



WAKE FOREST
UNIVERSITY

The Character Project: New Frontiers in Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology

Request for Proposals: “New Frontiers in the Philosophy of Character”

Fellowship Announcement

Wake Forest University, with the help of a generous grant from The John Templeton Foundation, welcomes proposals for the “New Frontiers in the Philosophy of Character” funding initiative. We aim to support young scholars working on the philosophy of character, who often have new and interesting ideas but who have not yet benefitted from traditional funding sources. Thus we would give preference to proposals from PIs who are within ten years of receiving their Ph.D. at the time of submission of the letter of intent. Interdisciplinary teams of philosophers working with faculty in other disciplines, especially psychology or theology, are encouraged, but team-based proposals are not required.

Fellowship Description

Fellowship Director and Character Project Director: Christian Miller, Wake Forest University

This \$300,000 RFP is aimed at work in philosophy on the topic of character. Proposals can request between \$40,000 and \$100,000 for projects not to exceed one year in duration. We hope to make between 5-6 awards. A residential incentive of \$6,000 for one semester or \$12,000 for an academic year will be offered to philosophy RFP winners who are willing to move to Wake Forest University during the award period, and this stipend would not count as part of the research funding request. A willingness to move will not be taken into account when evaluating proposals.

Since work here will primarily be theoretical, the funding is aimed at semester or yearlong sabbatical research leave projects involving a book manuscript or series of substantive articles on character. All award recipients are expected to complete and actively disseminate the results of their research.

Background and Big Questions

A common way of understanding twentieth century thinking about ethics is to say that it largely ignored notions of character and virtue, focusing instead on rules and consequences of actions. This notable omission changed in the 1980s, however, with the rebirth of virtue ethics. On this view, ethical theorizing should begin by thinking about character, and perhaps more specifically

about what a person with the virtues is like and what he or she would do in a given set of circumstances. Today, virtue ethics has established itself as a leading contender in contemporary ethical thinking, and alternative ethical theories also typically allow that character traits are important in their approaches.

At the same time, in large part due to the work of Gilbert Harman (1999) and John Doris (2002), many philosophers are now beginning to appreciate the implications of experimental results in psychology for their thinking about character. In particular, Harman and Doris appealed to the situationist tradition in social psychology in order to argue that there are no traditional character traits such as honesty, compassion, and courage, or at least that their possession is rare. This claim was met with a number of responses (by, e.g., Sreenivasan 2002, Kamtekar 2004, and Snow 2010), and examining the philosophical implications of empirical work on character in general and virtue in particular has become one of the most exciting areas in contemporary philosophy.

A consensus has been emerging in the philosophical literature which is similar to the consensus that has been building in the past twenty years in personality and social psychology, namely that both traits and situational influences are important to understanding behavior. One main project has thus been to develop, at the theoretical level, an understanding of character traits which is also empirically consistent with the psychology literature (see, e.g., Miller 2009, in progress). At this point, interdisciplinary work between philosophers and psychologists on character is at a very preliminary stage, and both sides could significantly benefit from further collaboration and mutual criticism.

This funding initiative is not limited to the specific topic of the empirical adequacy of character traits. Nor is it limited to topics connected only to virtue ethics in normative ethical theory. Rather, projects in any area of philosophy which are connected to the topic of character are welcome so long as they address at least one of the following **Key Questions**:

- What is the best conceptual understanding of the virtues and vices, and what role do beliefs, desires, and emotions have to play in a given virtue or vice?
- Is an ethical theory based on the virtues overly self-centered, as is sometimes alleged about Aristotelian virtue ethics?
- Can the most plausible versions of virtue ethics be given an objective foundation, or do they fall prey to moral relativism?
- Is virtue ethics really a legitimate alternative ethical theory to, for instance, the leading forms of consequentialism, which typically base the moral status of an action on the consequences produced by the action, or the leading forms of Kantian ethics, which typically base the moral status of an action on whether it is universalizable or treats others as ends?
- Does the topic of character have important implications in contemporary meta-ethics, perhaps in the form of advancing the debate between moral realists and anti-realists?
- Does the topic of character have important implications in contemporary epistemology, say in the form of developing a virtue epistemology?

- Does the latest work in psychology that bears on the existence and nature of character traits ultimately threaten virtue ethics or more generally most traditional philosophical thinking about character?
- If the empirical results suggest that most people are neither virtuous nor vicious, then how should advocates of virtue ethics think about the characters of the vast majority of people?

Character and Virtue

Philosophers have defined ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ in many ways, with no universal agreement as to their meaning. One common approach has been to say that character traits are dispositions that people can possess, and which can lead to certain relevant beliefs, desires, and (often) actions. On this approach, for instance, the trait of honesty would be a disposition to think, feel, and act in certain ways pertaining to telling the truth. Similarly, a virtue can be understood very roughly as a good character trait, while leaving open the question of whether a particular virtue is intrinsically or instrumentally good.

We will give preference to projects framed in these general terms. However, because we acknowledge the diversity of approaches in contemporary ethics, we realize that some projects may have different conceptual starting points. Thus, we definitely welcome applications using one of a variety of definitions. If a project does have a different conceptual starting point, though, we ask that this be noted and briefly justified in the application.

