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THE PHILOSOPHY OF EXEMPLARITY

SINGULARITY, PARTICULARITY, AND SELF-REFERENCE

Jakub Mácha

"Mácha has written an exemplary book about the nature of exemplarity. Drawing on Plato, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Kripke, Derrida, and Kuhn, he shows how ordinary individuals can come to play the role of exemplars and standards—and how exemplars and standards can lapse into being ordinary individuals."

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"Mácha's insightful book takes up the significant question of what is called an 'example' and what functions as 'exemplary' or as a paradigm in our everyday practices, in the formation and institution of our values and norms, and in a contemporary reception of the history of philosophical appeals to these notions. Highly recommended for all those who are interested in what contemporary philosophy has to teach us about the meaning of our everyday language, life, and practices."

Paul Livingston, *University of New Mexico*, *USA*

The Philosophy of Exemplarity

This book offers an original philosophical perspective on exemplarity. Inspired by Wittgenstein's later work and Derrida's theory of deconstruction, it argues that examples are not static entities but rather oscillate between singular and universal moments.

There is a broad consensus that exemplary cases mediate between singular instances and universal concepts or norms. In the first part of the book, Mácha contends that there is a kind of *différance* between singular examples and general exemplars or paradigms. Every example is, in part, also an exemplar, and vice versa. Furthermore, he develops a paracomplete approach to the logic of exemplarity, which allows us to say of an exemplar of X neither that it is an X nor that it is not an X. This paradox is structurally isomorphic to Russell's paradox and can be addressed in similar ways. In the second part of the book, Mácha presents four historical studies that exemplify the ideas developed in the first part. This part begins with Plato's Forms, understood as standards/paradigms, before considering Kant's theory of reflective judgment as a general epistemological account of exemplarity. This is then followed by analyses of Hegel's conceptual moment of particularity and Kuhn's concept of paradigm. The book concludes by discussing the speculative hypothesis that all our knowledge is based on paradigms, which, following the logic of exemplarity, are neither true nor false.

The Philosophy of Exemplarity will be of interest to scholars and advanced students working in philosophy of language, logic, history of philosophy, and literary theory.

Jakub Mácha has published on philosophy of language and classical German philosophy. His most recent book is *Wittgenstein on Internal and External Relations: Tracing All the Connections* (2015).

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The Philosophy of Exemplarity

Singularity, Particularity, and Self-Reference

Jakub Mácha

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For example. It is by example that it means that it means and that it says that it means that it wants and that it wants what it wants by example.

(Derrida, *Economimesis*)

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This book builds on ideas from my previous works, in particular *Wittgenstein on Internal and External Relations: Tracing All the Connections*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, and the book chapters "Particularity as Paradigm: A Wittgensteinian Reading of Hegel's Subjective Logic," in J. Mácha & A. Berg (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Hegel: Reevaluation of Difference*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019, 379–400; and "Paradigms and Self-Reference: What Is the Point of Asserting Paradoxical Sentences?" in S. Wuppuluri & N. da Costa (eds.), *Wittgensteinian (adj.): Looking at the World from the Viewpoint of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, Cham: Springer, 2020, 123–134.

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Part 1

Preface and introduction

Bertrand Russell, in his philosophical bestseller *The Problems of Philosophy*, makes the following claim:

> It is *obvious*, to begin with, that we are acquainted with such universals as white, red, black, sweet, sour, loud, hard, etc., i.e. with qualities which are *exemplified* in sense-data. When we see a white patch, we are acquainted, in the first instance, with the particular patch; but by seeing many white patches, we *easily* learn to *abstract* the whiteness which they all have in common, and in learning to do this we are learning to be acquainted with whiteness.
>
> (Russell 2001, 58, my emphasis)

Russell presents a certain account of exemplarity that he considers obvious. Universals are exemplified in sense-data. Exemplification is the movement from universals to particulars. If we see a series of particular patches, we can easily abstract the universal that they have in common. Abstraction is the opposite movement, from particulars to universals. This is a simple picture of how we exchange particulars for universals and vice versa.

