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The Bracing, Empty Self vs. the Open, Heart-Minded Self

By Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

The anthropologist, Colin Turnbull (1984), contrasted his British upbringing with African Mbuti (Bambuti) children, a non-industrialized foraging society (with few possessions) whom he studied. The Mbuti represent the type of society similar to that in which the human genus spent 99% of its history: small-band hunter-gatherers. When reaching adolescence, Mbuti children brim with skills, full of confidence





in their ability to meet any life challenge, ready to embrace the transition to adulthood. In contrast, left with uncaring nannies most of the time, subjected to physical punishment, and his feelings largely ignored, Turnbull approached his own adolescence empty and uncertain, ripe for bullying by teachers and peers.

According to Cushman (1995), the “empty self,” like that described by Turnbull, is a common outcome in the USA today, partially propelled by a history of migration and mobility but also by psychological theory and practice. I think much has to do with how adults have “turned away” from children’s wellbeing (not only in the USA). When families and communities are distracted and stressed, they do not provide young children with the intensive supportive care they evolved to need. Once a child is traumatized, it is difficult to reestablish the species-typical trajectory for development. And a distorted trajectory is often passed on to subsequent generations through epigenetic or extra-genetic inheritance.

Starting perinatally, **the sense of self is an emergent property**, an outcome of biosocial experience, based in the development of implicit socioemotional intelligence. Neurobiological studies today are supporting the general insight from psychoanalytic theory that the self is initially shaped through experiences with caregivers. As humans are dynamic systems and highly immature at birth, it is not surprising that early experience has longterm effects on wellbeing, sociality and morality.

One of the key aspects of early life is how much caregivers follow the **built-in needs of the baby** (e.g., the need for nearly constant physical intimacy and quick comforting responsiveness to signals of distress). This is not a mother-only or mom-and-dad-only endeavor—it requires a consistent, responsive set of caregivers through early childhood; three or four loving adult companions seems to be ideal.

The ongoing (emotional and physical) support that caregivers provide communicates to the young child the trustworthiness of his body signals and the safety and supportiveness of the world. Consistent responsiveness leads to a self highly secure and deeply rooted in the social landscape, who skillfully derives pleasure from and prosocially contributes to the community.

When caregivers are not ongoingly supportive (e.g., isolating the baby from touch and calming

comfort), the child's foundational neurobiology and sense of living forms around a sense of danger (Sandler, 1960), along with a sense of rejection or negation (Litowitz, 1998). Sandler suggested that the sense of danger develops into cynicism or anxiety, or, in any case, into an adult with little trust or confidence in the world. The self harbors a sense of abandonment and badness, apparent in insecure attachment, which subconsciously flavors life experience and propels behavior to avoid those feelings with neurobiological inflexibility ("stiffness" of the mind or heart).

When children start out with experiences that undermine their species-typical becoming, their moral motivations too are shifted. They move away from favoring relational attunement (peaceful engagement), the predominant moral orientation visible in societies that provide young children with what they evolved to need-- small-band hunter-gatherers. Instead,



with early emotional abandonment (conveyed by caregiver absence, socially and physically), motivations become oriented away from social and communal commitment. Detachment from intimacy is practiced and, over time, preferred-- an orientation that mainstream USA culture now considers to be normal. Toxically stressed, the child automatically shifts to favoring social and moral self-protectionism. Missing is the flexible and adept sociality that was central to human evolution.

Self-protectionist societies breed self-protectionist individuals who consider it normal to be narcissistic, selfish, and ruthless for one's own ends. And non-virtue, or vice, becomes part of the social institutions self-protectionist adults build. As Derber (2013) points out, the USA has become a sociopathic society, one that "creates dominant social norms that are antisocial—that is, norms that assault the well-being and survival of much of the population and undermine the social bonds and sustainable environmental conditions essential to any form of social order." Such a society is governed by sociopathic institutions that advance institutional self-interest at the expense of harming citizens and the society at large. The win-at-any-cost, profits-over-people attitudes and behaviors at the top of such social systems trickle down to the rest of the populace, infusing hyper-individualism and conversational narcissism throughout the social landscape.

Like Sylvan Tomkins (1965), I think adult worldviews start in babyhood, biosocially constructed by

parents immersed in a particular social system and worldview, which they pass on through their treatment of the child, influencing the child's neurobiological capacities for sociality, morality and wellbeing.

