



SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT NEWS

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MORAL EXEMPLARISM

By Linda Zagzebski, Ph.D.

Dr. Linda Zagzebski is George Lynn Cross Research Professor and Kingfisher College Chair of the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at the University of Oklahoma. Her project on exemplarist virtue theory was the topic of her [2015 Gifford Lectures](#) at the University of St. Andrews, and will be published as a book by Oxford University Press, 2017. She is President of the American Philosophical Association, Central Division, and has published widely in epistemology, philosophy of religion, and virtue theory.



In an essay on the place of classics in education, Alfred North Whitehead wrote, “**Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness**” since “**the sense of greatness is the groundwork of morals.**” These words have been repeated many times, but

rarely by moral philosophers, and certainly not by philosophers like me who interpret the words literally. I have been working on a moral theory I call "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," or just "Exemplarism," which is a theory based on direct reference to exemplars of goodness, identified through the emotion of admiration.

"...the cumulative experience of admiration in past ages and in past cultures is transmitted to us through stories of exemplars."

The idea is that a supremely good person is a person who is most admirable, and we identify the admirable through our emotion of admiration. Admiration is developed, refined, and altered through experience, including the experience of others whom we trust, and the cumulative experience of admiration in past ages and in past cultures is transmitted to us through stories of exemplars. The set of exemplars forms the basis for a theoretical map that I am proposing, a map in which I define "virtue," "good motive," "good life," "duty," and other moral terms by directly referring to exemplars. An advantage of this theory is that it is practically useful. That is because admiration for exemplars is a motivating force for moral education and self-improvement.

I am using "direct reference" in a sense that became famous in the 1970s, particularly in the form in which it was used by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam to define natural kind terms, or terms for naturally occurring substances or species, like "water," "gold," and "tiger." Briefly, the idea is that "water" is defined as "stuff like *that*," "tiger" is "creatures like *that*," and so on. Direct reference revolutionized semantics because it meant that we succeed in thinking about and talking about objects in the natural world without needing a descriptive meaning in our heads. People could talk about water, ask questions about water, and make assertions about water long before they knew that what makes water *water* is that it is H₂O. "Water" does not mean and never did mean "colorless, odorless liquid that flows in the streams and falls from the sky" because we realize upon reflection that something other than the substance water could have fallen from the sky, and could have been the liquid we drink, and so on. This theory was also revolutionary because of the way it linked empirical science with semantics, and it led to a great deal of work on the social construction of language. The upshot was that we are not connected to the outside world through a description in our heads. We are (or can be) connected to it directly. What we are talking about when we say "tiger" or "water" or "gold" is determined by observation of something we can pick out directly. We do not need a descriptive meaning.

"...exemplars are persons like that, and we point directly to exemplars of goodness, like Confucius, Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Holocaust rescuers, Jean Vanier, or many ordinary people..."

Exemplarism is the theory in which I have developed this idea for moral terms. The basic idea is that exemplars are persons *like that*, and we point directly to exemplars of goodness, like Confucius, Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Holocaust rescuers, Jean Vanier, or many ordinary people who are known only to a small circle of acquaintances—perhaps a neighbor or your grandmother. We find out what makes them admirable by observation, just as we find out what makes water the substance that it is by observation.

The observation of admirable persons is obviously much more complex than the observation of water since the psychological structure of an admirable person is much more complex than the physical structure of water, and individual exemplars differ from each other much more than individual samples of water. Also, we can't just put admirable persons under a microscope (although neuroimaging of exemplars is currently being done). Rather, we observe them through narratives and more recently, through controlled empirical studies.

My proposal is that we find out the motivational structure of exemplars by observation, and that permits us to define basic moral terms like “good trait of character,” “good life,” “good motive,” “right act,” and so on by features of exemplars or features of their judgments...

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SPOTLIGHT



SMV Project co-director, Dr. Nancy Snow, was recently interviewed for a documentary film entitled, "The Science of Wisdom," a project supported by the [Wisdom Research](#) initiative at The University of Chicago.