The aim of this book is to show that this picture is deeply misleading and faces numerous problems. It is anything but obvious that we can be acquainted with universals independently of the particulars that exemplify them. Can we be acquainted with whiteness independently of white patches? Next, it is problematic to claim we can easily abstract that which several particulars have in common. Is abstraction the (only) method by which we can arrive at universals?

In contrast, this book argues that universals are not independent of particulars—examples, exemplars, and paradigms. Universals exist only in particulars that exemplify them. Particulars cannot be abstracted away. Hence, there are no abstract universals, i.e., universals resulting from the process of abstraction. Moreover, the movement from particulars to universals is neither straightforward nor reliable. It can go awry and fail to reach that which several particulars have in common. This is

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a persistent threat because accidental properties of such particulars can induce anomalous effects. These are the main ideas that this book will elaborate on.

This study grew out of my thinking on a number of topics. I would like to pinpoint three or four main influences. The primary influence is **Wittgenstein's treatment of paradigms** and standards, especially his remark about the Standard Meter in §50 of his *Philosophical Investigations*: "There is *one* thing of which one can state neither that it is 1 meter long, nor that it is not 1 meter long, and that is the Standard Meter in Paris" (2009, §50, translation modified). There has been much discussion on what this intriguing statement amounts to. In this book, I draw on my earlier interpretation from *Wittgenstein on Internal and External Relations* (2015, 212), where I argue that the Standard Meter must be regarded as unchanging (this idea is deployed in Chapter 3.1). What is even more important for the present context is that Wittgenstein's claim about the Standard Meter implies that the domain of the predicate "1 meter long" is incomplete or, rather, paracomplete, as the Standard Meter is neither included in nor excluded from the domain of the predicate "1 meter long." What Wittgenstein says about the Standard Meter thus follows a paracomplete logic. And because the Standard Meter is the model for the account of exemplarity that will be developed in this book, this account will follow the same paracomplete logic.

The main topic of **Paul Livingston's book *The Politics of Logic*** (2012) is the practical consequences of formal structures. His discussion of paradoxes and self-reference deeply influenced my account of exemplarity. Livingston distinguishes four orientations of thought according to their attitudes toward paradoxes, self-reference, and the totality of the thinkable. Two of these orientations attempt to delimit and grasp the totality from the inside (the ontotheological orientation) or from the outside (the criteriological/constructivist orientation) without any paradox. The other two orientations recognize the paradoxical nature of reflexivity, i.e., self-reference. They accept a certain tradeoff between the completeness of the totality and its consistency. The paradoxico-critical orientation saves completeness by giving up consistency, whereas the generic orientation sacrifices completeness but insists on consistency (Livingston 2012, 58–59). These two latter orientations are what I will be concerned with in this book. Livingston identifies instances of these orientations in various philosophers. In particular, he finds paradoxico-critical thought patterns in, among others, Derrida, Agamben, and the later Wittgenstein, while the generic orientation is primarily located in Badiou. Coming down on the side of the paradoxico-critical orientation, Livingston undertakes a far-reaching critique of Badiou's philosophical project.

It must be admitted that many of Wittgenstein's remarks, explicitly or implicitly, suggest a paradoxico-critical, i.e., paraconsistent interpretation. I maintain, however, that Wittgenstein's remark about the Standard Meter instead follows a paracomplete logic. Although Badiou's ontology is based on the same orientation of thought and, by implication, on the same logic as the current account of exemplarity, there is a significant difference: Badiou's mathematical/set-theoretical ontology adheres to abstract universality. For Badiou, universals (sets and other mathematical structures) have ontological priority over particulars (elements of sets). Abstract universality is the negation of exemplarity.

