

# TWO VARIETIES OF MORAL EXEMPLARISM

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## **ABSTRACT**

References to moral exemplars run deep into the history of philosophy, as we find them featured in rather disparate context and approaches which span from virtue ethics to moral perfectionism, from existentialism to moral particularism. In the varied and growing contemporary literature on moral exemplarism, we find a number of options that can be brought down to the two rather broad yet distinctive categories of theoretical and anti-theoretical approaches. In the paper, I showcase and contrast these two varieties by taking the views of Zagzebski and Rorty as representative of, respectively, the reference to exemplars as most perfect beings to aspire to and get guidance from, and the use of them as next yet foreign beings to experiment with and get provocation from. Finally, I will draw some consequences for a conception of moral education hinged on unsettlement and transformation rather than on imitation and reproduction.

## **KEYWORDS**

Moral Theory; Moral Education; Spiritual Exercises; Linda Zagzebski; Richard Rorty.

## **1. MORAL EXEMPLARISM BETWEEN THEORY AND ANTI-THEORY**

The contemporary orthodoxy in moral philosophy has variously committed to a version of isolationism, bracketing our first order moral views from their philosophical account: that is, the tools and strategies to investigate the most general shape of the moral life should not be influenced by one particular picture of it on pain of jeopardizing the impartiality of our meta-ethical and normative theories alike, hence turning moral reflection into moral preaching of sorts. This theoretical model has been attacked from a number of corners

by the so-called “anti-theorists”<sup>1</sup>, who argued against what they take to be the impossible and eventually pernicious task of peeling off one’s substantive conceptions of the good life from one’s philosophical accounts of it – a maneuver which, according to this heterodox approach, often conceals precisely those very foundationalist agendas and ambitions moral theorists themselves wove against the moralizers<sup>2</sup>. With its stress on the importance of exemplar beings in both shaping one’s conduct and revising one’s views about how to live up to ethical standards, moral exemplarism sits rather well with, and can be read as belonging to, this feast of anti-theoretical approaches critical of mainstream moral theorizing, or so I will argue. In fact, according to this approach, moral thinking and acting move from the confrontation with embodied excellent human existences that might or might not inspire us and enlighten our conducts in the particular situation we find ourselves in, rather than with allegedly neutral templates which we should accept or reject independently from the standpoint we occupy – templates that nevertheless represent but one precise picture of the moral life as pumped by our allegedly pre-philosophical moral intuitions<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the very modality and goals of moral inquiry is different: while moral theorists seek moral justification and prescriptions via impersonal argumentations, exemplarists seek moral insight and transformation via personal confrontation.

While acknowledging the force and opportunity of an exemplarist approach to ethics, I distinguish two main varieties of it: a broadly theoretical one – most articulately and effectively defended by Linda Zagzebski – based on the centrality of the excellence *of* the exemplar’s virtues, and a broadly anti-theoretical one based on the centrality of the relationship we establish *with* the exemplar – which I find congenially articulated in the later work of Richard Rorty. While the former hinges on our capacity to recognize and possibly

<sup>1</sup> For the manifesto and classical statement of anti-theory, see Williams 1985, and Clarke and Simpson 1989; for a criticism, see Loudon 1992; for a recent, critical assessment of the whole debate, see Fotion 2014.

<sup>2</sup> By moralism I here mean both the promotion of one precise moral option in disguise – to be distinguished from the inscription of moral significance into moral reflection itself – and the extension of moral considerations by means of philosophical imposition beyond the boundaries of what is ordinary felt as pertaining to the range of the moral – to be distinguished from the open-endedness of the moral. The multi-faced and wide-ranging topic of moralism has been explored in several of its nuances by Taylor 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The battle over moral intuitions is also quite lively, and has been recently reinvigorated by the clash between experimental philosophers and their critics. For a survey and proposal congenial to the perspective advanced here, see Koopman 2012. On these themes, see also Lecaldano 2009.

duplicate the excellent life we read in the words and deeds of the exemplar, driven by the *admiration for* and *aspiration to* their lives, the latter hinges on our willingness to be reshaped by our real or imaginary *conversations* and *engagement with* such lives, driven by self-scrutiny and self-knowledge. While the former has among its key quests those of defining what exemplars are, how to individuate them and imitate them, the latter is interested in the relationship we establish with them and in how we are possibly displaced and transformed by them.