Application Instructions

Letters of Intent are due by September 1, 2011. Notification will be made by October 15, 2011, with submission of full proposals no later than January 15, 2012. Final award decisions will be issued by April 1, 2012 for research to begin no later than September 1, 2012.

Letter of Intent (LOI) Stage

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A complete curriculum vitae for the PI and for all major team members (if applicable).
2. A letter of intent that includes the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses at least one of the **Key Questions** of this RFP, and a summary of the main idea or argument. The letter should not exceed 1,500 words (references do not have to be counted in this total).
3. The amount of funding requested (one sentence is fine for this). No budget narrative or justification is needed at this stage. The amount can be revised at the full proposal stage.

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to character@wfu.edu. The words “Philosophy of Character” should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Questions about the application process can be sent to the same address. All LOI materials must be received no later than September 1,

2011. An acknowledgement email will be sent within seven days of receiving the materials. If you do not receive such an acknowledgement please write again to character@wfu.edu and to seachrjw@wfu.edu.

Full Proposal Stage

Those applicants invited to submit full proposals must include:

- A cover letter with the title, amount requested, duration of the project (not to exceed one year), and team members (if applicable).
- A description of the work to be carried out, not to exceed 5,000 words (references do not have to be counted in this total). The description should include the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses at least one of the **Key Questions** of this RFP, and a summary of the main idea or argument.
- A project abstract of up to 500 words which explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and which would be published on The Character Project website and possibly in Templeton materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
- A time line.
- A detailed budget, between \$40,000 and \$100,000 in total costs (direct and indirect), with accompanying narrative explaining line items, not to exceed two single-spaced pages. Overhead is limited to 15%, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases.
- Approval of the department chair and university signing officials.

CVs submitted at the LOI stage do not need to be resubmitted. Full proposals should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to character@wfu.edu. The words “Philosophy of Character” should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and PDF. Questions about full proposals can be sent to the same address. Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who have been invited to submit by the fellowship director on the basis of the LOI phase. Full proposals must be received no later than January 15, 2012. An acknowledgement email will be sent within seven days of receiving the materials. If you do not receive such an acknowledgement please write again to character@wfu.edu and to seachrjw@wfu.edu.

Grant Eligibility

The PI must have a Ph.D. and be in or contracted to a faculty position at an accredited college or university before March 15, 2012 (exceptions may be made on a case by case basis). Applicants from the U.S. and any other country are welcome to apply. Applicants can only have their name on one proposal for this competition (whether as a PI or a team member), and cannot compete as a PI in the theology funding competition nor have been funded as a PI in the psychology funding competition. We may contact an applicant and suggest that he or she apply under the theology competition if in our opinion the project would be a better fit there instead.

Selection criteria will include: feasibility of the project in the specified timeframe, prior research accomplishments of the PI and other team members, relevance of the project to the **Key Questions**, originality and interest of the intended project, quality of the budget justification, and coherence of the intended research plan. Preference will be given to proposals from PIs who are within ten years of receiving their Ph.D. at the time of submission of the letter of intent. All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in US dollars.

Projects which are primarily historical in focus will not be funded.

The PI of a funded project must commit to the following:

- 1) Submit interim and final reports, as well as interim and final expenditure reports. The interim and final reports should not exceed 5 pages, and should detail the outcomes of the funded project. Reports must be submitted at the end of six months and at the conclusion of the project if the project is for one year.
- 2) Attend the two day Initial Research Workshop in June of 2012 where PIs from the “New Frontiers in the Psychology of Character” funding initiative will present their initial findings (expenses covered).
- 3) Attend and present central conclusions at the three day Final Research Colloquia in June of 2013 where the PIs from funding initiatives for the psychology, philosophy, and theology of character will each present their conclusions (expenses covered).
- 4) Consent to have their presentation at the Final Research Colloquia be videotaped for The Character Project website.
- 5) Submit a chapter length version of their paper from the Final Research Colloquia by December 31, 2013 for publication in a two volume edited work tentatively entitled *The Character Project: New Perspectives in Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology*.
- 6) Notify the Project at character@wfu.edu of all conference presentations, papers, and books which arise from the funded research.
- 7) Follow stipulations of grant award as communicated by Templeton either to WFU or to the recipient directly, and as determined by WFU.

All questions should be directed to:

Character@wfu.edu

or

The Character Project
Department of Philosophy
P.O. Box 7332
Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, NC 27109

References

- Doris, John. (2002). *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Harman, Gilbert. (1999). "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315-332.
- Kamtekar, Rachana. (2004). "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character." *Ethics* 114: 458-491.
- Miller, Christian. (2009). "Social Psychology, Mood, and Helping: Mixed Results for Virtue Ethics." *The Journal of Ethics* (Special Issue on Situationism) 13: 145-173.
- _____. (in progress). *Moral Character: Philosophy and Psychology*.
- Snow, Nancy. (2010). *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Sreenivasan, Gopal. (2002). "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution." *Mind* 111: 47-68.