Although Livingston's study is not often explicitly mentioned in this book, its *traces* are present whenever I appeal to paracomplete logic and self-reference. Matters are very different with **Derrida** and **Agamben**, whose thoughts are extensively discussed throughout the book. They are the prime figures among the third and fourth clusters of influences respectively, which come from the deconstructive tradition. Both these thinkers address exemplarity explicitly and understand it in terms of the paradoxico-critical orientation. Let us look at two samples of their paraconsistent thinking about exemplarity. Derrida writes: "The exemplarity of the example is clearly never the exemplarity of the example" (Derrida 1992, 15). In a slightly different vein, Agamben writes: "Whereas the exception is included through its exclusion, the example is excluded through the exhibition of its inclusion" (Agamben 2009, 24). For both, exemplarity is a site of inconsistency, of contradiction. I do not want to disagree with their paraconsistent approaches but shall instead propose a paracomplete alternative: an example is neither included in nor excluded from the universal it exemplifies.

Besides this choice of logic, the deconstructive tradition has influenced the present account of exemplarity in other ways, too. Examples can induce nonstandard effects. Derrida describes such phenomena using various terms and expressions, most notably "supplementarity" and "parergon." I shall prefer the expression "an *other law*" (*la autre loi*). The main idea is that accidental properties of the examples account for an excess of signification and can thereby disrupt the natural movement toward the universal concept or law. They induce an *other law* that may not arrive at the law of the concept. The persisting possibility of not reaching the universal concept has radical consequences for the proposed account of exemplarity.

Agamben's work on exemplarity, especially his essay "What Is a Paradigm?" (2009), has influenced the present account quite significantly. Agamben, following Foucault, conceives of exemplarity as a distinctively epistemological theory—as opposed to an ontological or moral one. Another inspiration is Agamben's method of *philosophical archaeology*, i.e., the method of interrogating the historical roots of his theory in various philosophical narratives.[1] All the historical studies in Part 3 elaborate

on the suggestions made by Agamben in "What Is a Paradigm?" or elsewhere. This book can be understood as an extended elaboration on Agamben's brief essay on exemplarity.

Note

1 Agamben's conception of archaeology was inspired by Foucault. However, he gives it a specific deconstructive spin: "Provisionally, we may call 'archaeology' that practice which in any historical investigation has to do not with origins but with the moment of a phenomenon's arising and must therefore engage anew the sources and tradition. It cannot confront tradition without *deconstructing the paradigms*, techniques, and practices through which tradition regulates the forms of transmission, conditions access to sources, and in the final analysis determines the very status of the knowing subject" (Agamben 2009, 89, my emphasis).

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1.1 Methodology

Singularity, particularity, self-reference

This book gives an account of exemplarity that can be roughly described as a practice of giving examples. I wish to argue that exemplarity mediates between singular instances and universal concepts or norms. This book does not seek to provide (deductive) arguments, or at least that is not its primary aim. The main methodological approach consists in an exposition of the account of exemplarity (in Part 2), and then an elaboration of that account based on historical examples (in Part 3), thereby providing a *singular* account of exemplarity and its *particular* elaborations through four exemplary studies. The conclusion, Part 4, discusses how the account of exemplarity elaborated in the earlier parts can be *self-reflexively* applied to this book itself. The overarching structure of the book thus follows the triad of singularity, particularity, and self-reference that is referred to in the subtitle.

The book has a marked historical emphasis. Part 2 focuses on ideas from Wittgenstein and Derrida, while Part 3 contains four chapters dealing with ideas from Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Kuhn. It should be stressed that in all cases the engagement with these ideas is *selective*. The thinkers in question advanced various theories of exemplarity, often using very different terminology (as we shall discuss in the next chapter). Sometimes exemplarity was not their primary concern, but rather a methodological device designed for achieving other philosophical or metaphilosophical goals. It is therefore unsurprising that not everything they wrote on this topic is consistent. They sometimes changed their views or intentionally developed different theories of exemplarity according to their particular purposes. The present exposition must necessarily be selective, taking up only those ideas that *exemplify* the account of exemplarity developed here. The aim of this book is thus not exegetical. Sometimes I shall develop an author's views (especially those of Plato and Kuhn) and contrast them with other views of that same author.