I claim that it is exemplarism of the latter breed that we should endorse if we don't want to ultimately fall back to the prescriptivist, theoretical conception of moral thinking that exemplarism should be critical of. That is to say, it is only when exemplarism is made anti-theoretical that we can prevent it from becoming yet one more arrow in the moralist's quiver, thus jeopardizing its fierce opposition to abstractedness, on the one hand, and over-commitment, on the other. What I aim at disclosing is a space for moral reflection which is both morally committed (in the sense of not being morally neutral) and yet not morally charged (that is moralistically driven), where exemplars play the role of those very (concrete as against rarified) devices for moral education through which we explore and possibly transform our understanding and practice of our moral life without being given one to be inculcated from without through strokes of prescriptions.

After sketching the blueprint of Zagzebski's theoretical model (§2), I shall voice a number of concerns about some of its metaphilosophical and ethical implications (§3), and eventually turn to an different, anti-theoretical rendering of exemplarism as inspired by a line of reasoning drawn from Rorty (§4). Some very general conclusions about the nature and scope of philosophical ethics and some gestures towards the future path to travel will round things up (§5).

## 2. EXEMPLARS AS EXTRAORDINARY BEINGS

In a number of recent writings (most notably, 2010 and 2017), Linda Zagzebski sketched a very sophisticated and skillfully knitted up theory of moral exemplarity through which she aims to reclaim the centrality of extraordinary (virtuous) beings to moral judgment and moral education. Her goals are not so much descriptive and suggestive, but rather prescriptive and foundational in spirit: by offering a categorization and evaluation of the various directions in which exceptionality can be reached and most importantly admired and longed for, she sketches a meta-ethics as well as a

normative theory of moral value and conduct. Moral exemplars do show what goodness is as well as urge us to realize it.

This combo is presented under the auspices of a “radical kind of virtue theory [she] call[s] ‘exemplarism’, which is foundational in structure but which is grounded in exemplars of moral goodness, direct reference to which anchors all the moral concepts in the theory” (2010, 41). Zagzebski’s foundationalism is then grounded on the direct reference to exemplars and the normative role of the universal emotion of admiration. According to this scheme, narratives and tales are those very features of our ordinary moral practices through which we reinforce our confidence in referring to the right kind of people, and such identification is one pre-theoretical aspect of our moral practices that theory must explain and account for. Narratives and tales link the a priori element of moral theory (that is, foundationalism) to the practical aspect of our moral lives though (that is, exemplarism), as Zagzebski remarks at several stages, the resulting theory amounts to no *manual* for good deeds but rather to something closer to a *moral map* (2010, 43ss) which is up to the various individual to interpret and put to use. Exemplars possess a distinctive deep psychological structure that makes them maximally good or excellent, and that we can and should carefully observe, even if this natural or acquired endowment might well change among exemplars and through time. We educate the normative emotion of admiration through reflection and further experience, and in so doing we cherish and emulate those extraordinary individuals who handle us maps to get around and live by.

Now, Zagzebski notices how admiration and desire are two distinct aspects of goodness, as we admire things we don’t desire, and desire things we don’t admire. As against Aristotle, admiration (which opposite is contempt) is depicted as primary to desirability: according to Zagzebski’s exemplarist moral psychology, key to the moral life is the will (and often obligation) to model ourselves on whom we want to be like. Admiration is a motivating emotion that tracks how things are in the world, and, in this sense, “admirable” works as a thick concept, with the descriptive part as inseparable from the evaluative one. Zagzebski writes:

The test of whether someone is admirable is always that we admire her on reflection and continue to admire her after we obtain more information about her and reflect on our emotion and the emotions of those we trust. If the test of reflective admiration shows that some of these hypotheses need to be revised, then that will change the way we go about identifying exemplars. (2017, 64)

Exemplarity is pictured as a high (actually, maximum) degree of excellence that calls for and prompts our admiration, where this procedure is depicted as

a-posteriori and experimental, and yet not without normative guidance and predictability. The distinction between natural (admired but not imitable) and acquired (admired and imitable) excellences is more important than that between intellectual and moral virtues (both acquired). Zagbeski pictures moral expertise in terms of a sharing of a sense of importance as conveyed in our shared yet shifting narratives and story-telling about who the admirable figures are, and contrasts – or, better, compares – this capacity to our shared yet not so shifting practices of empirical and scientific discrimination and judgment:

