to the dimensions of dishonesty noted above: lying, cheating, stealing, deceiving, etc. Accordingly, (TR1) says that a minimally honest person will refrain from engaging in dishonest activities of a sufficiently bad quality (magnitude) or problematically wide variety—and that she will do so across a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts. Of course, the notion of “significance” is also central to this principle. While it would be desirable to say more about what counts as a “significant” magnitude, variety, and range, the discussion above suggests that this is a rather complicated and variable matter. It suggests, for instance, that whether the magnitude of a given form of
dishonest activity is significant can depend at least in part on the breadth of honesty-relevant contexts in which the person reliably refrains from this activity. Despite these complications, I assume that the relevant concept of significance is clear enough to be comprehensible and useful in the present context.14

(TR1) clearly is less demanding than any of the threshold requirements identified above. In keeping with (E1), (E2), and related cases, it allows for the following possibilities (among many others):

(1) A weakly or minimally honest person (a) who always or nearly always refrains from performing any dishonest actions of a certain variety (e.g. cheating or lying) across several high-stakes honesty-relevant contexts, but (b) who, in a relatively narrow range of low-stakes honesty-relevant contexts, sometimes engages in low-magnitude dishonest actions of the same variety.15

(2) A weakly or minimally honest person (a) who always refrains from any kind of cheating, stealing, or promise breaking, but (b) who, in a narrow range of low-stakes honesty-relevant contexts, sometimes performs low-magnitude acts of a different variety of dishonesty (e.g. lying).16

The empirical evidence

If the argument so far is on the right track, the bar for minimal or weak honesty is low enough to allow for certain kinds of moral limitations and imperfections not permitted by Miller’s account. However, this does not by itself undermine Miller’s argument that most people lack the virtue of honesty. For it may be that most people fail to satisfy even the weaker threshold requirements introduced above.

Miller’s argument is based on the behavior of subjects from several controlled experiments designed to test people’s willingness to cheat. While the amount of cheating discovered in these studies may be surprising to many, what does it reveal about people’s possession of honesty? Do the studies show that most people aren’t honest?

While the studies may provide good evidence for thinking that most people are not maximally or perfectly honest, the more pressing question is whether they support the claim that most people lack even weak or minimal honesty, that is, that most people fail to satisfy (TR1). Clearly, the studies do not provide anything like conclusive support for this claim. While most people may be disposed to engage in the relevant (and similar) forms of dishonest behavior in the relevant (and similar) contexts, it may be that there are many other (more significant) forms of dishonest behavior that they are disposed to avoid and many other (more high-stakes) honesty-relevant contexts with respect to which they are disposed to avoid the relevant and any other form of dishonest behavior. Were this the case, the likely conclusion, given (TR1), would be that most people are weakly or minimally honest.

Do the studies at least make it probable or likely that most people fail to satisfy (TR1)? That is, do the empirical data make it probable that most people aren’t “disposed to reliably refrain from
engaging in dishonest activity of a significant ‘magnitude’ and ‘variety’ across a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts”? This also strikes me as far from clear. The studies target a single kind of dishonest activity on a single occasion in a single honesty-relevant context. While it might be plausible to draw inferences from the totality of these studies about how most people are likely to behave with respect to related forms of dishonesty in related circumstances, it would seem like quite a stretch to conclude that most people probably aren’t disposed to refrain from engaging in dishonest activity of a significant magnitude and variety across a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts.

This assessment seems especially plausible given (1) the magnitude of the cheating behavior found in these studies and (2) the context in which this behavior occurs. Concerning (1), much of the cheating uncovered by the experiments (e.g. taking a little extra time to complete a timed exam or modestly exaggerating the results of a coin toss or die roll for a small financial gain) does not seem very morally significant. To be sure, this is not behavior that we would expect of a perfectly (possibly even a robustly) honest person. Nevertheless, given its limited magnitude, it would seem quite hasty to conclude that the subjects in question—let alone an even broader population—probably are not disposed to avoid engaging in dishonest activity of a significant magnitude or variety across a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts. Concerning (2), the contexts in which the cheating occurs are rather artificial and appear to involve very low moral stakes. The subjects are knowingly participating in psychological experiments. And they presumably are aware that nothing much hangs on whether their behavior in this context is perfectly honest. For this reason as well it would seem hasty to conclude that most people do not satisfy (TR1), and more specifically, that there is not a significant range of honesty-relevant contexts in which most people are disposed to refrain from engaging in the relevant or related forms of dishonesty.

