



## SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT NEWS

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### The Beacon Project: Jumpstarting a Field of the Morally Exceptional

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**By William Fleeson, Ph.D.**

*Dr. Fleeson is Professor of Psychology at Wake Forest University. He earned his B.A. in philosophy from Wisconsin, Ph.D. in psychology from Michigan, and completed postdoctoral training in development from Germany. His interests include moral exceptionalism, the nature of personality, borderline personality disorder, consistency, and self-regulation. He takes a personality, social, developmental, and philosophical approach.*

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**What kind of people are able to risk their lives** to save others during the Holocaust (Monroe, 2006), forgive the slaughter of 10 Amish schoolgirls, donate huge portions of





their wealth to the good of others, house endangered Tutsi in a converted hotel during a countrywide genocide, donate a kidney to an anonymous stranger, suffer alienation from their communities to stand up for civil rights, or put in endless hours to administer medical attention to victims of disasters?

Just as much attention has been paid to how geniuses and high-performing businesses function and thrive, we believe the morally exceptional represent a form of “genius” that deserves intensified attention. As a result, we are embarking on a three-year, multi-pronged study of the morally exceptional, with the generous help of the Templeton Religion Trust.

We propose to (i) jumpstart a field of study on the morally exceptional similar in scope to the study of exceptional cognitive talent; (ii) integrate philosophical, theological, and psychological expertise to characterize the morally exceptional, and (iii) answer big questions about the morally exceptional.

We believe the field is in a state of readiness for a study of the morally exceptional, but what is needed is a significant infusion of resourced scholars, networked in a carefully managed way, to transform readiness into reality.

Our central activity will be to hold three RFP’s – one each in Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology. We will have an initial workshop for the winners and a final conference to present their research. We will also hold an interdisciplinary summer seminar, a lecture series, two reading groups, and a project website. We will have expert consultants, who will help write a white paper on the morally exceptional. We will conduct our own psychology, philosophy, and theology scholarship, and we will teach a course on moral excellence.

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**"Despite the potential insights to be gained by studying people who are morally exceptional, only a handful of psychologists have focused their attention on this important population..."**

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Despite the potential insights to be gained by studying people who are morally exceptional, only a handful of psychologists have focused their attention on this important population (e.g., Walker and colleagues, Hart, Colby, Damon, Midlarsky, Monroe, Oliner, McFarland). They have mostly investigated specific exemplary groups, such as winners of national caring or bravery awards, Time magazine most influential leaders, or adolescents nominated for unusual commitment to organizations. This research has revealed several compelling initial findings. For example, people who exhibit moral excellence tend to:

- Incorporate morality into their identity
- Have moral goals and values
- Sometimes have moral traits (agreeableness, agency, communion, social responsibility, nurturance, generativity, optimism, affiliation)
- Employ agency in the service of communion

- Integrate others into their own self-concept
- Have higher faith
- Have life stories that feature themes of redemption, agency, moral motivation
- Do not struggle with themselves, work in isolation, or live grim, joyless lives

Our project is based on four starting hypotheses. **First**, we believe that there are individual differences in moral character, and some people are morally exceptional. Our previous work in the Character Project has persuaded us that some people are more moral than others. If so, then some people are the most moral. We want to study those people.

**Second**, we hypothesize that morally exceptional people can be conceptually and empirically identified. Philosophers and theologians will attempt to define the conditions for counting as morally exceptional people at the conceptual level, while psychologists will attempt to identify morally exceptional people empirically.

**Third**, we hypothesize that the study of the morally exceptional can answer big questions and facilitate new discoveries about moral functioning. They may provide more clarity on how morality guides behavior and action, because it is so prominent in their behavior and action.

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**"The morally exceptional address questions about human moral capacities more directly than do the rest of humans. Many questions about ethics are about the best capacities of humans, and those questions are most effectively answered by studying the best of humans."**

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**Fourth**, we hypothesize that the morally exceptional provide unique insights into how to improve moral character. Because they are the best among us, careful study of them may reveal how the rest of us can become more like them.

We believe it is important to have a field of the morally exceptional. The morally exceptional address questions about human moral capacities more directly than do the rest of humans. Many questions about ethics are about the best capacities of humans, and those questions are most effectively answered by studying the best of humans.

Additionally, the morally exceptional may provide guidelines for becoming more moral. By studying what people are like at their best, researchers can identify factors leading to highly moral behavior. These factors can be prime components in interventions to improve character. The morally exceptional can also serve as inspiration and guidance to normal individuals by acting as exemplars.

Finally, the morally exceptional may illuminate processes underlying moral behavior. Because their behavior is highly moral, their systems may reveal the systems leading to moral behavior. To learn how the moral system works, it is best to study well-functioning moral systems. This is analogous to the study of exceptional cognitive talent or studies of highly effective businesses.

We are holding funding three competitions, one each in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and theology. Letters of Intent for those competitions are due Nov. 30, 2015.