There must be...a socially recognized procedure for picking out instances of the relevant kind. For biological and chemical kinds, we have experts whose job includes identifying instances of the kind. For moral exemplars, we have different procedures embedded in our practices, particularly the telling and re-telling of stories. We learn through narratives of fictional and non-fictional persons that some individuals are admirable and worth imitating, and the identification of these persons is one of the pre-theoretical aspects of our moral practices that theory must explain (2017, 15)

It follows that the modality of moral learning is that of mimesis or emulation: “Admiration is internally linked to emulation: the moral learner admires the person she emulates. Admiration explains why she would want to be like the person she emulates, not just for the pleasure of imitation, but because she sees the person she emulates as good” (2017, 135). Emulation leads the learner to acquire a good motive since she “sees her individual self in the admired person...In projecting oneself into the image one then enacts, one gradually becomes the person one wants to be” (2017, 136).

This model of moral learning hinges in turn on something akin to a principle of “linguistic division of labor”, where once again cognitive as well as conative qualities and abilities are distributed according to a shared sense of social roles and expectancies. Zagzebski writes:

Moral reasoning is a role assigned to certain individuals in a society – typically, philosophers and theologians...Some people are “experts” at moral judgment because of their moral wisdom and insight; others are “experts” at providing the reasoning supporting the judgments of the wise. Ordinary people are expected to grasp a small part of that reasoning, but they are not expected to have the ability to give extended arguments any more than they are expected to give an explanation of the chemical structure of gold. A virtuous person need not be adept at moral reasoning, but her judgments would track moral truth and be justifiable by a community as a whole. (2017, 149-150)

Narratives serve “the critical semantic function” of “connecting the users of moral terms to a causal network linking them with the extension of the term”

(2017, 187). According to this picture of moral education, and unlike the case of objects and concepts dealt with by the natural sciences, there is moral/linguistic privilege without authority inbuilt in the principle of linguistic division of labor, so depicted:

Empirical scientists have the role of finding out how widespread the extension of a virtue term is, how changeable the extension is (whether virtuous persons tend to remain virtuous), and whether there are any connections between the extension of one virtue term and another. I think that philosophers also have specialized functions that include making the functioning of the network clearer and pointing out inconsistencies in the stereotype, in addition to contributing their powers of abstract reasoning to the community...*Moral philosophers have the specialized function of providing the reasoning that justifies the judgments of exemplars...*The people who deserve to be linguistically privileged are the people who are good at distinguishing true exemplars from the counterfeits, and who are good at spotting counterfeit virtues (2017, 188 emphasis mine)

Moral philosophy is then depicted as a somewhat specialized activity of backing up what we ordinarily acknowledge as morally significant, so to clear the ground of inconsistencies (ordinary or otherwise?) and oversee the establishment of (intellectual or otherwise?) connections among judgments and responses.

The hero, the saint, and the sage, unlike the genius (mostly because of her natural endowment as opposed to the acquired skills of the others<sup>4</sup>), are the three epitomes of, respectively, courage, dedication and wisdom, which they train and display for us to admire. These three figures are accompanied as many different understanding and practice of flourishing, exhibiting a peculiar model of exemplarity hinged on the excellence in their respective chief virtue. Flourishing, as in the best Aristotelean teaching, “has much to do with a sense of self in which there is a connection among one’s life activities” (2017, 175). We admire *lives* that are *harmonic*, and not just *rhapsodic* or *extemporary acts*. The more so as it is only through the reference to such lives that we see this or that particular act as morally salient and worth desiring<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, we admire acquired and sustained dispositions moved by the concern for others, more than those fleeting and temperamental ones moved by self-interest, and that has to do once again with the fact that in order for the

<sup>4</sup> The contrast with moral perfectionism is here particularly and dramatically stark, as I will reprise later. For a model of moral upbringing and uplifting hinged on geniuses – understood, after Emerson and after Cavell, as made and found in relations rather than given in nature –, see Donatelli 2018.

<sup>5</sup> For a fine discussion and integration of Zagzebski (and others), see the recent work by Vaccarezza and Croce 2016 and Croce and Vaccarezza 2016.

exemplars (and for us, after them) to care for others they need to engage and challenge their own self, which chiefly means overcoming egoism and embrace some form of altruism. Working for and with others in fact minimally requires coordinating with them and being there for them, and that is no small burden in itself. These virtues and qualities thus carry the best part of the moral weight because of their perceived difficulty and commitment: the more effort, the more admiration, and hence the more exemplarity and moral value. Not to mention that such activities generate their own secondary rewards and applause in that they create new webs of relationships to be admired and longed for<sup>6</sup>. I only mention this feature of Zagzebski in passing as, despite its importance, for my purposes it plays a slightly less significant role, although I will reprise it at a later stage when questioning the morality/prudence divide lying behind it.