Part 2 presents a rational reconstruction of the "life cycle" of a paradigm. This systematic approach is inspired by insights from the later Wittgenstein and Derrida (and also from Agamben). The life cycle begins with the introduction of a paradigm (2.1), continues with the

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practice of using or engaging with it (2.2), and concludes with its self-referential sublation (2.3). Like the book's overarching structure, the life cycle follows the triad from the title: **singularity**, **particularity**, and **self-reference**. This triad is inspired by Hegel's account of the moments of the concept: singularity, particularity, and universality. I do not focus so much on universality or, rather, I address it together with particularity. In general, we could say that exemplarity is an epistemological approach that prioritizes particular paradigms over abstract universals.[1] To put it another way, universals are not abstract because they are rooted in particular paradigms. The question of whether or how abstract universals or other entities exist does not arise within the present account because no abstract entities are postulated. The issue of self-reference emerges because the paradigm can be treated as belonging (or not belonging) to the set that is defined by the paradigm. In a way, a paradigm can belong to or be included in itself. This is a paradox, and I shall provide a specific account of this self-referential constellation. The received accounts either exclude, block, or do away with self-reference or give a paraconsistent treatment of it. In contrast to these accounts, I advance a paracomplete view.

The present theory of exemplarity is inspired by and often straightforwardly derived from the central insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. In particular, Wittgenstein's account of ostensive definition and his reflections on rule-following and the possibility of a private language directly inform the present account of the way paradigms are introduced and used. One example of a paradigm deserves special attention: the Standard Meter, as discussed in §50 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.[2] I will employ the Standard Meter repeatedly and compare it with other paradigms. However, I do not want to claim that all paradigms are like the Standard Meter. The Standard Meter is a very simple paradigm that exemplifies all aspects of exemplarity that I want to focus on, especially those pertaining to self-reference and paracompleteness. It is clear from many remarks scattered across Wittgenstein's works that his reflections are not restricted to the standard of length (or that only units of length can be defined by reference to standard samples). Units of weight and color terms are defined in the same way.[3] As we will see in Chapter 3.1, Wittgenstein also defines mathematical terms (numerals) by reference to paradigmatic lists. The Standard Meter can thus be taken as my primary *object of comparison* in Wittgenstein's sense. He writes in the §131 of the *Investigations*:

> For we can avoid unfairness or vacuity in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison—as a sort of yardstick; not as a preconception to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy)

The Standard Meter, itself being a yardstick, is the model of *my* conception of exemplarity, but I do not dogmatically assert that the real practice of giving examples *must* correspond to it. Note that the Standard Meter is an object of comparison or a yardstick in a double sense. In the *literal* sense, it is a yardstick that can be used for measuring the length of spatial objects. In a *figurative*[4] sense, the Standard Meter, including its institution and use, is an object of comparison for other instances of exemplarity. In the first sense, material objects are being compared, whereas in the second sense what is being compared are whole practices of exemplarity. The exact nature of this metalevel status of the Standard Meter will be addressed in the conclusion, Part 4. Meanwhile, the distinction between the two senses will be addressed in the next chapter (1.2), where I suggest terminology that can be used to express it.

The main insight I want to adopt from Derrida's deconstructive project is the ultimate indistinguishability of a mere or illustrative example on the one hand and a normative exemplar on the other. As we shall see in detail in Chapter 2.2, this indistinguishability has the structure of *différance*. For now, it is enough to say that there is no "mere" descriptive or illustrative example. Every example has a normative function; it in part defines the universal concept it is supposed to exemplify. This exemplifying part, however, always eludes any precise specification. As Derrida puts it: "The example itself, as such, overflows its singularity as much as its identity" (1992, 15). Derrida developed this insight in many works and in different contexts and terminological frameworks, most notably under the rubrics of "supplement" and "parergon." This indeterminacy of what is being exemplified can be reduced by providing more examples, a series of examples. Within such series, there is a dynamic, "a parergonal movement." The exact nature of this movement will come under scrutiny. The issue is whether this movement reaches the universal concept of what is being exemplified. Derrida expressed his doubts, whereas others, most notably Catherine Malabou, advanced a more Hegelian approach according to which a series of examples, after possible setbacks, arrives at the universal concept. This issue will be discussed in the following chapters. It is mentioned here because it provides an interpretative clue for approaching specific accounts of exemplarity that will be addressed in Part 3.