Early life can set one up for an open or bracing attitude towards others. Resonating with open heart-mindedness is fostered by companionship care. In contrast, the bracing empty-self results from lack of supportive care (e.g., patterns of being left alone in distress, physical isolation) or from later trauma.

Humans evolved with an developmental niche that matches up with the maturational schedule of the child (the longest of any animal), building capacities for virtue from the ground up. When the niche is undermined, the natural development of virtue is thrown off kilter.

When things have not gone optimally in childhood, we can take charge of our own healing in adulthood, by revamping our habitual moral orientations and learning to resonate with compassion instead of fear. Further, though we may always harbor woundedness, we can at least ensure proper nurturance of the next generation.

Although people have different definitions of virtue, most focus on getting along well and wisely with others. For example, Aristotle included "social fittedness" as a necessary characteristic (Nussbaum, 1988). But, as we are learning in this era of human-caused planetary crisis, we must expand the notion of virtue to living well with the earth and its creatures, cooperating with the "more-than-human world" (Abram, 1996). Though rare among the powerful in dominant societies today, a virtue inclusive of non-humans is normal in first-nation communities. Clearly, with nearly every locale and lifeform on earth under duress from human activity, inclusive ecological virtue is widely needed. And now.

You can read more about these ideas, which takes hundreds of pages to explain, in my recent book, [Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom](#) (Norton, 2014), winner of the 2015 William James book award from the American Psychological Association.

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SPOTLIGHT

Click below to watch a highlight reel from our 2015 Interdisciplinary Moral Forum. Also visit [our new YouTube channel](#) to see full-length presentations.



MEET OUR RESEARCHERS

Below we introduce Dr. Blaine Fowers and Dr. Bradford Cokelet, co-PI's on the SMV-funded project "Virtues as Properly Motivated, Self-Integrated Traits." We plan to make this section a regular feature of future newsletters.



BLAINE FOWERS (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin, 1987) is Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Miami. His scholarly focus is on virtue and flourishing from a psychological perspective. Read more about Dr. Fowers research at his personal website (www.blainefowers.com) and his [Research Gate page](#).

My area of expertise is the psychological study of virtue and flourishing from an Aristotelian perspective. I am one of a rare and quixotic breed known as theoretical psychologists, which has led me to focus my work at the nexus of philosophy and psychology. Early in my career, I tilted at windmills by critiquing the unexamined ideologies of individualism and instrumentalism in psychology from an ontological hermeneutics perspective

(primarily Gadamer, Taylor, and MacIntyre). Those critiques have made me very popular! This led to my first book, [Re-envisioning Psychology](#). At that time, I also studied romantic relationships empirically. In 2000, I thought I would write a one-off paper about how couple communication skills could be reconceptualized as proto-virtues. I began to read Aristotle for this paper, and I have never stopped. This “little paper” changed my focus to Aristotle’s philosophy and led to my second book, [Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness](#), an exploration of the role of virtues in high quality marriages. What I like most about Aristotle’s ethics is his guidance for reformulating psychological theory, research, and practice to transcend the limitations of individualism and instrumentalism. I did not find the resources for this reformulation in hermeneutic philosophy. Mostly, I would just mumble something at the end of a paper or book. Aristotle’s philosophy points me toward clear, practical recommendations, which psychology desperately needs!

I conduct theoretical and empirical research on virtue and flourishing. I train psychology doctoral students and do research with them. We have studied empirically how modes of goal pursuit predict hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, how people choose their goals, and the virtues of kindness and friendship. We just completed a series of studies developing a measure of the eudaimonic aspects of romantic relationships. A recent experimental study indicated that kindness is a better predictor of observed helping behavior than Agreeableness or any Big Five personality trait. We also recently finished a meta-analysis that refutes the situationist interpretation of helping behavior. I thought it was time for psychologists to respond to Doris, Miller, and Alfano’s misappropriation of psychological research.

Theoretically, we have examined the implications of eudaimonic theory for romantic relationships, multiculturalism, psychotherapy, moral psychology, and positive psychology. I just completed a book that integrates eudaimonic theory and human evolution, called [The Evolution of Ethics: Human Sociality and the Emergence of the Ethical Mind](#). I argue that humans flourish when we fulfill our evolved human capacities (e.g., attachment, cooperation, group membership).