In the interview, Dr. Snow discusses wisdom, virtue, and social intelligence, resource texts for virtue, and the interaction of virtue and oppression. [View the uncut interview](#)

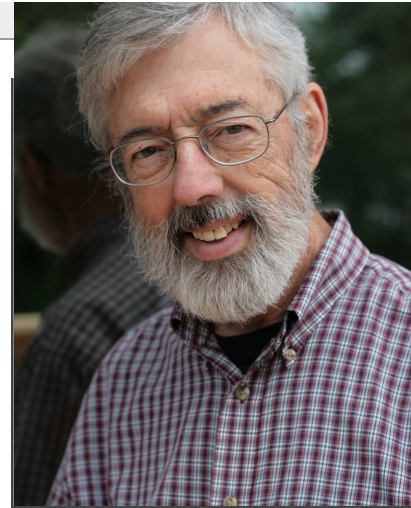
MEET OUR RESEARCHERS

ROBERT C. ROBERTS (Ph.D., Yale University, 1974) is Distinguished Professor of Ethics emeritus at [Baylor University](#), Chair in Ethics and Emotion Theory at the [Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues](#), the University of Birmingham (UK), and Professor in the



[Royal Institute of Philosophy](#). He is a research team member on the SMV-funded research project, "[Humility in Loving Encounter](#)."

My current area of research (and expertise, to the extent that it is expertise!) is the study of broadly moral character, with stress on its affective and motivational dimensions. I came to be interested in the topic long ago, namely about 50 years ago, in the classroom of Paul L. Holmer at Yale University. Holmer offered courses with titles like "Virtues and Vices" and "Emotions, Passions, and Feelings" at least fifteen years before the appearance of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. He was inspired to this by the likes of Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, as well as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Søren Kierkegaard, whose writings peppered his course reading lists along with the works of other worthies like Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and Peter Strawson. At Yale I majored in Holmer, and in a way I do so to this day, though I tremble to contemplate his reaction, should he happen to have access, in his current residence, to a collection of my writings.



I started teaching philosophy in 1973, though my training at Yale and my PhD were primarily in the department of religious studies. That perhaps explains why I didn't publish in philosophy journals until 1984. But in that year there appeared two papers that were harbingers of what I would do in the rest of my career. One was a response to Robert Solomon's book *The Passions* (1976): "[Solomon on the Control of Emotions](#)" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. The other was "[Will Power and the Virtues](#)" which came out in the *Philosophical Review*. I remember the moment in 1978 when, preparing a lecture on a chapter from William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (against the background of thinking about Solomon's book), the idea that an emotion is a concern-based construal, something like a gestalt perception loaded with concerns, came to me. I used the idea to criticize Solomon's proposal that emotions are judgments and a kind of action that we perform, and I based on my critique of Solomon an account of how we sometimes have voluntary control over our emotions.

The idea that emotions are concern-based construals became basic to all my thinking about moral psychology...

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RECENT PUBLICATIONS & NEWS

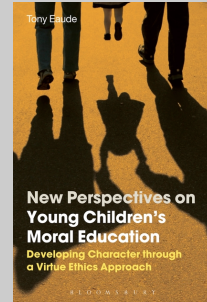
A screenshot of the Moral Self Archive website. The header features the text "THE SELF-MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT" and "Moral Self Archive". Below the header, there is a "Welcome" section with a paragraph of text. A "Submit your work" section follows, with instructions for authors. At the bottom, there are "Quick Links" and "Recent Submissions" sections. The "Recent Submissions" section lists a publication from 2013.

The [Moral Self Archive](#) has now been fully transferred to the University of Oklahoma, and is ready to receive submissions. Submit materials [here](#), or contact Max Parish (smvproject@ou.edu) with any questions.

A [new study](#) published in *Psychological Science* suggests that fighting stereotypes in the classroom is good for all students.

Researchers find that "[A wandering mind is a less caring mind](#)" - compassion meditation practice reduces mind-wandering and increases caring behavior.

Dr. Tony Eade (Oxford University) recently published [New Perspectives on Young Children's Moral Education: Developing Character through a Virtue Ethics Approach](#) (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).



Dr. Sangeetha Menon marshals "a critique of the growing trend in cognitive sciences, particularly in affective neurosciences, and approaches, to reduce the experiential self to a nonentity." See: "[The 'Outer Self' and the 'Inner Body': Exteriorization of the Self in Cognitive Sciences.](#)"

In "[Virtue and Duty: Negotiating Between Different Ethical Traditions,](#)" Dr. Julia Annas argues that we are influenced by two ethical traditions that do not form a unified whole.



Video: The Four Constituents of Well-Being - Richard Davidson, founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, [explains](#) what he sees as the four science-based keys to well-being.

