

# TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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## Defining Wisdom

The astonishing scientific and technological advances of recent decades have placed more information than ever before at our fingertips. Yet, as a range of social critics have observed, we seem to be no more thoughtful or prudent than previous generations. Knowledge has expanded exponentially, but wisdom has failed to keep pace.

This paradox lies at the heart of a new research project called “Defining Wisdom.” Based at the University of Chicago, the four-year initiative, supported by a grant of \$3 million from the Templeton Foundation, will examine the idea of wisdom from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, with the aim of better understanding the nature of wisdom, its benefits and applications, and how to cultivate it.

John Cacioppo, who directs the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago, is overseeing the project, along with Jean Bethke Elshtain of the Divinity School and Howard Nusbaum, chairman of the psychology department. Cacioppo became interested in the idea of wisdom three decades ago, as an undergraduate economics major. He found it difficult to accept rational-choice theory, the discipline’s primary explanation for human decision-making. “I worried about the simplifying assumptions behind it,” he told the *Templeton Report*. It seemed obvious to him that human beings make choices based on a good deal more than calculations of narrowly defined, short-term self-interest.



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Raphael's *School of Athens*, detail of central section with Plato and Aristotle.



John Cacioppo

For the Defining Wisdom grants competition, more than 600 research proposals were received from scholars across the world, in fields ranging from economics, philosophy, and theology to computer science, neuroscience, and psychology. The project’s leaders chose forty finalists, who were then evaluated in a two-step peer-review process involving external referees and the project’s own council of eleven distinguished scholars. At a conference at the University of Chicago this past August, twenty-three winning proposals for funding were announced. Finalists who did not receive funding will continue to participate in Defining Wisdom’s meetings and conference calls and to be active members of the project’s Wisdom Research Network, which is open to any scholar interested in the new field.

The organizers of Defining Wisdom decided to limit the competition to scholars who had completed their advanced degrees within the past decade, hoping to support fresh thinking on wisdom and new analytical approaches. “We want to use rigorous scientific and scholarly methods to study the concept as it has been discussed for thousands of years,” said Cacioppo. The winning proposals included:

- “Wisdom Is Compression: Data Compression as a Mathematical Measure of Wisdom,” by Ankur Gupta, a computer scientist at Butler University

- “Formalism and Its Discontents: Mathematics and Wisdom in the European Enlightenment,” by Matthew Jones, an historian at Columbia University
- “Wisdom-Related Knowledge and Behavior during Social Conflict,” by Ute Kunzmann, a psychologist at Leipzig University (Germany)
- “Wisdom as Skillful Interpretation: Scriptural Appropriation and the Hermeneutics of Recovery,” Michael Legaspi, a theologian at Creighton University
- “All the Wiser: Wisdom from a System Dynamics Perspective,” by Seana Moran, a research fellow at Stanford University’s Center on Adolescence
- “Wise Choices: The Interaction of Institutional and Individual Wisdom,” by Sendhil Mullainathan, an economist at Harvard University

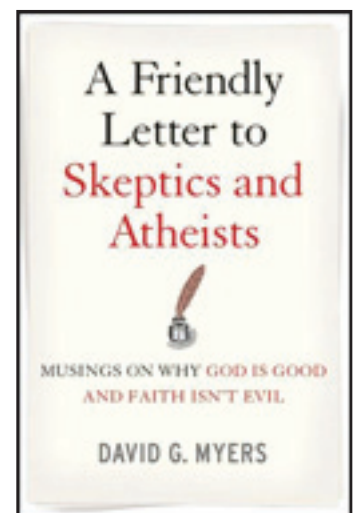
The Defining Wisdom project was developed at the request of the late Sir John Templeton, who passed away this past July. According to Barnaby Marsh, JTF’s director of strategic initiatives, “Sir John recognized that there has been an explosion in human knowledge and that we have come to understand a lot of things better. But he was troubled by the fact that all this knowledge has not necessarily made us wiser.”

## NOTEBOOK

### Belief and Reason

David G. Myers is the author of the most widely used psychology textbook on college campuses today, soon to be in its 9th edition, and he devotes a good deal of his time to keeping it up to date. But Myers, a trustee of the John Templeton Foundation and a professor of social psychology at Hope College in Michigan, also has a vocation—getting people on different sides of difficult issues to talk to each other.

In his new book, *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn’t Evil*, Myers does not try to convince skeptics to accept the “truth claims” of religion, but he does draw their attention to its social benefits. Studies show that, compared with their secular counterparts, religious people tend to be happier and healthier and to contribute more to helping others through volunteer work and charitable giving. Nor, he insists, is religion the enemy of science. “Believers can share with skeptics a commitment to reason, evidence, and critical thinking,” he writes, “while also embracing a faith that supports happiness, health, and helpfulness.”



This middle ground, Myers recently argued in “On Faith,” the religion blog of the *Washington Post*, is precisely what today’s “new atheists” refuse to accept, a point he also emphasized in his response to *Religulous*, the new movie by Bill Maher. *Publishers Weekly*, among other reviewers, has singled out his new book’s calm reasonableness as a particular strength: “Myers adds to the numerous apologetic texts that have emerged since the neo-atheist movement began. But this quick jaunt into potentially dangerous waters is head and shoulders above the rest.”

## Free-Market Honors

Tomorrow the Virginia-based Atlas Economic Research Foundation will honor sixteen think tanks from nine different countries with the Templeton Freedom Awards. Established in 2003, the awards are intended to recognize the contributions of independent think tanks. With the support of the John Templeton Foundation, more than \$1.25 million in prize money and grants has been awarded in the last five years.



This year's winners include: for free-market solutions to poverty, the Unirule Institute of Economics (China) and Fundación Ecuador Libre (Ecuador); for social entrepreneurship, Japanese for Tax Reform (Japan) and Deep Springs International (USA); for ethics and values, the American Center for Civic Character (USA) and the Polish-American Foundation for Economic Research and Education (Poland); for student outreach, the Center for the Dissemination of Economic Knowledge (Venezuela) and the Institut de Formation Politique (France); and for initiative in public relations, the Goldwater Institute (USA) and the Institución Futuro (Spain).

Prizes in three new categories were also awarded this year: for innovative media, the Reason Foundation (USA) and the Institute of Economic and Social Studies (Slovakia); for university-based institutes, the Mercatus Center at George Mason University (USA) and the Political Theory Project at Brown University (USA); and for young institutes, the Prometheus Institute (USA) and the Instituto Juan de Mariana (Spain).

## Recent Articles of Interest

- "Body of Knowledge," a review of *Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict between Faith and Reason*, by JTF Chief External Affairs Officer Gary Rosen, *New York Times Book Review*, 2 Nov 2008.
- "We are all in the same darkness," review of Templeton Laureate Michael Novak's *No One Sees God*, *Washington Times*, 12 Oct 2008.
- "Wired for Justice," featuring JTF grantee Michael McCullough, *New York Times*, 7 Oct 2008.
- "Little Gray Cells Add Up," discussing a JTF-sponsored study of mathematically precocious youth, *Science*, 3 Oct 2008.
- "Science and Faith, the British Way," by Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellow Mark Pinsky, *USA Today*, 29 September 2008.

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