Another related insight adopted from Derrida is that the reason for the emergence of exemplars or paradigms that define a universal concept is opaque. The reason for the emergence of a paradigm cannot be fully expressed within that same paradigm. The fact that a series of examples does not need to reach (the paradigm that defines) the universal concept implies that there can be passages of discontinuity, a "radical interruption," an "absolute surprise." The insistence on this discontinuity is, again, directed against the Hegelian belief in continuity. This discontinuity would imply that our understanding of the past is inaccessible or at

least limited. How can we get to know a past paradigm from the perspective of the present? The answer is that we can construct it retrospectively as an ideal example. We can find this insight in Derrida, and it has been developed in more detail in Agamben's work on exemplarity. Agamben's point is that historical hypotheses and presuppositions are treated as paradigms rather than as principles (Agamben 2009, 25–26).[5] All this will be addressed in Chapter 2.1.

Part 3 of this book presents four historical studies that exemplify the views proposed in Part 2. These studies are examples and exemplars of the overall theory. Each of them exemplifies and highlights slightly different aspects of the theory. These studies are not meant to lead to a unified account of exemplarity. Rather, they articulate and further develop the overall theory in different ways.

These historical studies are, necessarily, *my* interpretations, which are contrasted with other competing interpretations. To reiterate what I wrote earlier: I interpret selected ideas from these historical thinkers in a way that *exemplifies* the account of exemplarity developed here. Although the aim of this book is not exegetical, I wish to provide interpretations that are acceptable on their own merits and can stand up against other competing interpretations.

The four historical studies focus on Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Kuhn. One may ask why I have chosen to address these philosophers in particular. A straightforward answer is that they are the most important philosophers whose ideas and theories exemplify the account of exemplarity advanced by this book. They are important in the sense that their legacy is alive today. Hence, interpretations of their ideas that exemplify my account of exemplarity can contribute to contemporary philosophical debates.

Interpreting and reinterpreting historical examples is a common method in the continental tradition. Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze are famous for presenting their own views as particular interpretations of past philosophers. What is distinctive about their interpretations is that they usually focus on less central or even marginal topics from the work of the author under scrutiny. A novel interpretation of such minor points, which may have been overlooked by the author themselves, can have surprising consequences for the whole work. As we shall see in Chapter 3.3, Derrida interprets Hegel's dialectic through the lens of his conception of family and early Zoroastrianism (the luminous essence). The same is true of Malabou's work on plasticity. In the same vein, Lyotard's interpretation of Kant's aesthetics focuses primarily on the concept of the sublime.

The approach advanced here is different. I focus on the most central ideas and concepts of Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Kuhn. The aim of the exemplary studies in Part 3 is not to deconstruct or subvert these ideas, but rather to show that they exemplify the present account of exemplarity. In Chapter 3.1, **Plato's** concept of **Form** (*eidos*) is taken as a standard,

following Wittgenstein's suggestion, or as a *paradeigma*, following Plato's own suggestion from the *Parmenides*. In Chapter 3.2, **Kant's** notion of **reflective judgment** is interpreted in a more general manner (that goes beyond the scope of aesthetics) as a movement from a singular example to a universal concept that is not given in advance, but rather adduced within this very movement. Chapter 3.2 provides a deconstructive account of the conceptual moment of **particularity** in **Hegel's** subjective logic. Finally, Chapter 3.4 focuses on **Kuhn's** concept of **paradigm**.