As these remarks suggest, a more revealing collection of studies would be one that targets people’s behavior with respect to a wide variety of high-magnitude dishonest actions across several high-stakes honesty relevant contexts. While studies of this sort are likely unfeasible (e.g. given IRB restrictions), it is important to note that the studies in question lie at the opposite end of the spectrum: they examine people’s behavior with respect to a limited variety of relatively low-magnitude dishonest actions across a very limited range of relatively artificial and low-stakes honesty-relevant contexts. As such, they seem like a shaky basis for drawing conclusions about whether most people are weakly or minimally honest. I conclude, contra Miller, that we should be reluctant to infer, on the basis of the relevant empirical data, that most people fail to satisfy (TR1) and therefore are less than weakly or minimally honest.

**What unifies “mixed traits”?**

I close with a question about Miller’s positive account of character, which he introduces toward the end of the chapter. Miller proposes that most of us possess neither virtues nor vices, but rather “mixed traits,” which he describes as having “some morally positive features—which preclude them from being vices—but also some morally negative features—which preclude them from being virtues” (XX). While there is something attractive about this picture, especially if one agrees with Miller about the upshot of the empirical research discussed above, I find the very idea of “mixed traits” somewhat puzzling.
Notice that Miller’s claim is not that most of us possess mixed traits in the sense that we possess a wide range of traits some of which are positive and others of which are negative. Rather, for Miller, a single mixed trait has both positive and negative valences.\textsuperscript{18} A person’s mixed trait related to honesty, for instance, might consist both of dispositions to tell the truth and dispositions to lie. But this leaves one to wonder: in what sense are mixed traits single traits?

Again, compare the following two claims:

(1) We possess “mixed traits” in the sense that, relative to a given virtue concept like honesty, we possess a mixture of traits, some of which dispose us toward virtuous (e.g. honest) behavior, some of which dispose us toward vicious (e.g. dishonest) behavior, but neither of which is good or bad enough to count as a virtue or a vice.

(2) We possess “mixed traits” in the sense that, relative to a given virtue concept like honesty, we possess a singular, generic trait that is constituted partly by dispositions to engage in honest activity and partly of dispositions to engage in dishonest activity, but that is neither good or bad enough to count as a virtue or a vice.\textsuperscript{19}

Options (1) and (2) both seem to fit with Miller’s general take on the empirical research discussed above. However, his considered position apparently is (2). But, again, one might wonder: in what sense are “mixed traits” singular traits, given the mutually opposing valences of the dispositions that are said to constitute them? Why not think instead that, when it comes to honesty, most of us possess a cluster of dispositions—perhaps even traits—that incline us toward cheating (in certain ways, in certain situations) as well as a cluster of dispositions that incline us toward honest behavior (of certain sorts, in certain situations)? That is, why favor (2) over (1)?\textsuperscript{20}

It is not clear to me how much hangs on this issue. It could be that, barring a satisfactory answer to the question just posed, Miller could, without much cost to his overall account, opt for something like (1) over (2).\textsuperscript{21} Still, given the centrality of the notion of mixed traits to Miller’s positive account of character, this seems like a matter worthy of some attention.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{1} More specifically, he claims that most college-age Westerners lack the virtue of honesty. While not an insignificant qualification, I will set it aside here.
\textsuperscript{2} Miller notes on p. XX that he is not wedded to this account, nor to the idea that a unified account of honesty is even possible. Still, his account is, by my lights, sufficiently interesting and prima facie promising to merit serious attention and evaluation.
\textsuperscript{3} On p. XX Miller responds to an objection to the effect that his account is too passive; however, that objection is distinct from the present one. Instead, the dimension of honesty I’m calling attention to is similar to what Miller calls “forthrightness” (XX). Accordingly, the present objection could be recast as the claim that forthrightness doesn’t appear to be a matter of reliably not distorting the facts.
\textsuperscript{4} This is in keeping with his response to the objection that his account doesn’t fit well with the “fidelity to promises” dimension of honesty (XX).
\textsuperscript{5} This mirrors his response to the “pirates and theft” case discussed on pp. XX.
This worry could also be developed in terms of the claim that a major subset of immoral actions (considerably larger than the putative subset of dishonest actions) involve distorting to oneself certain facts about moral one’s obligations. See note XX above.

