

nature [**inside**view]



TEMPLETON WORLD
CHARITY FOUNDATION

Profile Feature as seen in *Nature* 17 September 2020

A NEW QUEST TO UNCOVER WHAT HELPS HUMANS FLOURISH

A conversation with **ANDREW SERAZIN**, President of the Templeton World Charity Foundation



For centuries, humans battled plagues, famine and each other, locked in a struggle to survive. Science evolved to help us meet those challenges. We invented penicillin, launched a war on cancer, split the atom, and sequenced the genome. But humans are capable of flourishing, as individuals and as societies, and science could offer valuable support. Templeton World Charity Foundation is launching a novel request for ideas to identify Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing and scientifically tractable ways to address them. The foundation will follow this with a five-year, US\$40 million programme to fund interdisciplinary research on these challenges. Andrew Serazin outlines why we need a scientific approach to human flourishing, which questions are of interest, and why now is the time to pursue them.

What is human flourishing?

Our vision of human flourishing has many dimensions, including mental and physical health, happiness, life satisfaction, meaning, purpose, character and close social relationships. Flourishing contrasts with languishing, and it also has a connotation of human goodness, generativity, growth and resilience. Our mission is to support new scientific research on flourishing and to translate discoveries into practical tools. There's something fundamental about how we choose the goals we have for humanity. We do this by establishing a scientifically informed view of what humans are capable of, and how we can grow and progress.

How are you approaching these grand challenges for human flourishing?

It's a two-phase process. The first phase is the request for ideas, which aims to identify the most significant barriers to human flourishing where interdisciplinary scientific research can help. We're asking the world to come up with descriptions of obstacles, and scientifically tractable means of addressing them. Applicants should be experts in their fields

and employed at research institutions, but, ultimately, we want anybody with a high-quality idea to submit a proposal. The second phase is about awarding grants for research projects designed to make progress against one or more of those challenges. The people who submit ideas will have the opportunity to shape the strategic planning process we use to award grants. We would also like to publish the winning submissions either in a top research journal or through general media outlets. In the first phase, clear, simple, and persuasive writing by applicants will help distinguish the best ideas.

What types of questions are of interest?

The biological complexity of human beings is of interest, particularly the interplay between genetics, physiology, and the environment. Psychological concepts or constructs that are central to the human experience, such as creativity, empathy, free will, imagination, and wisdom, are also important to explore. The social capacities of groups, moving from an individual out to society, is also within our range of inquiry. The RFI also includes studies of human biological or cultural evolution,

the origins of humanity, and by extension, the future of humanity, such as how we interact is changed by technology.

It is important to note topics out of this programme's scope, including many worthy topics funded by other organizations. Basic research on neurological disease, infectious disease, cardiovascular disease and cancer are important, but not the focus. Research on climate change, COVID-19, and mental-health issues such as depression and anxiety are also not eligible for support. That said, we don't know all the answers, which is why we're asking the world to share their ideas.

How do interdisciplinary teams play a role in this process?

When we talk about interdisciplinarity, it's not just having a chemist and a biochemist talk to each other. We really want philosophers to interact with neuroscientists, we want psychologists and computer scientists talking to each other, we want animal behavior scientists and anthropologists to work together. We want radical collaboration between people with different ways of approaching the world. The humanities have a rich way of describing human flourishing.

Blending scholarship in the humanities with empirical scientific methods is an extremely powerful combination, and is ultimately the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration that we look for.

Why is this an important time to explore these questions?

It is clearly a tough time for humanity. Through the Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing programme, we have an opportunity to set our collective sights a little higher and to recognize in a clear-eyed way what we both expect and hope for humanity. There couldn't be a better time to rigorously think about these existential questions and use science to help make progress on issues and concerns that have been with us forever. All important societal issues have a human element, whether it's climate change or coronavirus or the deployment of artificial intelligence. These issues all have at their heart implicit or explicit visions for flourishing. If we don't understand it, then it's harder to envision, and harder to achieve the outcomes we want.



Grand Challenges for Human Flourishing

We Want Your Big Ideas.

Templeton World Charity Foundation is investing \$40 million in research that promotes human flourishing.

Be part of the future of science.

Submit your ideas by Nov. 11, 2020



www.humanflourishing.world

