

“Virtue, Happiness, and The Meaning of Life”

A project led by Jennifer A. Frey and Candace Vogler

The John Templeton Foundation has generously granted a major, 2.1 million dollar research initiative, led by Jennifer A. Frey (University of South Carolina) and Candace Vogler (University of Chicago), titled “Virtue, Happiness, and The Meaning of Life”. This 28-month project, launched in August 2015 and set to conclude with a major international conference in October 2018, incorporates psychological, philosophical, and theological research focused on self-transcendence to advance understanding of the interrelations of virtue, happiness, and the meaning of life. The following is a brief description of the project’s theoretical framework, guiding questions, and ambitions by its principal investigators.

Although interdisciplinary research into virtue and happiness has taken great strides forward in recent decades, there has been very little attention paid to the fact that virtue was traditionally conceived in terms of common goods. On the more traditional conception of virtue, human happiness is to be found within the context of a rich social life shared in common with others, a life in which the goods sought by individuals are those shared in common with others, and in which these goods are worked for and maintained together through the sound modes of social interaction that the cultivation of virtues makes possible.

While philosophers (and virtue ethicists in particular) have been busy thinking of happiness in terms of personal benefit, welfare, or self-realization, research in the humanities and social sciences has continued to suggest that individuals who feel they belong to something bigger and better than they are on their own – a family with a long history and the prospect of future generations, a spiritual practice oriented towards the due reverence for the sacred and the need to live right by others, work on behalf of social justice and the improvement of one’s community – often feel happier, have a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their lives, and have overall better life outcomes than those who do not. Some psychologists have labeled this sense of connection to goods that go beyond the self “self-transcendence.” Our project emphasizes the need to develop a new theoretical model of the virtues, one that is built around the concept of self-transcendence understood in terms of common goods more traditionally conceived. The concept of self-transcendence, we think, is key to understanding the interrelations between virtue, happiness, and meaning in human life.

We think that the account of virtue given by St. Thomas Aquinas is especially helpful for developing this model. We follow Aquinas in thinking that a virtue is “a disposition whereby the subject is well disposed according to the mode of its nature”¹.

On our view, virtues are habits that perfect our natural human powers of thought, action, and emotion such that we are able to reliably act in accordance with principles of right practical reason in order to attain and maintain a good or happy human life. Moreover, we suggest that all of the virtues, even those that look on the face of it to be merely self-regarding, such as the virtue of self-control or temperance, are dispositions that orient us to the common good and therefore are practical orientations to self-transcendent goods.

Aquinas’s theory of virtue is especially sensitive to the fact that virtue is very demanding because it can require great personal sacrifices; for this reason he well understood that the cultivation of virtue must be a training that orients us outward toward the promotion and attainment of goods that transcend an egoistic or self-centered perspective. Aquinas saw that any explanation of how it could be reasonable for individual human beings to pursue goods that will not directly benefit them, here and now, has to take seriously an account of human beings as spiritual creatures, that is, as beings oriented to self-transcendent goods.

Positive psychologists have become increasingly interested in studying self-transcendence or connections to goods that are ‘greater than the self’ since Martin Seligman put transcendence on his universal list of virtues found across history and cultures². Unlike Seligman, we do not understand self-transcendence as a single virtue, but rather in terms of a general behavioral structure (patterns of thought, action, desire, and emotion) that characterizes each virtue.

By “self-transcendence” then, we mean a cognitive, conative, and behavioral structure or practical orientation that expresses a deep attachment to an overall good that an individual cannot attain alone and whose benefits go beyond what can be captured by measures of personal welfare. Religion is a common enough source of self-transcendence to make religious studies one resource for research on self-transcendence. However, we do not understand self-transcendence as limited to religious practice, belief, or experience, and we do not think of the divine as the only source of genuine self-transcendent good. We will consider non-religious examples of self-transcendence as well. For instance, generativity – serious attachment to past generations and dedication to moving good forward for future generations – is self-transcendent by our definition. Participation in collective pursuit of knowledge is often self-transcendent. Work on behalf of bettering the community and altruistic work on behalf of others’ welfare can be self-transcendent. Self-transcendence constructs currently used in psychology do

1 ST I-II 71.1

2 M. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, (Simon & Schuster, New York 2002) and Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, (Oxford University Press, 2004).

not capture this concept in its full generality. Self-transcendence locates efforts and experiences in the context of an overall good for whose sake individual participants are willing to make personal sacrifices.