Strictly speaking, Miller’s (C1) and (C2), as well as (C1*) and (C2*), are modally ambiguous and admit of a weaker reading than I am giving them here. For instance, (C2) might be read as saying that a person who is honest will sometimes or often reliably refrain from telling everyday lies. However, I will assume here that Miller does not favor these weaker formulations of honesty’s threshold. My reason for doing so is that if these weaker principles were correct (and the stronger ones incorrect), then as I explain in greater detail below, the upshot of the empirical data countenanced by Miller would be highly questionable. In particular, it would become much more difficult to conclude from the empirical data that most people are not minimally or weakly virtuous. For, the data evidently don’t substantiate a denial of the claim that, for instance, most people sometimes (even often) refrain from from cheating or telling everyday lies.

Note that in allowing for such a possibility, we needn’t assume that the person in question reliably cheats in any context. Failure to reliably refrain from engaging in dishonest behavior is consistent with one’s honesty-relevant behavior being a “mixed bag”—neither reliably honest nor reliably dishonest.

Miller could object that the contexts in which Smith “intentionally distorts the truth” aren’t actually honesty-relevant: they aren’t contexts call for or demand honest behavior. However, this claim threatens to undermine Miller’s own argument that most people aren’t minimally honest. For, by the same token, it could be argued that the experimental contexts central to the studies on which this argument turns also aren’t honesty-relevant.

I am not intending to contradict Miller’s principle on p. XX that a person “cannot have the virtue of honesty and the opposing vice of dishonesty as part of her character at the same time.” The kind of unreliability or limitations I have in mind need not be understood—even potentially so—as vices.

Miller has confirmed this point in conversation.

By “somewhat regularly” I mean regularly enough such that the person cannot be said to reliably refrain from said activity.

While suboptimal, this should not be very surprising. That is, there is no antecedent reason to expect judgments about whether a person possesses minimal honesty vs. a trait that falls just short of minimal honesty to be especially clear or straightforward (indeed we should probably expect a certain amount of vagueness on this point).

For instance, I assume that it is clear enough that (barring additional relevant information) the persons in (E1) and (E2) reliably refrain from engaging in dishonest activity of a “significant” magnitude and variety across a “significant” range of honesty-relevant contexts.

This is the kind of case illustrated by (E1) and (E2) above. And, again, by “sometimes” here I mean regularly enough such that the person cannot be said to reliably refrain from the relevant actions.

This kind of case illustrates the point that the significance of a person’s dishonesty activity in a given context can depend in part on the kind and quality of honest behavior she manifests in other relevant contexts.
A similar conclusion is suggested by the “everybody does it” response that one often hears in connection with certain highly prevalent but low-grade manifestations of dishonesty. It is unlikely that people who make this kind of remark also believe that most people aren’t weakly or minimally honest. Therefore, if the moral intuitions in question are to be trusted, it would seem that the possession of weak or minimal honesty is consistent with certain forms of dishonest behavior. Thanks to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for this point.

This is made clear by his discussion of “some of the dispositions to form beliefs and desires which make up a Mixed Cheating Trait” on p. XX (emphasis added).

“A” singular trait may not be quite right, particularly in the case of honesty, which presumably has several different dimensions. But this is neither here nor there relative to the present point. The critical difference between (1) and (2), for my purposes, is that with (2) the traits in question are comprised of dispositions that are in mutual opposition.

Thanks to Steve Porter for a helpful discussion of this point.

One possible cost is that (1) may represent a further departure from ordinary ways of thinking about character compared with (2). (2) allows Miller to substitute talk of virtues and vices with talk of “mixed traits” in a fairly straightforward way.

Thanks to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter and to Christian Miller for some helpful dialogue and clarifications.