

THE SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT

supporting innovative, interdisciplinary moral self research

The Beacon Project: Jump-Starting a Field of the Morally Exceptional

William Fleeson, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology
Wake Forest University
fleesonw@wfu.edu

Copyright © 2015 William Fleeson.

This article was originally published in the
Self, Motivation & Virtue Project's e-Newsletter 03 (October 2015).

Link to this work: <https://shareok.org/handle/11244/44592>
Link to the Moral Self Archive: <https://shareok.org/handle/11244/22702>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. Noncommercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way, is permitted.

Website: <http://www.smvproject.com>
Email: smvproject@ou.edu
Phone: (405) 325-8657

The University of Oklahoma
620 Parrington Oval, #207
Norman, OK 73019-3051

The Self, Motivation & Virtue Project is a 3-year, interdisciplinary research initiative on the moral self. It is funded by generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust, the University of Oklahoma, the Spencer Foundation, and Marquette University.

THE BEACON PROJECT: JUMP-STARTING A FIELD OF THE MORALLY EXCEPTIONAL

William Fleeson, Ph.D.

Wake Forest University

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.

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

THE SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT

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.

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.

THE SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT

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/>

Dr. Fleenor 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.
