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The Templeton Effect

By Nathan Schneider



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Philosophy is surely first among the disciplines in the sheer number of metaphors assigned to it, even if not all of them are very flattering. Boethius, while imprisoned and facing execution, sought out his Lady Philosophy. Aquinas thought the discipline a mere "handmaiden," and Locke an "under-labourer." It has since jockeyed alternately with theology, mathematics, and physics for the title "queen of the sciences"—the highest, the purest, the judge over all the rest.

Descartes, in his monumental *Discourse*, presented a philosophy meant to be "the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences." It would be hard to get more foundational than that. But closer to the prevailing view today is that of Bertrand Russell: Even while attempting to ground all of mathematics in philosophical logic, he observed that philosophy was only the "residue" left over after "those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences."

That latter opinion has been taken up with a vengeance lately by famous scientists, most notably Stephen Hawking, who proclaimed "philosophy is dead" on the first page of his recent *The Grand Design*, even if the subsequent pages contained no small amount of what can only be considered philosophizing. Another physicist, Lawrence M. Krauss, staked his latest book, *A Universe From Nothing*, on much the same claim: "I think philosophy is

already unnecessary," he said when I asked about the issue in an online discussion held by his publisher.

This would be news to Alfred R. Mele, a philosopher at Florida State University. When I first contacted him, in early 2010, his phone was ringing so much that he was anxious about picking it up. "I've been taking steps to avoid crank calls since the grant was announced," he told me then.

The grant he was referring to, as is well known among philosophers by now, is for a \$4.4-million study of free will financed by the John Templeton Foundation. Mele isn't planning to use it just to sit around and think. He's charged with leading a multidisciplinary project that provides for six-figure subgrants to scientists for conducting empirical research (see Page B8).

He hopes the philosophical contributions will give this research a leg up on previous scientific studies, which he says have been conceptually jumbled. "There are interesting studies," he says, "but they could be done in a more interesting way, in a way that would bear more directly on free will than some of these free-will studies actually do." It's a project of a size and scope unheard of in academic philosophy—that is, except for the ever-growing number of similar grants in the Templeton docket. Just this summer, \$5-million went to John Martin Fischer, a philosopher at the University of California at Riverside, to study the concept of [immortality](#).

"Philosophers don't have that many sources of money to turn to," says Brian Leiter, a philosopher at the University of Chicago's law school and editor of the discipline's leading gossip blog, *Leiter Reports*. For them, "Templeton has been a windfall." No longer are philosophers stuck playing catch-up with the latest science; now, some of them have the resources to help shape it from the outset.

It's rare that philosophers require any equipment for their research besides a library card and an armchair. The grants they receive are often meant just to buy them time—a semester away from teaching to write a book or a paper, for instance—or to foster discussion through conferences. The National Endowment for the Humanities typically gives individual philosophers grants of \$25,000 to \$50,000, along with a few larger awards for collaborative projects like a journal on Kierkegaard or a new edition of Husserl.

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But in the past few years, Templeton has been stepping up the number of its six- and seven-figure awards for people in the discipline to study what the foundation calls the "Big Questions." These "Big Questions" are the kinds of out-there topics that make philosophy seem bold and exciting to a college freshman but can feel thoroughly desiccated after a few years in graduate school: free will, the universe, evil, hope, consciousness.

Controversy, though, always follows money, especially when it's Templeton money. Partisans of Richard Dawkins and his fellow New Atheists have long despised the foundation, interpreting its interest in dialogue between science and religion as an attempt to buy undeserved credibility for the latter at the cost of the former. Adds Brian Leiter, "It's clearly more of a windfall for philosophers who have some sort of vague religious angle to what they're doing." Yet he also points out that Mele is an exception. His foregoing work on free will expressed scant interest in the religious implications—which makes it all the more noticeable that his Templeton project has a component devoted to theology.