The SMV project funding will help us expand and deepen our research program on virtue and flourishing. The funding will make it possible for us to study the virtues of kindness and justice experimentally and to conduct a longitudinal experience sampling study of those virtues. In experience sampling, we ask participants to respond to a short questionnaire four times per day for 14 days. Thus, we will assess within-person and between-person variation in these virtues. We will assess how much the participants’ motivations and self-processes covary with kind and fair

actions. Finally, we will attend to the contexts in which people do and do not express these virtues. This relatively new method is extremely valuable for examining traits, and we are expanding on this method by studying motivation, self-processes, and context. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to a vibrant research paradigm for empirically studying virtue.

The discipline of psychology is only slowly waking up to the idea that virtues and flourishing are worthwhile research topics. The positive psychology movement has contributed much to this awakening. Unfortunately, most positive psychologists have not gained a deep understanding of these topics. Most just stick with common-sense ideas and typically study virtues and flourishing with unsophisticated single time-point self-report scales. We want to expand and deepen this research with more sophisticated and compelling methods and with a richer philosophical understanding of Aristotle's thought. There are a few ongoing collaborations between philosophers and psychologists (hooray Nancy and Darcia!), but not nearly enough. We are very optimistic about the fruitfulness of this approach and hope to demonstrate its value in better theory and better science. We hope to show that virtue traits are just as measurable and useful as personality traits, and that virtue traits predict behavior and well-being. We think that would be a nice contribution to psychology, philosophy, education, and our society.

BRADFORD COKELET (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 2009) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Miami. Learn more about his research by visiting his [personal website](#).



I work in moral philosophy. My main expertise is contemporary moral theory and meta-ethics (What sort of ethical ideal should we aspire to embody? What sort of objectivity should we aim for in our thinking about ethics and the good life?), but I like to think about ethics in a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary context. My undergraduate majors were Math and Religious Studies and I was drawn to contemporary philosophy because it encouraged me to think logically and carefully about existential questions and questions about the good life. I was raised knowing little about Religion and my interests in ethics and cross-cultural philosophy grow out of the classes I took on religious philosophy as an undergraduate. I come from a line of scientists so I am also naturally inclined towards interdisciplinary questions, e.g. about how to combine moral philosophy and empirical science.

Various religious studies, comparative literature, and intellectual history professors at Washington University inspired my pursuit of philosophy, as did a group of friends I squatted with in an apartment one summer. The owner showed up half way through the summer but was such a nice guy that he let us stay for the rest of the summer and joined our life-affirming and free-wheeling discussions of Hegel, critical theory, and how to live a good life. I miss those kinds of youthful conversations about life and philosophy, but I feel lucky to have a job that lets me keep thinking about some of the same ideas as they show up in a more rigorous and historically informed academic setting.

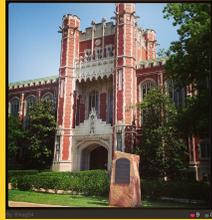
Various cultural commentators, philosophers, and sociologists have raised worries about how modern societies, with their bureaucracies, pressures to focus on productivity and profit, underfunded and uneven forms of education, questionable practices of child-rearing, and so forth promote individualist pathologies such as narcissism, anxiety, and alienation. I am very interested in the nature of these pathologies and questions about how they conflict with or impede personal happiness, authenticity, and our ability to embody admirable ethical ideals, which involve what philosopher's call 'virtues'. Our research project is connected to one facet of this question. Inspired by (philosopher) Alastair MacIntyre, we will test the hypothesis that because we are pressured to adopt different personas at work and at home it is hard for us constantly and fully to embody virtues such as kindness.

Lots of philosophers want their moral or ethical theories to identify ideals that normal people can reasonably hope to embody in their lives, but there is serious debate about what kind of constraint this puts on our theorizing. Some philosophers appeal to social science to support a rather unflattering picture of human nature and then argue that we need to bring our hopes for humanity, and the ethical ideals we set up, down to earth. This is certainly a view is worth taking seriously, but like MacIntyre, I also think we need to be cognizant of the way in which contingent social structures and features of our culture may impede or enable us to reach various ideals. Our study is designed to test one hypothesis in this vein and it is part of an argument that philosophers need to think systematically about the social and cultural contingencies that may explain some of the social science results to which they appeal. In short, instead of reigning in our hopes and ideals in the light of social science, perhaps we should be thinking about how we can change our institutions, practices, and culture in order to reach higher standards.