### 3. EXEMPLARS LOST AND FOUND: OR, ON THE VIRTUE OF DISPLACEMENT

In my admittedly raw and highly selective sketch of Zagzebski, I was interested in highlighting the idea according to which our most genuine and powerful (a posteriori) relation with exemplars is one of admiration for their qualities (virtues) as shown in their lives and acknowledged via direct reference yet mediated by stories and narratives. Now, my chief worry is that Zagzebski's picture of admiration leads straight into a model of moral education as imitation or simulation rather than as exploration and transformation, and for the worse of it. The choice between the two is not merely terminological, and rather amounts to metaphilosophical as well as ethical divergences: it has to do with what we expect from moral philosophy and its relationship with the moral life altogether. In the one case, in fact, exemplars call for an a posteriori yet reproductive model, while in the other for an a posteriori and generative one.

Let me briefly articulate this difference with reference to an alternative understanding of what exemplarity might mean: what I will call a hortatory or exhortative approach<sup>7</sup>. An hortatory approach seeks to go beyond descriptive

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps interesting to notice how nowhere in her work Zagzebski gives weight to considerations about the evolutionary opportunity of altruism, despite those are indeed part and parcel of our variegated stories and narratives about who we are and where we might be going (our forms of life) – and, note, this is quite different from using those considerations as heuristic evidences of our alleged constitution and its shortcomings (our human nature).

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller presentation and assessment, see Marchetti forthcoming.

ethics (telling us what ethics consists in) and prescriptive ethics (instructing us how to best implement it): ethics has rather to do with an unbroken work of self on self in which we check, challenge, and revise our inherited moral sensibility and views midst problematic situations. Exemplars here feature as those very geniuses whom, by crafting a way of their own for their self to survive and thrive, offered us precious material about who we might become to ponder over and act upon. It is in this sense that moral philosophy, that is *moral philosophers*, should exhort us to find and make these representative individuals and ourselves through them: individuals whose constitution is mobile as ours so should be. While we find this picture cashed out in rather different ways throughout the history of philosophy, I will here spin the story as told by a pragmatist line which makes reference to Rorty and some of his philosophical heroes: Emerson, Nietzsche, James, and Dewey<sup>8</sup>).

Now, according to this hortatory picture, admiration, rather than as an emotion, should be thought of as a mood leading to a particular line of self-conduct: rather than having an object (the admired exemplar) and moving us to imitate her (reproduction), it colors our perception and judgment and makes us question our very evaluative mindset (as in critique). Admiration is then more of a behavior than of a psychological state. *Bildung*, according to this picture, should not be thought of as the imitation of a model but rather as an open-ended experimentation with one's individuality in the light of a further being to question and achieve.

One of the key feature of this picture is Dewey's notion of morality as springing from the problematic situation in which we find ourselves in and for which we still have to find a breakthrough – where prudence is called such situation in which a solution has been already found and socially accepted, and only in need to be kept following. According to Dewey, moral philosophers should not be dealing in the justification or strengthening of our moral practices (from within or without those very practices), but rather in the deepening of them and the exploration of alternative ones when the problems we are dealing with seem to be recalcitrant to the tools we treat them with<sup>9</sup>. This is the pragmatist core of hortatory ethics, where pivotal is the striving to achieve what one might become through self-clarification and transformation, and conformism depicted as the chief threat to the liveliness of our moral selves. If ethics is then a practice of self-caring, exemplars are among the most

<sup>8</sup> A kindred reading of Rorty as a pragmatist rooted in the romantic tradition is to be found in Goodman 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Among many texts, see Dewey 1983 and 1985. For a line of reading once again akin to the one adumbrated here, see Goodman 2007.



precious devices through which we might perform this rather demanding task. Exemplars are thus not raw models showcasing excellent lives to imitate, but rather often conflicting companions in the quest for coming back to oneself and possibly find ourselves otherwise.