It's true that one tends to hear more Templeton-branded talk of "Big Questions"—spoken as if capitalized, and without irony—on the lips of philosophers with religious commitments, at religious institutions. When I met Christian Miller two years ago at a Society of Christian Philosophers conference at Wake Forest, the historically Baptist university where he teaches, he was still glowing from news of the three-year, \$3.7-million Templeton grant he'd just received. Its purpose is "to promote significant progress in the scholarly investigation of character," and \$2-million of it will go to empirical psychological research, alongside accompanying investigations in philosophy and theology.

Miller wasn't the only Templeton beneficiary in the room. Also at the Wake Forest conference was Samuel Newlands, a University of Notre Dame philosopher who had just begun spending the \$1.8-million he'd received to investigate the problem of evil—that is, the problem of whether worldly pain and suffering can coexist with a perfectly good God. The project includes both textual considerations centered on Gottfried Leibniz and a biological subgrant for research on animal pain. "Historically, the best philosophers that we all think of as the greats were all deeply immersed in the ongoing scientific inquiries of their time," Newlands explains, "and we think that's a noble endeavor to continue."

With the project on evil slated to end next year, Newlands is starting to develop another big project, oppositely enough, about hope and optimism. Receiving funds from Templeton is part of his plan; for undertakings like this, there's really no other choice.

Barry Loewer, a philosopher at Rutgers University at New Brunswick, isn't likely to turn up at a Society of Christian Philosophers meeting with Newlands and Miller. "I myself have no interest in philosophy of religion and am not a religious person," he says. For years, Loewer has been working with a group of philosophers, mathematicians, and physicists in the New York area, meeting and collaborating on papers—nothing very expensive. But about five years ago a colleague at Rutgers, Dean W. Zimmerman, told the group about the Templeton Foundation and suggested that they apply for a grant. Zimmerman, a top Christian philosopher, had already served on Templeton's advisory board and participated in many foundation-sponsored activities.

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he idea at first was to do a project about quantum mechanics and the foundations of physics, which was an interest of Loewer's group. Templeton had other ideas. The foundation pointed the group in the direction of cosmology, with the prospect of a much

bigger grant, and the researchers jumped at the idea. They realized that cosmology encompassed the questions of time and physical laws that had concerned them all along.

"You know that story of Molière's where someone discovers that he has been speaking prose his whole life?" says Loewer. "It was a little bit like that."

The nearly \$1-million grant his team received from Templeton last year coincided with another, slightly larger one called "Establishing the Philosophy of Cosmology," which was awarded to scholars at the University of Oxford. Despite the change of plans at Templeton's behest, Loewer stresses, "They've been really helpful, and totally noncoercive in terms of any agenda that they might have. I had my eyes open for it."

Not that philosophers are especially well practiced in negotiating the terms of million-dollar grants, much less in thinking about how such money might sway them. Neither Loewer nor Mele nor Miller nor Newlands could have anticipated back when they were in graduate school that they'd be administering projects like this; their training was for armchairs, libraries, and conferences. But now that the money is coming into the field, it is being welcomed even by those who lack the foundation's spiritual proclivities.

"Templeton picks some people whose Christian epistemology I might not share," Brian Leiter says, "but there's no quarreling that they're serious philosophers." Suspicions about some secret religious agenda tend to lessen the more widely the foundation's substantial sums begin to spread.

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he phenomenon under consideration here can be traced to two others gradually converging over the past few decades: the rise of the John Templeton Foundation itself, and the quiet coup hatched by religious believers within analytic philosophy.

John Marks Templeton, born in 1912, was sufficiently precocious to leave his home in small-town Tennessee for Yale, and after that for Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. The Depression hit his family hard, and while still a student he cultivated the habits of thrift and bargain-hunting that would characterize his career in business. He was willing to look where others wouldn't for a good bargain, and he became a pioneer of globalized finance and mutual funds. His most famous deal was to buy 100 shares of every stock that was selling for less than a dollar per share, just as Germany and Russia were invading Poland. A few years later, when the tide of the war economy lifted all boats, Templeton had quadrupled the money he had put in. "Invest at the point of maximum pessimism," he would say. His cheerful disposition, meanwhile, supplied enough optimism to go around.