UPDATES & OPPORTUNITIES

We're Moving!

SMV co-Director, Dr. Nancy Snow, recently accepted an offer from the [University of](#)



[Oklahoma](#) to serve as Director for OU's new Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing. The SMV Project is moving with her to OU this summer.

SMV Grant Projects Selected

Last month we announced the winners of our grant competition. Read about the 10 winning research projects [on our website](#).



New happiness and well-being research initiative

[Happiness and Well-Being: Integrating Research Across the Disciplines](#) is a three-year, \$5.1 million project based at Saint Louis University, aimed at fostering inter-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration among well-being researchers across a wide range of disciplines. ([Press Release](#))



Free course on virtue ethics

Dr. Linda Zagzebski, prof. of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma and member of

MORAL SELF *in the NEWS*

"[How Children Think](#)" - Nanyang Technological Univ. and Science Centre Singapore begin a 5 year study on cognition and moral development in children. (7/23/15)

Barbara Kay mounts a "[Defense of the Classic Virtues](#)" (National Post). (7/22/15)

Dr. Daryl Cameron argues that "[Empathy is Actually a Choice](#)" (NYT). (7/10/15)

"[Is Gratitude a Moral Virtue?](#)" David Car is not so sure. (Philosophical Studies, 06/15)

"[Trauma, Trust and Hope among Women: A Qualitative Study](#)" - Manjari Srivastava examines how "to counter depressing moments and develop positivity in life." (*Psychological Studies* 06/15).

"[Respecting Elders as a Moral Virtue: Terminal or Instrumental?](#)" Vatsala Saxena and Nandita Babu study how parents conceptualize the value of respecting one's elders. (*Psychological Studies* 06/15)

In "[Temperament, Parenting, and Moral Development](#)," Mairin Augustine and Cynthia Stifter find correlations between parenting methods, child temperaments, and later moral behavior. (*Social*

our Core Project Team, will be teaching [a new course on virtue ethics](#) this fall, starting August 24. The course will be open to the public via the University of Oklahoma's online Interactive Learning Community. [Sign up for Dr. Zagzebski's course here.](#)

Development 05/15)

"[The moral self: A review and integration of the literature.](#)" Peter Jennings, Marie Mitchell and Sean Hannah "review and synthesize empirical research related to the moral self." (*Journal of Organizational Behavior* 02/15)

SMV LEADERSHIP TEAM ~ RECENT PUBS & PRESENTATIONS

Dr. Darcia Narvaez will give the Kohlberg Memorial Lecture in Sao Paulo, Brazil this November for the Association for Moral Education. [Click here to see past Kohlberg Memorial Lecturers.](#)

Dr. Linda Zagzebski was elected president for the [American Philosophical Association, Central Division](#). She will deliver her presidential address, "Persons and the Value of Uniqueness," in March, 2016. Dr. Zagzebski will also deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures this fall at the University of St. Andrews. [Click here to learn more.](#)

Recent Books

Narvaez, D. (2014). [Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture, and Wisdom](#) (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.).



Snow, N. ed. (2015). [Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology](#) (Oxford University Press).

Selected Papers & Presentations

- Fleeson, W., & Jayawickreme, E. (2015). "Whole trait theory." *Journal of Research in Personality*, 56, 82-92. ([Abstract](#))
- Fleeson, W., co-author. (2015). "Six visions for the future of personality psychology." In M. L. Cooper & R. J. Larsen (Eds.), [Handbook of personality processes and individual](#)

[differences](#) (pp. 665-689). APA.

- Herdt, J. (2015). "Empathy Beyond the In-Group: Stoic Universalism and Augustinian Neighbor-Love," *Journal of Philosophy, Theology, and the Sciences* 2.1: 63-88. ([Abstract](#))
- Herdt, J. (2015). "Eudaimonism and Dispossession: Augustine on Almsgiving." In T. Delgado, J. Doody, and K. Paffenroth, (eds.), [Augustine and Social Justice](#). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 97-112.
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- Zampelli, M. (2014). "Bridging the Distance: Jesuit Performance Transposed to a Contemporary Key." In A. H. Celenza and A. R. DeIDonna, [Music as Cultural Mission: Explorations of Jesuit Practices in Italy and North America](#). Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press.

If you have any questions about the SMV Project, or would like to contribute a news item, publication, or newsletter article, please contact Max Parish at smvproject@ou.edu.



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