



## SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE PROJECT NEWS

### IN THIS ISSUE

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- LEAD ARTICLE: *Turning Points: Finding Experiential Forks in the Path to Wisdom and Virtues*, by Howard Nusbaum, Ph.D.
- SPOTLIGHT: *2016 Self, Motivation & Virtue Conference*
- MEET OUR RESEARCHERS: *Featuring Dr. Warren Herold and Dr. Walter Sowden*
- RECENT PUBLICATIONS & NEWS
- SMV LEADERSHIP TEAM ~ RECENT PUBS & PRESENTATIONS

### TURNING POINTS: FINDING EXPERIENTIAL FORKS IN THE PATH TO WISDOM AND VIRTUES

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**By Howard Nusbaum, Ph.D.**

*[Dr. Nusbaum](#) is the Director of the Chicago [Center for Practical Wisdom](#), Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago and a member of the Committee on Computational Neuroscience. He is also a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the Psychonomic Society and has served as Associate Editor for the journal *Brain and Language* and the journal *PLoS One*, as well as serving on the editorial board of *Heliyon*.*

People often believe that, by adulthood, the psychology of the way they think, feel, believe, and act is set in stone—that an adult’s personality cannot really change. In part, this may be why people think that wisdom is something unattainable because they think you are either wise or you are not. Wisdom is not just what you know but the way in which you use what you know.

However, research at the Chicago Center for Practical Wisdom ([wisdomcenter.uchicago.edu](http://wisdomcenter.uchicago.edu)) has focused on studying

wisdom in the context of Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom: When faced with certain situations, is it possible to make a wiser decision, a decision that will increase human flourishing? If so, what can help someone make a wiser decision? Sir John Templeton said that wisdom cannot be taught. But can it be learned? Are there experiences that can lead someone to make a wiser decision? In our lab, we think about this question as falling within the context of the problem of “learning the unlearnable.” How can people “learn” things that are thought to be a fixed part of who we are? For example, we have taught adults without perfect pitch, to have perfect pitch even though it has been claimed that you can only acquire perfect pitch as a child (Van Hedger et al., 2015).

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***...if we can think about wisdom as a decision-making skill, one that leads to human flourishing, then perhaps anyone can improve at wisdom rather than waiting for it to come with old age.***

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It could be that improving a listening skill is different from acquiring virtues such as wisdom. But if we can think about wisdom as a decision-making skill, one that leads to human flourishing, then perhaps anyone can improve at wisdom rather than waiting for it to come with old age. There is a belief that certain kinds of experiences, adverse experiences like trauma can change personality for the better, although research does not clearly support this belief (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). People attribute positive personality growth, including an increase in wisdom, to adverse experiences on the one hand, but at the same time, there are clear examples of trauma and hardship leading to embitterment, depression, and anger. This suggests that extreme experiences can lead to positive or negative outcomes. If true, the effect of experience may depend more on psychological characteristics of the person having the experience than the experience itself. Indeed, with our work on training perfect pitch, some people have better memory for sound than others and this aids in learning perfect pitch. What aids in becoming a little wiser or indeed more virtuous in any way from an experience?

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SPOTLIGHT

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# 2016 SELF, MOTIVATION & VIRTUE CONFERENCE

The University of Notre Dame  
May 5-7, 2016

The SMV Project Team  
thanks everyone who made  
this conference a success!

**Click here for  
pictures & more**

On May 5-7, 2016, thirty-three researchers converged at The University of Notre Dame in South Bend, IN, for the 2016 Self, Motivation & Virtue Conference. The event began with [a keynote address on Whole Trait Theory](#), co-presented by Dr. William Fleeson (Wake Forest University) and Dr. Eranda Jayawickreme (Wake Forest University), followed by presentations from the SMV research teams, and questions and discussion.

The conference concluded with discussion on “The Pros and Cons of Deep Integration,” moderated by Dr. Darcia Narvaez and Dr. Nancy Snow, with invited comments by Dr. Candace Vogler (University of Chicago).

Presentation videos and speaking pictures are available on [the conference webpage](#).

## MEET OUR RESEARCHERS



**WARREN HEROLD** (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at The University of Arkansas. His recent research has focused on the moral philosophy of Adam Smith, the role of imaginative perspective taking in moral deliberation, and the psychological foundations of contractualism.

I did not study much philosophy as an undergraduate. I majored in economics, environmental studies, and music history. After college I worked for three years as an economic analyst in the environmental policy division of an economic consulting firm in Boston, and earned a master's degree in environmental and resource economics from University College London. I enjoyed working as an



economist, but I kept bumping up against difficult questions – about rights, about justice, and about the values of various non-economic goods (e.g., health, safety, the natural world). Dissatisfied with the way economists typically discussed such things, I began to look elsewhere.