As a first thing, then, if anything, it is us who create the exemplars, rather than the other way around. Compare here with Zagzebski, who writes that “the deeper psychological structure of a person who does admirable acts is what makes the person admirable” (2017, 61). Hence her delving deep into the respective psychologies of the excellent saints, heroes, and sages: useful and fascinating for sure, but missing the target altogether if severed from the kind of needs and interests we admirers have for those biographies. Contrary to this view, we might want to claim that exemplars become admirable *in the course of admiring them*, because of a need we have and a relationship we establish with them. They prompt admiration from us because of something they *do to us*, rather than because of something they *are anyway*. Plus, it is us who in the end *do something with them by investing them with value* – what, exactly, this value is, I will say in the next section. If this is a case, then perhaps the theory of direct reference as employed by Zagzebski is not a good model for moral exemplarity – or overall, as gold or even water can be said to be what we make of them, as the natural goods/artifact divide is porous to say the least: think of the works of art or to metaphors – ; a model better to be replaced with a relational understanding of exemplarity as provocation and invention.

This resonates quite well with a line of thinking we find in the early James comparing natural and social selection in the wake of Darwin’s genealogical revolution. For James, in order for “great men” to be turmoil and enzymes of society, they need to prepare the environment so to make its very transformation possible in the first place:

[The environment] chiefly adopts or rejects [the great man], preserves or destroys, in short *selects* him. And whether it adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by its influence in an entirely peculiar and original way. He acts as a ferment, and changes its constitution [...]. If anything is humanly certain it is that the great man’s society, properly so called, does *not* make him before he can remake it (1979, 176)

James is here calling attention to the opportunity (if not necessity) to think of exemplars as those very fertile seeds upon which new ground can be broken, where the soil itself, in order to nourish the seeds, needs to be ploughed for the good in a virtuous, transformative circle. Nietzsche has a fine, kindred line in this regard concerning our deferring to strong thinkers in ordinary and critical moments alike, only to recognize that it is us practical

beings who constantly make and remake themselves anew according to our needs and deeds. He writes:

The higher human being deludes himself: he calls his nature contemplative and thereby overlooks the fact that he is also the actual poet and ongoing author of life [...]. It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually make something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colors, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. This poem that we have invented is constantly internalized, drilled, translated into flesh and reality, indeed, into the commonplace, by the so-called practical human beings (our actors). Only we have created the world that concerns human beings! (2001, 170)

Now it is us who make what Rorty, after Nietzsche and Harold Bloom, calls the strong poets as much as they make us since we engage in a conversation with them whose rules and results are not written in stone but are rather part and parcel of the very process of acculturation and growth. Dewey is once again very much the reference here, as he characterized moral inquiry as “growth of conduct in meaning” (1983, 194) from within our particular standpoint. Through engaging exemplars we strive to get a better angle on our own thoughts and deeds, one from which overlooked assumptions won’t go without checking and petrified conducts become fluid again and possibly undergo dramatic reshaping. As James wrote, “philosophical study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind” (James 1978, 4). The states of mind of the exemplars, called for by the philosophers given their achieved facility in seeing and thinking otherwise, are mobile through and through, and related to one’s sense of self as an agent of change.

Now, it has to be noted, agency is important for Zagzebski as well, but for reasons quite different from those I am suggesting here. She indeed writes that “To the extent that we believe or come to find out that the source of an admirable act is something independent of agency of the person, we admire the person less or not at all” (2017, 61). But, I would add, we admire what we take as an acquired talent rather than a natural one because we praise what we read as the work on the self of the exemplar, a work we might perform ourselves; however, it should not be forgotten that also natural talents, in order not to be dissipated, must be worked out time and again. Sometimes, in fact, we nurture them despite our hating and resisting them and the more so if we do, as e.g. in the case of Andre Agassi’s dramatic yet captivating troubled relationship with his natural talent for tennis, which brought him to despise himself (and those closer to him) and keep fighting himself despite also

cultivating himself: that is, finding and losing himself in the best part of himself.<sup>10</sup>

We admire acquired excellence, then, not so much because of the effort it took to achieve it by the exemplar, but rather because it showcases the sense of possibility inbuilt in our moral lives against which measuring our moral sensibility and sense of self. In this picture, the telling and re-telling of narratives aims at our checking and enrichment of our own inherited moral baggage rather than at the individuation and refinement of the proper moral response. We re-describe ourselves in the light of the exemplars who disrupt and stretch our very sense of self: individuals who displace and replace us as much as they displace and replace themselves. The motive to admire them is not the wish to be like the exemplar, but rather the hope to be transformed by her and by our relationship with her. We don't want to become them (because they epitomize virtue and goodness), but rather to attain a wider and perhaps deeper perspective on our own selves through them. This is the difference between derogation or elevation and engagement or transformation. For Zagzebski we admire the perfectly good or virtuous, while for this pragmatist, hortatory line we admire the unbroken work of self on self to dislocate and ameliorate oneself informing exemplarity.