We follow Aquinas in thinking that the virtues dispose and enable us to act in ways that place the common good above our private good, and so enable us to develop a practical orientation that is broadly speaking self-transcendent. For instance, the cultivation of temperance regulates the human appetites that preserve the body and the species: our appetites for food and drink and our appetites for sex. But the cultivation of temperance goes far beyond mere self-control or self-regulation for the sake of personal health or well being, it orders one to the common good by allowing one to make choices that place one's most immediate, pressing, and powerful desires for bodily pleasures in the wider context of how one ought to relate oneself to others with whom one shares a life in common, as a member of a family, as a member of various institutions, and as a citizen of some political order. One needs to have rational self-control over one's sexual appetites, or one's relationships with others will become disordered – one may be given over to sins such as incest, rape, sexual harassment, stalking, cat-calling, lascivious staring, or other problematic forms of making others into unwilling objects of one's own sexual desires. The same is true for fortitude, which not only requires that one be bold in the face of danger to preserve one's own well being but that one be able to lay down one's life for others when this is necessary. The good life, for Aquinas, is not a private good but a common one, because human happiness is communal rather than individualistic. If the good life is necessarily something higher than private self-satisfaction or well-being, then the virtues must dispose us to seek this self-transcendent good and enable us to attain it.

In investigating the interrelations of self-transcendence, virtue, happiness, and meaning through a Thomistic framework, our work will be oriented by the following three big questions, each keyed to specific hypotheses:

Does self-transcendent orientation help ordinary virtuous activity – that is, the exercise of acquired, settled dispositions with cognitive, conative, and behavioral aspects which jointly coordinate pursuit of human good – provide a source of happiness and meaning?

When and how does cultivating virtue (in the rich, Thomistic sense of building an overall well-functioning character directed at doing and being good) produce a purposeful, fulfilling human life?

(3) What kind of happiness comes of virtue in the context of orientation to a self-transcendent good (such as the good associated with religious practice or the good associated with working on behalf of future generations)?

The major investigation of these questions takes place at our bi-annual working group meetings. Our project is a network project that brings together philosophers, theologians and religious scholars, and empirical psychologists to share their works in progress in an intensive, cross-disciplinary setting where work is not merely shared but is shaped and transformed by dialogue. Network projects offer distinctive advantages for our project, because our working group meetings

enable the character of our research to be shaped and informed by the insights provided by other members of the group while the research is still in progress.

In addition to our working group meetings, we also host intensive summer seminars for advanced graduate students and early career researchers, philosophy workshops, public lectures and debates, and we run a blog that regularly features the research of our scholars and that focuses on the themes of our grant. Our project will conclude with a major, international capstone conference that will enable us to share our research results and to discuss ways to carry the work forward in the future. You can learn more about our research, our institutional partnerships, our many public events and lectures, and you can subscribe to our blog on our website: virtue.uchicago.edu

Jennifer A. Frey
University of South Carolina
frey.jenn@gmail.com

Candace Vogler
University of Chicago
vogue@uchicago.edu

Jennifer Frey è docente in filosofia presso la University of South Carolina e portavoce in qualità di principale ricercatore del progetto “Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life”. Precedentemente ha insegnato presso la University of Chicago, dove è stata membro della Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts. Ha conseguito il dottorato di ricerca in filosofia presso la University of Pittsburgh, e il master in filosofia e studi medioevali presso l’Indiana University-Bloomington. Il suo ambito di ricerca risiede nell’intersezione della filosofia dell’azione e l’etica, con particolare attenzione alla tradizione aristotelico-tomista.

Candace Vogler occupa la cattedra David B. and Clara E. Stern di filosofia, è docente presso la University of Chicago, ed è portavoce in qualità di principale ricercatore del progetto “Virtue, Happiness, and the Meaning of Life”. È autrice di due libri, *John Stuart Mill’s Deliberative Landscape: An essay in moral psychology* (Routledge, 2001) e *Reasonably Vicious* (Harvard University Press, 2002), oltre che di numerosi scritti di etica, filosofia sociale e politica, filosofia e letteratura, cinema, psicanalisi, studi di genere, studi sulla sessualità e altre aree. I suoi interessi nella ricerca sono la filosofia pratica (in particolare tutto quel filone che ha origine in Elizabeth Anscombe) ragione pratica, etica kantiana, Marx e il naturalismo neo-aristotelico.