I found better answers in the work of moral and political philosophers, and I decided to switch from economics to philosophy. At the time, I had no interest in either moral psychology or the history of philosophy, but a single course at the University of Michigan taught by Stephen Darwall on the history of ethics changed that. I became fascinated with the work of David Hume, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and many others. I was amazed by their insight, by their rich and subtle arguments, and by the connections between their work and more recent research in philosophy and empirical psychology. I found in them a new source for answers to the questions that first motivated my move from economics to philosophy. I have been working on the intersection of ethics, history, and psychology ever since – looking for answers and finding new questions.

Our research team can trace its origins back to January of 2013. At that time I was a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, writing a dissertation on the moral philosophy of Adam Smith. I was working on Smith's account of sympathy, his theory of the impartial spectator, and his explanation of the origin and development of our capacity for critical self-evaluation. Smith makes a number of empirical psychological claims in his work – claims about what happens when one imagines oneself in another person's shoes, for instance, and what happens when one imagines oneself as the spectator of one's own conduct. As my research progressed, I began to wonder whether anyone had ever tested any of Smith's claims.

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**WALTER SOWDEN** (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 2015) is a Research Psychologist and Task Area Manager at the Center of Military Psychiatry and Neuroscience, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. His research covers three broad topics: moral psychology and social decision-making, self-control and emotion regulation, and military member & veteran performance and wellbeing.

Two experiences spurred my interest in studying human behavior. The first was during my deployment to Iraq and the second was during my time as a Tactical Officer at the United States Military Academy (i.e., West Point). During my deployment to Iraq, I observed, on several occasions, people that I thought I knew well (including myself) drastically change with the situation. People who I believed to be cooperative and honest become selfish and deceitful, while others, who I thought were incompetent, demonstrated exceptional leadership and character in combat. This perplexed me greatly. Why were my assessments of people so off? Am I really that bad at judging character? In an attempt to come to grips with this, I stumbled onto social psychology. This discovery, set forth my desire to not only understand how the situation interacts with the individual to produce human cognition and behavior, but also motivated me to become a social psychologist.



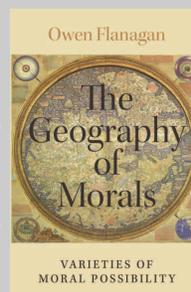
This desire was refined a few years later while I was serving as a Tactical Officer (TAC, for short) at West Point. The role of the TAC at West Point is very unique. TACs are responsible for managing the holistic (academic, physical, military, and character) development of approximately 150 cadets as they make the transition from teenage civilian to military leader. West Point is designed not only to provide Cadets with a world-class college education, but also to develop their ability to ethically lead Soldiers on the battlefield. To effectively accomplish this latter task, the Cadets at West Point are responsible for governing themselves in accordance with the Cadet Honor Code, which states "A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal or tolerate those who do." As the value of integrity is being imbued into the cadets, they are also being indoctrinated into the Army's occupational culture. The Culture of the U.S. Army is exemplified by the four

sentences that make up its Warrior Ethos: "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade." This last sentence epitomizes a valuable attribute that the Army spends a great deal of effort developing in its Soldiers: interpersonal loyalty.

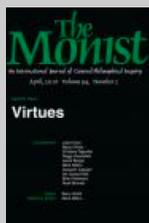
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## RECENT PUBLICATIONS & NEWS

SMV Core Project Team Member, Dr. Owen Flanagan, is publishing a new monograph entitled [The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility](#) with Oxford University Press. The book will appear on October 3rd. Pre-order now, with a 30% discount! ([Click HERE for discount code](#))



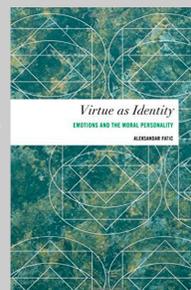
In a recent article titled "[Collective Virtue](#)" (*The Journal of Value Inquiry*), T. Ryan Byerly and Meghan Byerly explain what collective virtue is and classify its different types.



*The Monist* recently published [an entire issue on virtue](#). Contributors include SMV researchers Dr. Peggy DesAutels and Dr. Mark Alfano.

*The Journal of Moral Education* also published an issue on virtue, titled "[Virtue and Control: Lessons from East and West](#)," co-edited by Dr. Heather Battaly and Dr. Ryan Nichols.

Dr. Aleksandar Fatic, Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade, published a book titled, [Virtue as identity: Emotions and the moral personality](#) (Rowman & Littlefield).



In "[Empirical Adequacy and Virtue Ethics](#)" (*Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*), Philip Reed addresses the situationist challenge to virtue ethics by arguing that there is much confusion over the very meaning of empirical adequacy, and that "situationists frequently misconstrue the empirical commitments of virtue ethics."



SMV researcher, Dr. Dawne Moon's lecture "Overcoming Shame, Practicing Love: LGBT Evangelicals' Strategies for Social Justice," delivered at Fordham University, is now freely available in the Moral Self Archive. [Read the lecture here](#).