This difference issues in a diverging conception of the self and its unity. Zagzebski claims that “a desire to have a consistency and continuity of ego that consciously integrates one's past self into one's present and future self and where one's beliefs, desires, values, and over behavior are harmonious” is one of the marks of integrity of exemplars. “To get it, exemplars often resist cultural forces that would push them along in ways determined by other people [...]. There is an important way in which exemplars do not change [...], or if they change, they change in a way that is self-directed” (2017, 179). Once again, this sounds important and yet problematic: the consistency Zagzebski describes can also take place when we integrate one's past self into one's present by acknowledging the breaks and inconsistencies in one's path – this is what Rorty (1990) famously called “irony”, that is the keeping together a hold on what one was and is with the sense of radical contingency of such path–, and the resistance exemplars shows is to the idea of values as established from without our practices. Communal, then, rather than Reality (note the capital) is then what defines the very shifting yet definite boundaries of the moral. If this is the case, then, the self-directing character of change is not a matter of holding fast to certain excellent ideals, but rather of welcoming the

<sup>10</sup> See Agassi 2010.

prospect that each and every of us is the very centerpiece of moral understanding and moral revolution.

One's *life as a whole* is then important both for Zagzebski's theory and for the hortatory (anti-theoretical) picture I am here sketching, but in radically different ways: for her exemplars' whole lives matter because of their "sense of purpose" and "striving for something of ultimate concern" to be equally longed for, while for pragmatism they do because of their leading a path of their own which might inspire and transform us. This issues in a radically different view of autonomy: while for her autonomy amounts to trusting authorities and depending on others we have reason to trust (Zagzebski, 150), for hortatory ethics it amounts to self-reliance. Self-reliance makes reference to the quest to trust ourselves but also to finds one's lost or alienated voice due to the weight and exhaustion of tradition and conventions.

As already remarked, it is quite telling that while Zagzebski does not take into consideration genius as a type of exemplarity (but only heroes, saints, and sages), it is exactly on geniuses that a line running from Mill and Emerson, through James, Dewey and Rorty hinged moral exemplarism. For Mill, the genius is the one who does not left possibilities untried, and for whom the higher activities – that is those which call for a transformation of self – are bread and butter of her ordinary way of facing the world and others<sup>11</sup>. For Emerson, the genius is a friend and better self: not the maximally good or fit but rather the figure unsettling us and yet empowering us by reminding us what we might have forgotten and enlightening us about what we might become. As he famously remarked,

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another. (Emerson 2000, 132-3)

The alienated majesty of which Emerson speaks of consists in the sense of human possibility and closeness of the work of genius to oneself: that is the proximity and yet distance of my current self from my next one and the fear and shame to take such leap. Exemplars are there for us when we feel such resistance, and in paying attention to them we pay attention to what we might

<sup>11</sup> On Mill's perfectionism, see Donatelli 2006.

have become if only we were brave and open to such strangeness and unsettlement.

If this is the case, then linguistic moral competence is then not only a matter of mastering concepts and knowing how to use them, but also of changing them and imagining them anew. Moral concepts are not the things we need experts for like in the case of scientific ones. We don't so much need surveys about how terms are currently used, but rather genealogies of how they have started to circulate, how they shifted meaning in order to build up a sense of what we ourselves might make of them. What we need philosophers the most is not detecting true exemplars, telling them from wannabes and working out the credentials and details of their affiliation, but rather to get rid of those pictures which depict exemplarity as inhabiting a dimension alien to our ordinary capacities for self-constitution and transformation by employing newer vocabularies. This actually chimes quite well with what Zagzebski (2017, 189-192) claims about shifts in moral vocabularies and linguistic moral communities, thought not with her saying that it is the wise person only who we should trust when deciding whether to push for agreement and a common vocabulary, or rather not to (2017, 211).