Arguably, other historical examples could have been chosen. I shall mention two of them very briefly. Aristotle provides an account of paradigmatic reasoning that relates one particular to another particular, both of which fall under the same universal genus (*Prior Analytics*, B.24, 69a1p3–15; *Rhetoric*, 1357b). This relation between particulars and universals also arises in Aristotle's conception of substance. Aristotle divides substances into primary and secondary ones. Primary substances are "not said-of" (i.e., particulars) and "not present-in" (i.e., nonaccidental) (see *Categories*, 1a20). Primary substances, being particulars, can be interpreted as paradigms that exemplify secondary substances, i.e., universals.

This problem reemerges in medieval and contemporary debates between realism and nominalism. Within these debates, one could doubtless find accounts of exemplarity similar to that presented here. However, as already indicated, the issue of whether universals exist does not arise in the present account. This account is a kind of realism inasmuch as universals exist as particular paradigms. It can also be taken as a kind of nominalism because it denies the real existence of universals taken as abstract objects.[6]

The conclusion, Part 4, addresses the key question of whether the exposition of exemplarity presented here follows its own standards. We might expect an affirmative answer. However, as we shall see, this question cannot be answered straightforwardly because my specific account of exemplarity adheres to a paracomplete logic. More specifically, Part 4 discusses the status of exemplary studies, like those presented in Part 3. I argue that they function as, so to speak, *examples of examples*. These *squared* examples are, in a certain sense, exemplars of examples, i.e., exemplars of exemplarity (as outlined in Chapter 2.2).

This final part examines the hypothesis that all knowledge is based on paradigms—as was recently argued by Agamben (2009). This thesis implies a kind of epistemological externalism (since paradigms always make reference to external objects). This externalism, however, does not rely on the Fregean principle of unrestricted abstraction (as Kripke's and Putnam's accounts of the same subject do). This thesis also implies that the power of abstraction is limited by the inevitability of a paradigm. No universal concept can ever be fully abstract, since it is always tied to something particular: namely, to a paradigm. Finally, if the present book provides a paradigm for this thesis, then, following the self-referential

logic of exemplarity (Chapter 2.3), this thesis is, by its own standards, neither true nor false.

Notes

1 In contrast to my specifically epistemological account of exemplarity, which relates the singular and the particular, Harvey maintains that "the most common, indeed, almost colloquial understanding or misunderstanding of examples and hence exemplarity [is] simply the *translatability* of generality into particularity, and vice versa" (2002, viii). However, further in her book she subscribes to the following definition of exemplarity: "Exemplarity is the region between essence and accident, between general and particular, between ontology and epistemology" (ibid., 163). And, furthermore, in Heideggerian terms: "Exemplarity [. . .] allows for the traffic between the ontic and the ontological" (ibid., 164). However, this contrast may be merely verbal in nature since Harvey advances a slightly different conception of particularity. On other occasion she specifies exemplarity with the question: "What makes the wholly other or any singularity whatever into an example?" (ibid., 8)

2 The literature on Wittgenstein's account of paradigms and the Standard Meter is vast. Among the works that influenced the present account are Fogelin (2002), Gert (2002), Pollock (2004), Baker and Hacker (2005), Dolev (2007), Jolley (2010), and, especially, Diamond (2001), Avital (2008), and Mácha (2015).

3 The Standard Meter and the Standard Pound are Wittgenstein's (2009) most common examples of standards. They can be used interchangeably. Of course, one must not confuse standards of different qualities, e.g., length and weight.

4 This sense is figurative, but not metaphorical. As Agamben puts it: "Paradigms obey not the logic of the metaphorical transfer of meaning but the analogical logic of the example" (2009, 18).

5 This idea pervades all the essays in Agamben's *The Signature of All Things* (2009).

6 Although Agamben (2009) derives his account of exemplarity mainly from Foucault, he also draws, among others, on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Kuhn. The later chapters on Plato, Kant, and Kuhn can be seen as more detailed elaborations of Agamben's brief suggestions.

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