As Templeton's net worth grew into the billions, he turned his attention to a new kind of investment. He had always lived by an eclectic and homemade brand of spirituality, blending Presbyterian respectability with the New Thought-influenced mysticism of his mother, and those with the pie-chart evidentialism of the boardroom. He was also enamored of science. "What might we learn," he wondered, "if we applied the same intensity of research energy to the pursuit of spiritual information that has been devoted to scientific inquiry?" The terms of his eclectic vocabulary

—"spiritual information," "humility theology"—framed the charter for the John Templeton Foundation, formally established in 1987. The materialism of modern society cast its "maximum pessimism" on the possibilities of spirit.

The foundation's flagship program has been the annual Templeton Prize, always pegged to be a little larger than the Nobel. This year's prize went to the Dalai Lama; the British physicist Martin Rees won it last year. Meanwhile, Templeton has bankrolled an infusion of spirituality into medical-school curricula, new scientific studies on the efficacy of prayer, sociological research on young adults and Pentecostals, and top-notch theorizing about the origins of the universe. With a kind of love-hate relationship to ivory towerism, many of the foundation's projects include a substantial component for public dissemination.

John Templeton died in 2008, and was succeeded by his son John Jr., a devoted neoconservative and evangelical Christian who finances Tea Party causes on his own dime. The foundation now holds an endowment of more than \$2.3-billion. "Spiritual information" and "humility theology" have given way in its messaging to the more marketable "Big Questions." And philosophy seems to be its latest market.

The architect of projects like Mele's and Loewer's is a philosopher named Michael J. Murray, who before joining the foundation taught at his alma mater, Franklin & Marshall College. He did a short stint directing philosophy and theology programs, and then was elevated, in February 2011, to the job of overseeing Templeton's entire portfolio of grant programs. Murray is a product of what has often been called the "renaissance" of Christianity in analytic philosophy. So is Dean Zimmerman, the one who connected Murray with Loewer. And so was the Wake Forest conference where I met Christian Miller and Samuel Newlands. This renaissance helped till academic philosophy for Templeton then to sow.

In the 1960s and 70s, while the atheistic straitjacket of logical positivism was loosening, smart, young Christian philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff began crafting new ways of defending Christian faith from the deliverances of the latest epistemology and modal logic. They formed the Society of Christian Philosophers to help coddle their conversations and cultivate successors, and they ascended to chairs in eminent departments—Plantinga at Notre Dame, Wolterstorff at Yale. Soon, thanks to them, the world of analytic philosophy that was once decidedly hostile to religious believers became significantly less so. More science-savvy students soon followed suit, crafting their own sophisticated defenses of faith in terms of physics, neuroscience, and biology. Michael Murray, who earned his Ph.D. at Notre Dame, has played a part in this, including as editor of a 1998 book, *Reason for the Hope Within*, which triumphantly summarizes the fruits of the renaissance so as to equip lay Christians to defend their faith.

Follow these contours, and Templeton's recent projects—even those led by people outside the Christian-philosophy fold—seem to follow a certain apologetic logic. Free will, for instance, is a critical feature of Plantinga's celebrated defense against the problem of evil; although Al Mele does not partake in religious speculation himself, he is a respected opponent of the brazen neuroscientists, like Michael S. Gazzaniga, who announce [free will's nonexistence](#). Cosmology, too, is considered one of the most promising avenues lately in arguments for God's existence, particularly thanks to

evidence that basic features of the universe may be "fine-tuned" to provide for the possibility of life. Barry Loewer isn't particularly interested in arguing for a divine fine-tuner, but his efforts might indirectly lend aid to someone who is. The recent \$5-million grant to study immortality went to a philosopher who doesn't believe in the afterlife, but the very fact that so much money is going to study it might give more credence to those who do.

Academic philosophy represents a distinctly Templetonian opportunity. Grants of a few million dollars are a drop in the bucket for the sciences, awash as they are with tax dollars and corporate contracts; but in philosophy, where such sums are unheard of, they have the potential to transform the whole field. The only question is whether philosophy is a worthwhile prize anymore—whether the discipline can still change how we think about science, what we think it means, and how we do it. The foundation is putting its money on yes.