Zagzebski's theory of exemplars, in the end, seems in need of a substantive backup of values to do the mileage she wants it to: but where do these values come from? As we saw, she denies the need for any conceptual foundation, but only direct reference to how we ordinarily and communally pick out exemplars. Yet, that would seem to rule out cases of exemplars who do not show any such feature but who are seen as exemplary nonetheless – I discuss a case below. So, where to look for such backup, if we ourselves claimed that exemplarity has to do with what we make of certain excellent features rather than with their very possession or lack thereof? A hint, surely in need of further elaboration, comes from Rortian corners, and has to do with the idea that what we admire the most in exemplars, and hence what *constitutes* value, is their very embodied ability to escape moral closure and denounce moral certainty.

#### 4. SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND ORDINARY MORAL EDUCATION

In one rather unknown piece (2010), Rorty speaks of some great writers<sup>12</sup>, among which he lists Henry James and Marcel Proust, as nothing less than

<sup>12</sup> It is significant that, in this text as well as elsewhere in his work Rorty contrasts philosophical with literary and religious texts, charging them with different aspirations and

“spiritual exercises” through which getting redemption from the quite unfortunate state of “egotism” (as opposed to egoism) in which we all variously swim. The rationale and background of Rorty’s proposal is a conception of an ethics “without principles” (2000) hinged on the activity of self-redescription and transformation through the arts – understood, very broadly, as basically anything which is not currently considered a science, even if the sciences as well can offer us great narrative through which re-describing ourselves, as e.g. in the case of evolutionism. For Rorty we don’t need a foundational model through which justify morality, but rather a set of reminders and provocations which would prompt us to deepen or challenge our own understanding of it and reworking ourselves accordingly. In exposing ourselves to (what we see as) exemplar beings we do not necessarily feel to emulate them, but rather enlarge our moral imagination and experiment with our own moral aptitudes and aptness<sup>13</sup>.

Egotism consists for Rorty in the assumption that one has already secured a place from which to judge and make correct (that is wise, virtuous) moral choices, and the one whole purpose of hortatory ethics is questioning such acceptance of moral certainty or at least our confidence in it:

People read religious scriptures and philosophical treatises to escape from ignorance of how non-human things are, but they read novels to escape from egotism. “Egotism”, in the sense in which I am using the term, does not mean “selfishness”. It means something more like “self-satisfaction.” It is a willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation, all the understanding of the consequences of a contemplated action that could be needed. It is the idea that one is now fully informed, and thus in the best possible position to make correct choices (2010, 394-5).

Exemplars take this certainty and confidence away from us and put our entire moral background of assumptions and regularities before us for critical examination and revision. While according to the orthodoxy moral philosophy gives us reasons for doing something (say, be altruistic rather than egoistic), for Rorty reading James or Proust it gives us a practice of self-questioning. Novel reading is then a spiritual exercise (among others) attempting to undo us and

purposes, and yet in the context of the present argument such demarcation does not play a great role since despite exemplars can be showcased in literary as opposed to philosophical and religious texts, still one could argue that philosophy, once *made* literary, can still play the exhortative role of calling for transformation and critique. Rorty’s text is itself a case of a philosophical text aimed at such rethinking and adjustment of moral reflection along non-foundational lines.

<sup>13</sup> I have touched upon these topics in Marchetti 2016, where I contrast and integrate Rorty’s pragmatist angle on moral progress with Cora Diamond’s Wittgensteinian one.

redo us by upsetting one's sense of what matters most and how to achieve it. "Following certain figures and characters might lift up the heart by letting the reader overcome the immaturity, confusion, and incoherence of her days" (Rorty 2010, 405).

Now, it is clear that this is a non-foundational approach all the way down: one which finds little room in Zagzebski's picture (and in the orthodoxy of moral philosophy more generally). Agency and luck alone cannot explain in full the achievements of individuals or their communities, or even fix and exhaust what is valuable in their lives: a great share of importance is due to the capacity and coincidence to have endured a number of situations (problematic or apparently smooth alike) and having taken them all in. Exemplars are then not experts of sorts, then, as in morality there is (or, rather, there would better be) no derogatory work, but only a constant activity of deepening the words, concepts, and practices one lives by. This amounts to, among other things, the resistance of the divide between appearance and reality (as in "I am leading such a life, but is this life *really* good?"), in favor of a practical distinction between more or less intelligent (that is, experimented with) ways of conducting oneself. In this picture, exemplars are then suggestions of what we might have been, what we might become, and of what might have been wrong all along. In Rorty's words:

Seen in this light, what novels do for us is to let us know how people quite unlike ourselves think of themselves, how they contrive to put actions that appall us in a good light, how they give their lives meaning. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes a problem of how to balance our needs against theirs, and their self-descriptions against ours. To have a more educated, developed and sophisticated moral outlook is to be able to grasp more of these needs, and to understand more of these self-descriptions (2010, 393).

