



MIND & LIFE EUROPE FRANCISCO J. VARELA AWARDS FOR CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCES RESEARCH 2021

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

AWARD REMIT

Mind & Life Europe is seeking applications for the Mind & Life Europe Francisco J. Varela Awards for Contemplative Sciences Research (European Varela Awards – EVAs). The EVAs are an integral component of Mind & Life’s (Mind & Life Institute and Mind & Life Europe) support of contemplative sciences—a growing field investigating contemplative practices through research in diverse disciplines ranging from basic and clinical sciences to social sciences and the humanities. Named after one of Mind & Life’s co-founders, neuroscientist Francisco J. Varela (1946–2001), these grants of up to €17,500 are awarded annually to early-career scientists and scholars (see **ELIGIBILITY** section for further detail).

The Varela Awards fund rigorous examinations of contemplative techniques with the ultimate goal of providing greater insight into contemplative practices and their application for reducing human suffering and promoting flourishing. Mind & Life views the Varela Awards as an essential feature of its overall strategy for building an interdisciplinary understanding of the mind and human behavior. These awards are a key vehicle for increasing the number of exemplary scientists, scholars and clinicians involved in contemplative sciences.

Much has been learned already through empirical investigations of the effects of contemplative practices and techniques on emotion regulation, attention, working memory, and associated neural plasticity. Furthermore, contemplative practices are being increasingly used in secular settings, including mental health, education and the workplace. However, much remains to be understood regarding the relationship between different elements of contemplative interventions and their desired outcomes, differences in outcomes across populations and contexts, relative beneficial effects of contemplative practices when presented within a wider spiritual framework vs. secular setting, as well as ethical issues surrounding implementation of such interventions in different contexts. Moreover, the intrinsic embodied nature of contemplative practices calls for experiential categories, typologies, and language that could extend the terminology of cognitive science beyond such useful but limiting terms as attention and working memory. In all of these areas, contributions from the humanities and social sciences are invaluable in providing conceptual and contextual grounding to advance the study of contemplative practices and their theoretical underpinnings.

Francisco J. Varela believed that contemplative training offers us novel methods for investigating human experience. He particularly emphasized the importance of an embodied, phenomenological perspective in gaining insight into the nature of the human mind. In his vision, contemplative training not only provides a new domain for scientific study, but more importantly offers theoretical and methodological resources for advancing scientific models of emotion, cognition, and consciousness. Varela proposed one such methodological framework known as *neurophenomenology*. As an empirical paradigm, neurophenomenology combines data derived from first- and third-person methods in the framework of mutual constraints and enriched explanatory scope, and could be implemented in a number of ways, for example:

- Using subjective reports from the trained observers (e.g., experienced meditators) or interviewed participants to refine the experimental categories and/or reduce the ‘noise’ in third-person data;
- Using trained observers (e.g., experienced meditators) to shift between and sustain different experiential modes for more robust third-person measurement.

TYPES OF PROJECTS ENCOURAGED

Given the importance of neurophenomenology as an empirical paradigm to Varela’s vision of developing Contemplative Sciences, the research proposals combining first- (and/or second)- with third-person methods are particularly encouraged. Further developments of first-person methods uniquely suited to the study of contemplative practices and associated experiential states are also much needed. Strong proposals will meet the highest standards of rigor in the applicant’s field of expertise. Preference will be given to interdisciplinary studies, thus actively encouraging research collaboration of researchers with contemplative scholars/practitioners.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and uncertainties associated with the ability to carry out face-to-face/lab-based data collection, we are encouraging the following types of proposals for the EVA 2021 call:

- Online interventions;
- Online behavioral testing (e.g. using *Psychopy* or *E-Prime Go* software);
- Projects that include first-person data: microphenomenological interviews using virtual meeting platforms (i.e. Zoom, Skype, etc.) are permitted for this round;
- Secondary data analysis of existing datasets (exclusive of meta-analysis): we encourage these types of proposals particularly from the junior faculty, with the accompanying budget for an RA. All such projects will have to be preregistered on the OSF’s website using the form: <https://osf.io/x4gzt/wiki/home/>. The preregistration could occur if and when you have been awarded an EVA; however, we would welcome a preregistration confirmation being included as a part of your EVA application submission.

The proposed projects that rely solely on the online platforms to collect data using self-report measures/questionnaires (e.g. a *Qualtrics* survey) will be evaluated less favorably.

Please take these recommendations only as suggestions; we very much welcome and encourage creative and adaptive proposals outside of the parameters outlined above, as long as they are feasible within the unpredictable context of COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions.

If your proposed project involves face-to-face/lab-based data collection, we require that you provide a brief but clear, feasible and rigorous Plan B (a relevant section has been added to the online application form) that will enable you to address your proposed aims & objectives should you be unable to carry out the project as proposed due to the social distancing restrictions in the context of COVID-19 mitigation measures in your country/institution.

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible for the European Varela Award, the applicant **must** have attended the [European Mind & Life Europe Summer Research Institute \(ESRI\)](#) in the previous 5 years or participated in both the [Contemplative Science Symposium \(CSS\)](#) and the [Mind & Life Europe Retreat](#) held in October 2019. The EVA is intended as a career development award, and is open to:

- graduate (PhD) students (ideally within their 1st or 2nd year of registration if full-time);
- post-doctoral fellows affiliated with a research institution or university;
- post-doctoral researchers on fixed terms contracts of at least 2 years' duration (if your contract is due to expire prior to the proposed timeline for completion of the EVA project if awarded, you will need to provide a confirmation from your supervisor/line manager that your contract will be extended or there will be other funding available to support your salary/living costs for the duration of the award);
- junior faculty (i.e. lecturers) up to the fifth year (inclusive) of university appointment.

AWARD INFORMATION

Grants of up to €17,500 are awarded annually through a competitive application and selection process. Applications are reviewed and selected based on the following criteria:

- Significance to the field
- Methodological approach/design and feasibility
- Innovation/novelty
- Quality of the applicant, likelihood of success and future contribution to the field
- Strength of academic/research environment.

AWARD CONDITIONS

Proposed research should be completed within a 2-year period; an annual progress report and a final report are required for awardees to remain in good standing. It is expected that the completion of proposed research will result in a peer-reviewed publication (scientific journal article) or book/book chapter, as well as a scholarly presentation at a professional conference. The EVA funds **may not be used** for PI (or Co-I) salary/indirect costs or institutional overheads.

APPLICATION PROCESS

To apply, please submit the following materials by **23:00 CET November 5, 2021** using your [personal Converia account](#):

- Completed application form, which can be found on our [online application site](#), including research proposal and budget
- Project Summary/Abstract (250 words maximum)
- Applicant's and research team members' abbreviated CVs or NIH-style biosketches (limit

each to 4 pages maximum)

- Two letters of recommendation: letters should speak to the ability of the applicant to perform the proposed research and his/her potential to develop a fruitful program of research and contribute to the growing field of contemplative sciences.

Awardees will be announced in **the first week of March 2022** at the latest.

For more details, please visit <https://www.mindandlife-europe.org/our-work/evs/> and our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) or email varelaawards@mindandlife-europe.org with specific queries.