We believe the scholarly community, the larger public, and parents are all ready for and interested in more work on the morally exceptional. We believe that understanding the morally exceptional will both illuminate processes of self, motivation, and virtue, and also impact the world for the better, so we are excited and grateful to begin this project.

Please visit our website for more information about the project and the funding competitions. <http://www.moralbeacons.org>



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[Discuss this article on the SMV Project Website](#)

#### SPOTLIGHT



[Dr. Linda Zagzebski](#), one of our Core Project Team members, delivered the prestigious and historic [Gifford Lectures](#) at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland on October 1-9. Read the press releases [here](#) and [here](#).

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The Gifford Lectures were established in 1888 by Adam Lord Gifford. Dr. Zagzebski joins a long tradition of distinguished lecturers, including Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, Stanley Hauerwas, William James, Jean-Luc Marion, Iris Murdoch, Roger Scruton, Eleonore Stump, Charles Taylor, and Alfred North Whitehead.

Dr. Zagzebski's five lectures focused on a new approach to ethics she is developing called Exemplarism. Exemplarism is a comprehensive ethical theory in which all central terms in moral discourse ("virtue," "good life," "wrong act," etc) are defined by direct reference to exemplars of goodness, picked out through the emotion of admiration. Read a fuller summary on the [Gifford Lectures website](#).

Click the titles below to see a video of each lecture.

#### [LECTURE 1: Why exemplarism?](#)

This lecture gives the motives for inventing a moral



theory based on direct reference to exemplars of moral goodness. Zagzebski explains what direct reference is and why it can serve several theoretical and practical purposes simultaneously.

#### [LECTURE 2: Admiration](#)

This lecture begins with an explanation of Zagzebski's account of the nature of an emotion, the kinds of admiration, and the components of admiration, some of which have been empirically confirmed. She discusses the trustworthiness of admiration, and cynicism about the admirable. She describes three kinds of exemplars: the hero, the saint, and the sage, and mentions narratives and empirical studies relevant to each kind.



#### [LECTURE 3: Virtue](#)

This lecture shows how to define the value terms, including "virtue," "good motive," and "good end," by reference to exemplars, and gives some advantages of observation of exemplars as a way to define these terms, including the identification of virtues that have no name.

#### [LECTURE 4: Emulation](#)

In this lecture Zagzebski looks at the use of exemplarism for the practical purpose of acquiring virtue through emulation of exemplars. She discusses the psychological process of imitating an exemplar's motives and acts, and the different process of learning moral reasons from exemplars.

#### [LECTURE 5: The division of moral linguistic labor](#)

This lecture defends a modification of Putnam's principle of the Division of Linguistic Labor in moral discourse. Zagzebski describes the distinctive social function of the deontic terms "right," "wrong," and "duty," and gives some advantages of defining these terms by direct reference to exemplars. and shows how exemplarist semantics reveals conditions for reaching cross-cultural moral agreement.

## UPDATES & OPPORTUNITIES

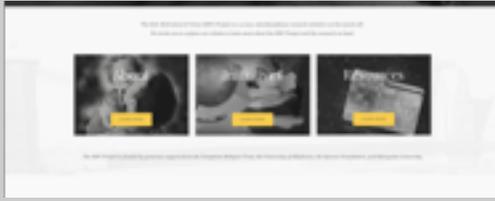
### Updated Website



## PUBLICATIONS & NEWS

Christian B. Miller, R. Michael Furr, Angela Knobel, and William Fleeson co-edited the 720 page [Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology](#) (Oxford University Press, 2015).





As a result of our move to [The University of Oklahoma](#) we were able to update [our website](#) to improve its appearance and functionality. We are also working with OU's Repository Services to set up our new Moral Self Archive. We expect it to launch by the end of October!

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### New Initiative: Virtue, Happiness and the Meaning of Life

Dr. Candace Vogler and Dr. Jennifer Frey are leading a new program, supported by a grant from the [John Templeton Foundation](#), to study the connections between self-transcendence, virtue, and happiness:



*"By fostering intensive collaboration between philosophers, religious thinkers, and psychologists, we will investigate whether self-transcendence helps to make ordinary cultivation and exercise of virtue a source of deep happiness and meaning in human life."*

[Visit the website](#)

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### New Videos from the Character Project

[The Character Project](#) has recently produced a number of [new videos](#) featuring researchers in philosophy, theology, and psychology. Among them are videos of our Core Project Team member, [William Fleeson](#) and our research team members, [Bradford Cokelet](#) and [Valerie Tiberius](#).