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uch as Notre Dame served as the headquarters of the Christian-philosophy renaissance ushered in by Alvin Plantinga, a 104-year-old evangelical institution on the outskirts of Los Angeles called Biola University has cleared the way for one of the renaissance's most spirited and ambitious outgrowths. Biola supports the Evangelical Philosophical Society, a more doctrinally austere cousin of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and it houses the country's largest philosophy graduate program, which is devoted to sending Christian students with its master's degrees to leading Ph.D. programs. For a few weeks each year, Biola is graced by an intensive course by William Lane Craig, the master of public "God debates," who famously trounced Christopher Hitchens in 2009.

This summer Biola received the largest foundation grant in its history—a \$3-million Templeton award to support a new Center for Christian Thought, an interdisciplinary forum led by three philosophy professors. One of them, Thomas Crisp, was a star student of Plantinga's at Notre Dame, and he first met Michael Murray during a 2010 Society of Christian Philosophers good-will expedition to a symposium in Iran. A year later, Crisp and the others in the center's "leadership triumvirate" were hard at work on a proposal for the foundation, and he sees Templeton and Biola as an ideal match.

"The Christian community needs to think well about the Big Questions," says Crisp. "Especially in the evangelical world, we haven't done a great job of providing resources for our scholars to work collaboratively on these questions." He hopes that the center will elevate the level of discussion throughout Biola's curriculum, as well as in the churches they plan to reach through public events. The fellows that the center brings to the campus will vary from year to year, according to a sequence of themes like neuroscience, spiritual formation, and civil discourse. But Crisp expects that philosophers are there to stay.

There is a venerable tradition of placing philosophy in a queenly role in sectarian higher education; Roman Catholic universities, in particular, tend to have strong philosophy departments and often require all students to take a course in the discipline. Philosophy bears some elective affinities with religion, of course, and lately the analytic Christian renaissance has provided ammunition to use

against the unsophisticated ways that prominent scientists have been belittling religion in public. Still, a 2009 survey of philosophers conducted by the Web site PhilPapers found—surprising no one—that a considerable majority of academic philosophers identify as nontheists. And surely the appeal of putting philosophers at the helm of large research projects is far from solely religious. "This is an opportunity to realize a dream that many scholars have concerning the prospects for truly interdisciplinary research and discovery," says Murray. It's hard to imagine why nonbelievers might have that dream any less than believers.

As it has for centuries, the contest of metaphors for the rightful place of philosophy continues. "In some of the philosophy that is sensitive to the empirical disciplines," says Samuel Newlands, "it looks like philosophy becoming handmaiden to the sciences. I've always been a little bit uncomfortable with that relationship." He wants to see, instead, a relationship that is more genuinely collaborative, one in which philosophers can contribute more substantively. "Maybe when we have funding to offer, we can at least get some kind of seat at the table," adds Newlands.

Sitting at the table—that's a lot more modest than being queen. But in the modern research university, where money rules and money tends to go straight to hard science and lucrative business, what Templeton calls the "Big Questions" of meaning, judgment, and value are usually relegated to a quaint afterthought. A few million dollars carefully placed here and there might at least—to try on another metaphor—level the playing field, offering philosophers a chance to hold their own.

Nathan Schneider's first book, "God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet," is forthcoming from the University of California Press. Reporting for this article was made possible by a Knight Grant for Reporting on Religion and American Public Life.


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OT, but as an attorney, I feel obligated to point this out:

"[S]ays Brian Leiter, a philosopher at the University of Chicago's law school and editor of the discipline's leading gossip blog, Leiter Reports."

The discipline's leading gossip blog? Hardly. I fear that would have to go to Above the Law, with Inside the Law School Seam in silver. Of course, Leiter hates both those sites (they run contrary to his notions of the profession - namely that it and legal education are in a horrible mess at present),