Rorty marks a difference between a religious culture (and more generally a picture of ethics as achieving the proper human form), here epitomized by the life of the saints, and a literary culture (and more generally a picture of ethics as enlarging the human landscape), here epitomized by Proust:

The big difference between the Proustians and the Catholics, and more generally between the religious and the literary cultures, is that devotional reading emphasizes purification rather than enlargement, getting rid of distractions rather than incorporating them in a larger unity. Novel-reading, on the other hand, aims at encompassing multitudes rather than eliminating superfluities. (2010, 406)

Examples of such spiritual exercises are Proust or James and their books, but even great movies or tv series, in which we are exposed and why not

admire troubling and troubled characters. No wonder Zagzebski denies that we can admire someone radically evil, since admiration is for her a positive feeling with the desire to emulate. As she writes, “I am interpreting admiration as focusing on the possession of good in the other person and the possibility that I can acquire it myself” (Zagzebski 2017, 52). As a contrast, in Rorty’s view you can indeed admire such figures precisely because their longing can be quite painful and unsettling. Once again, we don’t admire them as raw models to emulate but as exercises of the imagination to engage in to check ourselves and possibly recast ourselves otherwise.

Can then an exemplar be *vicious* rather than *virtuous*? For Zagzebski she can’t, as we would need to admire the exemplar because of her goodness (that is, for how she exemplifies it), but exemplars could also be people we don’t feel sympathy for but who still spur us and educate us to better ourselves. It is in this sense that exemplarity is somewhat uncodifiable, and seems to be resisting even the most open-ended casuistry: there is no template for the exemplar but only a risky and uncertain relationship with her. For Zagzebski, “what we admire in exemplars is their integrated self, a self that harmonizes all aspects of their psyche” (2017, 155), but someone like the dedicated family man and drug lord Walter White (the fictional character from the AMC series *Breaking Bad*) had such selves although they will hardly count as exemplars for her. What we find exemplar and hence moral captivating and instructing in the character of Walter White is his transformation and recasting, his own redemption from the egotism of knowing exactly what the right thing to do is and which place to occupy in order to be able to see and take it. These figures challenge their own sense of morality and moral bounds, and in so doing they expose themselves to moral transformation and ourselves through them. How can a dedicated father and husband even start to think a shift from high school chemistry classes to international narco-traffic? And how is it that the many reasons he gives to himself and to the ones closest to him (us included, watching the show and taking part in his life and struggle) start changing dramatically and eventually turn upside down? What has he found and made along the way? Apparently, the greatness of such character lies precisely in the radical character and distance of his path with reference to our supposedly shared sensibility as conveyed in stories and narratives which forged our very sense of morality. And what are we to make of his journey overall? This would also explain because, while Zagzebski puts much weight on the concern for others as a mark of morality and moral excellence, hortatory ethics depicts ethics as hinged on self-cultivation and perfectibility, where altruism is not the necessary goal of moral education, but rather one of its possible outcomes.



## 5. ORDINARY EXEMPLARS AND THE MORAL LIFE

As a way of conclusion, this heterodox, anti-theoretical understanding of exemplarism trades the reference to – and invocation of – exemplars as the most perfectible and excellent specimen of their category (the saint, the hero, the sage) with the attractiveness to – and experimentation with – exemplars (the genius) as those who are capable to make us thinking, reacting and conducting ourselves differently given their own tentative reconstruction of a moral path within their ordinary condition. This shift reflects a deeper move from a conception of ethics as the foundation of the moral life to ethics as the critical exploration and handling of the very boundaries of what we thought our moral life to be like: while in the one case we look up at exemplars for moral guidance and direction, the in the other we let them look back at us for moral interrogation and transformation. Future research on the key topic of moral exemplarity would better include references as well as uses of individuals whose greatness lies exactly in not knowing what morality is anymore, so to start building up together a conception of it from the ground up in an unbroken activity of moral recasting: uplifting, downsizing, and eventually discovering ourselves us anew.

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