SMV Researcher, [Dr. Blaine Fowers](#), spent a week in May at the [Jubilee Center for Character and Values](#) as a Distinguished Visiting Professor for 2016. During his visit he met with the Centre's researchers to discuss projects and delivered a seminar titled "[How Can Humans Flourish as Dependent, Vulnerable Creatures? The Necessity of Virtue](#)." In this video Dr. Fowers talks about his research on humans as reasoning social creatures. See also Dr. Fowers' recent publication: [Traits, situational factors, and their interactions as explanations of helping behavior](#) (*Personality and Individual Differences*).



Core Project Team Member, [Dr. Howard Nusbaum](#), talks with [Dr. Candace Vogler](#) about being wise and being good. They discuss "the wisdom that belongs to ordinary human flourishing and requires a deep sense of both humility and social connection." Go to the [event](#)



[page](#), or click on the video thumbnail to watch the conversation.

We are actively seeking submissions for the SMV Project's [Moral Self Archive](#). Submit materials [here](#), or contact Max Parish ([smvproject@ou.edu](mailto:smvproject@ou.edu)) with any questions.

## SELECTED RECENT PUBS & PRESENTATIONS FROM THE SMV LEADERSHIP TEAM



### Dr. Owen Flanagan

- (2016) [The geography of morals: Varieties of moral possibility](#). Oxford University Press. **This new monograph will be published in October. Pre-order now and receive a 30% discount with [this OUP discount code!](#)**

### Dr. William Fleeson

- With L. E. R. Blackie, et al. (2016). Post-traumatic growth as positive personality change: Developing a measure to assess within-person variability. *Journal of Research in Personality* (2016),
- Hartley, A. G., Furr, R. M., Helzer, E. G., Jayawickreme, E., Velasquez, K. R., & Fleeson, W. (2016). [Morality's centrality to liking, respecting, and understanding others](#). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1-10.

### Dr. Douglas Fry

- With Souillac, G. (2016). [Anthropology: Implications for peace](#). In O. P. Richmond, S. Pogodda & J. Ramovic (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of disciplinary and regional approaches to peace* (69-81). New York: Palgrave.

### Dr. Daniel Lapsley

- With Reilly, E. E. & Stey, P. (2016). [A new look at the links between perceived parenting, socially-prescribed perfectionism, and disordered eating](#). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 88, 17-20.

### Dr. James Laidlaw

- Laidlaw, J. (2016). [The interactional foundations of ethics and the formation and limits of morality systems](#). *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(1), 455-461.

### Dr. Darcia Narvaez

- (2016). [Embodied morality: Protectionism, engagement and imagination](#). New York: Palgrave.
- (2016). [Revitalizing human virtue by restoring organic morality](#). *Journal of Moral Education*, 1-16. See also: [Returning to humanity's moral heritages](#) in the same issue.
- With S. Thoma & M. Bebeau. (2016). [How not to evaluate a psychological measure: Rebuttal to criticism of the Defining Issues Test of moral judgment development by Curzer and colleagues](#). *Theory and Research in Education*, (14)2, 241-249.
- With L. T. Gettler, J. M. Braungart-Rieker, L. E. Miller-Graff & P. D. Hastings. (Eds.) (2016). [Contexts for young child flourishing: Evolution, family, and society](#). New York: Oxford University Press.
- With her co-editors, Dr. Narvaez also authored two chapters in the volume above: Chapter 1 - The flourishing of young children: Evolutionary baselines; and Chapter 18: Young child flourishing as an aim for society.

#### Dr. Howard Nusbaum

- With Williams, P., Mangelsdorf, H. Kontra, C. and Hoeckner, B. (2016). [The Relationship between mental and somatic practices and wisdom](#). PLoS ONE, 11(2). [Open Access PDF](#)

#### Dr. Ross Thompson

- With Waters, S. (2016). [Children's perceptions of emotion regulation strategy effectiveness: links with attachment security](#). *Attachment & Human Development*, (18)4, 354-372.
- (2016). What more has been learned? The science of early childhood development 15 years after *Neurons to Neighborhoods*. *Zero to Three* (Jan), 18-24. ([PDF](#))

#### Dr. Nancy Snow

- (2016). [Review of Kristján Kristjánsson, Aristotelian character education](#). *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64(2), 264-266.
- (2016). [Virtue acquisition: The paradox of striving](#). *The Journal of Moral Education* 45(2), 179-191.
- (2016). [Virtue Talk Podcast: Philosopher Nancy Snow on virtue, ethics, and human flourishing](#). An initiative of the Virtue, Happiness & the Meaning of Life Project (University of Chicago), May 27.
- (2016). The perils of magnificence. Presented at: *Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life Work Group*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, June 6-9.
- (2016). Virtue as social intelligence. Presented at: *NEH Seminar, Moral Psychology and Education: Putting the Humanities to Work*, Grand Rapids, MI, June 15.

If you would like to contribute a news item, publication, or newsletter article,  
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