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[Last issue](#) we announced Nanyang Technological Univ. and Science Centre Singapore's 5-year collaborative project on children's moral development. [Read a brief interview](#) with Peipei Setoh, leader of the research team at Nanyang Technological University. (Asian Scientist, 8/5/15)

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İlhan Yalçın and Asude Malkoç's [recent study](#) of 482 university students finds that hope and forgiveness "fully" mediate "the relationship between meaning in life and subjective well-being." (*Journal of Happiness Studies*, 8/15)

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Recent research suggests that [authenticity in the workplace is important for personal happiness](#). (Business News Daily, 8/11/15)

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["Study uses fMRI scans](#) to examine neural substrates of moral cognition in healthcare decision making." (News Medical, 8/18/15)

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Research from Jason Cowell and Jean Decety (both from Univ. of Chicago) suggests that ["Babies' neural responses to morally charged scenarios are influenced by their parents' attitudes toward justice."](#) (Neuroscience News, 9/1/15) See the original article [here](#).

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In ["Virtue's Turn and Return"](#) Michael Slote suggests the eclipse of virtue theorizing in the West is linked to Western modernity's emphasis on the individual, and the contemporary revival of virtue theorizing may indicate that "the shock of modernity is starting to wear off." (*Dao*, 9/15)

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Susana Monsó argues that [empathy does not require the ability to attribute mental states to others](#). This has big implications for animal ethics. (*Biology and Philosophy*, 9/15)

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## Funding Opportunities

### Transformative and Religious Experience

[The Experience Project](#) has issued a call for applications for one-year fellowships, up to \$100,000. Applications are due February 15, 2016. [Learn more](#)

### Humility: Moral, Religious, Intellectual

Biola University's Center for Christian Thought is inviting applications for semester and year-long residential fellowships in amounts up to \$90,000 per year. [Learn more](#)

Bobby Azarian cites Nina Strohming and Shaun Nichols (two of [our own researchers](#)) in support of the idea that "[Morals, not Memories, Define Who We Are](#)." (Scientific American) (9/29/15) Strohming and Nichols article, "[Neurodegeneration and Identity](#)," was published in *Psychological Science* earlier this year.

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Dr. Michael Mantell on "[Teaching children moral courage](#)." (San Diego Jewish World) (10/22/15)

## SMV LEADERSHIP TEAM ~ RECENT PUBS & PRESENTATIONS



### Dr. Fleeson

- **"States for Mechanisms: A Perspective from Whole Trait Theory,"** with E. Jayawickreme. Presented at the EAPP Expert Meeting: Integrating Personality Structure and Processes, Annweiler, Germany (July 2015).
- **"Personality Science and the Foundations of Character."** In Miller, Furr and Knobel (eds.), [Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology and Theology](#) (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Dr. Fleeson was awarded the **2015 Carol and Ed Diener Award** in Personality Psychology.

### Dr. Fry

- **"Conflict and War: Anthropological Aspects."** *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed) (2015), pp. 614-619.
- **"Why Human Nature Matters: Violence, Myths, Discourse, and Politics in Anthropology,"**

with G. Souillac. Presentation at the *9th Pan-European Conference on International Relations: The Worlds of Violence*, Giardini Naxos, Sicily, Italy, September 23-26, 2015.

- **"Toward Resolving the Forager War/Peace Debate: Assessing Relevance, Logic, and Rigor."** Plenary Session Presentation at the Eleventh Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGs 11), Vienna, Austria, September 7 -11.
- Dr. Fry was awarded the **2015 "Peace Scholar/Educator Award"** from the [Peace and Justice Studies Association](#) (Oct 17). He was also interviewed by the BBC in June for a feature "[On the Origin of War.](#)" Dr. Fry is introduced at 18.38'.

#### Dr. Herdt

- **"Truthfulness and Continual Discomfort."** In [The Difference Christ Makes](#), ed. Charlie Collier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015). Dr. Herdt [presented a paper with the same title](#) (video) at a conference in honor of Stanley Hauerwas at Duke Divinity School (Nov. 2015).

#### Dr. Narvaez

- **"Keynote: Raising and Educating Good and Wise People."** Presented at the [Character Education Partnership annual meeting](#), Atlanta, GA.
- **"Moral Sensibility: Attunement and Communal Imagination"** (3 talks). Presented at Bethel University, St. Paul, MN (October 21-22, 2015).
- Inside Higher Ed's Academic Minute featured Dr. Narvaez's [1-minute essay](#) on how parenting leads to the moral self.

#### Dr. Thompson

- **"Chronic Adversity Shapes Character."** In *Essay Series on Character and Opportunity*, Brookings Institute. Essay series [available online](#).
- **"Baby altruists? Exploring the early origins of prosocial motivation."** Keynote presented at the Roots of Empathy Research Symposium, Toronto.
- **"The Center for Poverty Research: Children in economic adversity."** Presentation to the Board of Directors of WestEd, San Francisco.

#### Dr. Zagzebski

- **"Exemplarism and Admiration."** In Miller, Furr and Knobel (eds.), [Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology and Theology](#) (Oxford University Press, 2015).

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](mailto:smvproject@ou.edu).





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