RESEARCH & FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES



The
UNIVERSITY
of
OKLAHOMA

*Institute for the Study
of Human Flourishing*

Postdoctoral Fellowships at the University of Oklahoma

[The Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing](#) is seeking applications for three 1-year, residential postdoctoral fellowships, to begin on August 16, 2016. These fellowships are open to all researchers, nationally and internationally. **Hurry!** Applications are due **February 12, 2016.**

[APPLY NOW](#)

NEH Summer Institute: Putting the Humanities Back to Work

"This four-week [Summer Institute on Moral Psychology and Education](#) provides participants with an intense study and research opportunity. From May 30 to June 24, 2016, participants gain the necessary background in moral psychology to examine the effectiveness of the humanities for moral development and as a crucial part of all moral education."



SMV co-director, Dr. Nancy Snow and Core Project Team member, Dr. Owen Flanagan, are on the Institute faculty. Desired applicants include community college and university faculty, adjunct faculty, graduate

students and qualified independent scholars.

[APPLY NOW](#)

SELECTED RECENT PUBS & PRESENTATIONS FROM THE SMV LEADERSHIP TEAM



Dr. Douglas Fry

- With Souillac, G. (2016). [Peace by Other Means: Reflections from the Indigenous World](#). *Common Knowledge*, 22: 8-24.
- With Souillac, G. (2015). [The Philosophical Anthropology of Interculturality: A Vehicle for Creating Inclusive Identities and Positive Peace](#). *Thémata: Revista de Filosofía* 52: 31-39.

Dr. William Fleeson

- With McCabe, K. O. (2016). [Are traits useful? Explaining trait manifestations as tools in the pursuit of goals](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110, 287-301.
- With Meindl, P., Jayawickreme, and E., Furr, R. M. (2015). ["A foundation beam for studying morality from a personological point of view: Are individual differences in moral behaviors and thoughts consistent?"](#) *Journal of Research in Personality*, 59, 81-92.
- With Jayawickreme, E. (2015). [Going beyond traits or into depth on traits? Commentary on "Contextualized Personality, Beyond Personality Traits"](#). *European Journal of Personality*, 29, 327-328.
- With Jayawickreme, E. (2015). [Whole trait theory](#). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 56, 82-92.

Dr. Jennifer Herdt

- (2015) "Dignity as Personal Life-Form." Presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta (Nov 22).
- (2016). Sleepers Wake! Eudaimonism, Obligation, and the Call to Responsibility. In [The Freedom of a Christian Ethicist: The Future of a Reformation Legacy](#), ed. Brian Brock and Michael Mawson, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 159-174.
- (2016) "Human Dignity in the Image of Augustine." Presented at the Society of Christian Ethics

Annual Meeting, Toronto (Jan 8).

Dr. Daniel Lapsley

- (2015). [Moral Identity and Developmental Theory: Commentary on Krettenauer and Hertz](#). In *Human Development* 58(3), 164-171.

Dr. Darcia Narvaez

- With Four Arrows. (2015). A more authentic baseline. In N. McCrary & W. Ross (Eds.), [Working for social justice inside and outside the classroom: A community of teachers, researchers, and activists](#) (pp. 93-112). In series, *Social justice across contexts in education* (S.J. Miller & L.D. Burns, Eds.). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- (2015). Raising and Educating Good and Wise People. Keynote address for the Character Education Partnership (character.org) annual meeting, Atlanta, Georgia (Oct 15).
- (2015). Moral Sensibility: Attunement and Communal Imagination. Three talks given at Bethel University, St. Paul (Oct 21-22).
- (2015). The Kohlberg Memorial Lecture, delivered at the 41st Association of Moral Education conference in Santos-Brazil (Nov 5-7).
- (2015). The Neurobiology of Character: Fostering Compassionate, Communal Moral Mindsets in the Classroom. Keynote address for "The Science of Character" conference, sponsored by [Learning & the Brain](#) (Nov 14).
- (2016). [Creating Sustainable Humans With Conscious Parenting](#). Interview with Kindred Media and Community (Jan 9).

Dr. Nancy Snow

- (2015). Dr. Snow participated in a meeting of the [working group](#) of the "[Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life](#)" Project in Columbia, South Carolina (Dec 14-18).
- (2016). From 'Ordinary' Virtue to Aristotelian Virtue. Presented at a conference on "[Cultivating Virtues](#)," sponsored by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, England (Jan 5-7).

If you would like to contribute a news item, publication, or newsletter article,
please contact Max Parish at smvproject@ou.edu.



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