
Overview of Core Funding Areas

In the charter establishing his Foundation, the late Sir John Templeton set out his philanthropic intentions under several broad headings. These Core Funding Areas continue to guide our grantmaking as we work to find world-class researchers and project leaders to share in our pursuit of Sir John’s dynamic, contrarian, forward-looking vision.

A number of topics—including creativity, freedom, gratitude, love, and purpose—can be found under more than one Core Funding Area. The Foundation welcomes proposals that bring together these overlapping elements, especially by combining the tools and approaches of different disciplines.

Science & the Big Questions

Sir John Templeton stipulated that most of the Foundation’s resources would be devoted to research (and disseminating the results of research) about the “basic forces, concepts, and realities” governing the universe and humankind’s place in the universe. What did he mean by “basic forces, concepts, and realities”?

Sir John’s own eclectic list featured a range of fundamental scientific notions, including complexity, emergence, evolution, infinity, and time. In the moral and spiritual sphere, his interests extended to such basic phenomena as altruism, creativity, free will, generosity, gratitude, intellect, love, prayer, and purpose. These diverse, far-reaching topics define the boundaries of the ambitious agenda that we call the Big Questions. Sir John was confident that, over time, the serious investigation of these subjects would lead humankind ever closer to truths that transcend the particulars of nation, ethnicity, creed, and circumstance.

In posing the Big Questions, Sir John stressed the need for humility and openness, and he saw the possibility of important contributions from various modes of inquiry. He especially wished to encourage researchers in the natural and human sciences to bring their rigorous methods to bear on the sorts of subjects that he identified, but he was also enthusiastic about the insights that might come from new approaches in philosophy and theology. Whatever the field, he expected research supported by the Foundation to conform to the highest intellectual standards.

For Sir John, the overarching goal of asking the Big Questions was to discover what he called “new spiritual information.” This term, to his mind, encompassed progress not only in our conception of religious truths but also in our understanding of the deepest realities of human nature and the physical world. As he wrote in the Foundation’s charter, he wanted to encourage

every sort of opinion leader—from scientists and journalists to clergy and theologians—to become more open-minded about the possible character of ultimate reality and the divine.

Sir John’s own theological views conformed to no orthodoxy. Though raised a Presbyterian and exposed in his youth to the Unity School of Christianity, he did not fully identify with any established religion and possessed an eager curiosity about all of the world’s faith traditions. In assessing proposals, he asked the Foundation to stand apart from any consideration of dogma or personal religious belief and to seek out grantees who, in their approach to the Big Questions, were “innovative, creative, enthusiastic, and open to competition and new ideas.”

The Foundation has honored Sir John’s vision of the Big Questions by supporting a wide range of research projects, as well as other activities of a more practical or educational purpose, in the following areas:

Mathematical & Physical Sciences

The Foundation supports innovative projects that focus on foundational questions in mathematics or that seek a deeper understanding of the nature of reality within the realm of physics, cosmology, astronomy, chemistry, or other physical sciences. Projects that are unlikely to be supported by conventional funding sources are especially encouraged.

Life Sciences

The Foundation supports projects investigating the evolution and fundamental nature of life, human life, and mind, especially as they relate to issues of meaning and purpose. Projects are welcome from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including the biological sciences, neuroscience, archeology, and paleontology.

Human Sciences

The Foundation supports projects that apply the tools of anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology to the various moral and spiritual concepts identified by Sir John Templeton. These include altruism, creativity, free will, generosity, gratitude, intellect, love, prayer, and purpose.

Philosophy & Theology

The Foundation supports projects that attempt to develop new philosophical and theological insights, especially (but not only) in relation to advances in scientific understanding.

Science in Dialogue

The Foundation has a strong interest in projects that bring one or more scientific disciplines into a mutually enriching discussion with theology and/or philosophy, whether for a scholarly audience or the public at large.

Character Development

“Wherever we find ourselves in life, whatever the circumstances, whatever habits may be influencing our decisions,” Sir John Templeton wrote, “we can transform each situation into a learning and growing experience. We can determine how to be the masters of our habits so that our habits can be useful servants to us.” For Sir John, such self-awareness and personal growth depended on a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which good character flourishes and of the roots of good character in human nature, whether understood from a scientific, philosophical, or religious point of view.

The Foundation supports a broad range of programs, publications, and studies focused on the universal truths of character development, from childhood through young adulthood and beyond. The qualities of character emphasized by Sir John in the Foundation’s charter include awe, creativity, curiosity, diligence, entrepreneurialism, forgiveness, future-mindedness, generosity, gratitude, honesty, humility, joy, love, purpose, reliability, and thrift. The Foundation also has recently supported a major project on wisdom.

We remain open to other possibilities for extending our activities in the area of character development, especially projects that deal with the crucial relationship between culture (as expressed in beliefs, values, and worldview) and behavior. As Sir John emphasized in the “Laws of Life” that he saw as the key to character development, “When you rule your mind, you rule your world.”

Freedom & Free Enterprise

For Sir John Templeton, wealth creation was no accident of history, whether for the nations of the West or for the billions of people struggling for basic necessities in the developing world. Human societies could experience general prosperity, he believed, only when they recognized and established broad principles of freedom, competition, and personal responsibility. For him, individual freedom was the indispensable foundation of economic, social, and spiritual progress.

As one of the most successful investors of modern times, Sir John understood the enormous contribution that free markets and entrepreneurship could make to material improvement. As a student of classical liberalism, from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman, he also saw that, without

economic freedom, individual freedom was fragile and vulnerable. The Foundation honors this profound vision by supporting a range of programs intended to liberate the initiative of individuals and nations and to establish the necessary conditions for the success of profit-making enterprise.

Exceptional Cognitive Talent & Genius

“History abounds with stories of great minds that have gifted humanity with wonderful discoveries and inventions,” Sir John Templeton wrote. “Each discovery or invention began as a ‘seed idea’ in an open and receptive mind.” As Sir John saw it, genius was perhaps the greatest engine of material and spiritual progress and could be understood as a kind of transcendent spark, a way for human beings “to be helpers in the acceleration of divine creativity.”

In pursuing Sir John’s aims, the Foundation has made a strong commitment to identifying and nurturing young people who demonstrate exceptional talent in mathematics and science. In the U.S., we have supported accelerated learning for students capable of working well beyond their grade level, and we have funded a number of important national studies of the issue. Internationally, the Foundation has sponsored academic training and competitions for students who show extraordinary potential but whose talents might not otherwise be developed, especially because of their economic circumstances or insufficient educational support.

Genetics

Research in genetics was a longstanding interest of Sir John Templeton, who saw the field’s extraordinary potential for explaining the deepest principles of life’s evolution and for providing large-scale, transformative breakthroughs in fields like medicine and agriculture. He was particularly interested in how major advances in genetics might serve to empower individuals, leading to spiritually beneficial social and cultural changes. (The Foundation’s engagement with this Core Funding Area is still in its early stages, and we are not currently accepting unsolicited proposals on genetics.).