**Adversity, Wisdom, and Exemplarism**

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**Adversity and wisdom**

According to a venerable ideal, the core aim of philosophical practice is *wisdom*. The guiding concern of the ancient Greek, Indian, and Chinese traditions was the nature of the good life for human beings and the nature of reality. Those concerns converge in a foundational conception of wisdom as living a good – ‘flourishing’, ‘consummate’ – life, guided by a deep understanding of fundamental truths about our situation within the wider order of things. Wisdom manifests in ways of experiencing and engaging with the world, shaped by deep understanding of truths about it, and our relations to it.

This *aspiration to wisdom* takes many forms, varying across times and traditions. Many are deeply metaphysically invested, invoking complex visions of reality, like the Platonic Forms, Buddhist ‘emptiness’, or the divine creators and moral lawgivers of Western monotheism . Other forms, of course, are more metaphysically modest, but still of a kind that many modern philosophers are apt to reject as overly exotic or high-falutin’. The dominant enthusiasm of much twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy was for ethically and metaphysically less demanding ways of thinking. Wisdom, indeed, disappeared as an ideal, such that it became necessary to defend, as Pierre Hadot did[[1]](#endnote-1) , the very idea of philosophy as a ‘way of life’, of wisdom put in the service of life.

The historical story of the atrophy of aspirations to wisdom as a guiding philosophical ideal has been told elsewhere. Much of that story involves a decoupling of ethics from metaphysics, a sense that nothing as exotic as God, Platonic Forms, Brahman, or Dao is needed to understand or cope with the human situation. Fortunately, we can articulate the general form of the aspiration to wisdom – of living a life guided by some set of deep truths about our situation in the world – in less specifically doctrinal ways. We can say a lot about the ardours intrinsic to a human life, and about wisdom and wise ways of living, without needing to invoke deeply metaphysical or religious visions.

Alasdair MacIntyre articulated many of the truths relevant to living well in an appropriately general form. In his 1999 book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre criticizes a set of tendencies among the dominant moral philosophies of Western modernity, like deontology, utilitarianism, and existentialism. Each of these, in its own way, valorizes a certain conception of human beings, centered on what he calls ‘independent rational agency’.[[2]](#endnote-2) An independently rational agent is, essentially, active, autonomous, and confident – rationally engaged, initiating projects, pursuing goals. A Kantian rational agent with an autonomous will, the utilitarian working to maximize utility for the good of all, and the authentic existentialist forging their own values and projects are all conceptions of moral agency marked by independent rational agency.

Stirring as this may be, argues MacIntyre, this conception ignores certain deep truths about human life – the truths that our situation is fundamentally characterized by ‘affliction, dependence, vulnerability’. These manifest in various ways: ‘bodily illness and injury’, ‘mental defect and disturbance’, ‘aggression and neglect’, and in certain forms of morally injurious ‘dependence on particular others’, such as an unavoidable dependence on those who cannot be trusted to act in line with moral values.[[3]](#endnote-3) It might be better to speak of affliction and vulnerability as the primary truths, with certain forms that these take being results of certain forms of dependence, rather than classifying our necessary dependence on others as worrisome in itself. Many forms of dependence are, after all, potentially positive and enriching, when manifested in acts of caregiving or through romantic relationships – think of Goethe’s characterization of love as a form of ‘voluntary dependence’, the ‘best position’ in which any of us can be.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Such features are most evident during childhood, illness, and ageing, of course, but they are continuous possibilities for embodied, fragile creatures like ourselves: intrinsic features of the lived experience, and a grounding concern of the existential self-reflections, of human beings.[[5]](#endnote-5) MacIntyre’s point is that modern Western moral philosophy has neglected this trio of truths about human life. Dimensions of life that attest to or bear the marks of affliction, dependence, and vulnerability are consistently ignored, downplayed. This has had several negative consequences. First, a neglect of certain experiences where affliction, dependence, and vulnerable are at the fore, such as childhood and ageing, parenthood, relationships of love and care, and illness, Second, a focus on a muscular set of moral concepts, values, and virtues, such as autonomy, confidence, and agency, typical of independent rational agency, not afflicted dependent vulnerability. Third, a focus on certain types of person – active, autonomous, stable, secure, exercising the powers they have in the pursuit of projects. Ill, aged, and dependent people tend to fall out of the moral picture, except as the objects of the independent rational agency of the rest.

Such tendencies, in practice, confine our moral imaginations to the narrow class of independent rational agents, healthy in body and mind, able to endure adversity, and energetically pursuing a flourishing life. If this vision is entrenched to the exclusion of alternatives, argues MacIntyre, the consequence is a conception of life that is at best incomplete, and at worst distorting. For certain of its vital dimensions are ignored or occluded, namely those that attest to affliction, dependence, vulnerability.

This style of criticism is not unique to MacIntyre, whose concerns have many precedents, not all of which he mentions. A wide constituency of feminist theorists, care ethicists, disability scholars and activists, and the members of oppressed groups were making similar charges. In her 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan asked us to reimagine moral development by taking seriously the relationality of human life, ‘the morality of mutual care’, and the ‘psychology of dependence’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Eva Feder Kittay, a champion of care ethics, focuses on ‘dependency relations’, as exemplified by intimates, close friends, and carers.[[7]](#endnote-7) A broad community of other theorists and activists vigorously repeated and extended such criticisms of those dominant moral visions, and urge alternatives ones of their own.

Central to these and similar accounts is profound recognition of the subjection to adversities intrinsic to human life. Such subjection is a deep truth about life, but not of a metaphysically exotic type, of large theoretical claims about the nature of reality. I refer to affliction, dependence, and vulnerability together under the label *experiences of adversity* and explore the idea that wisdom involves living in awareness of the truths about our existence they convey. My strategy is to consider paradigmatic *exemplars of wisdom*, from ancient Western and Asian traditions, and the ways that experiences of adversity shaped their life. The suggestion is that these exemplars, if any, will show how to live wisely in adversity.

**Exemplars of wisdom**

The history of philosophy affords many candidate exemplars of wisdom. Obviously the aspiration to wisdom is not confined to the ancient periods of the Greek, Indian, and Chinese traditions. But the ancient period was home to many self-selecting candidates. The conception of philosophy as a ‘way of life’, embodied by a sage, runs through some of the major schools of those traditions – Stoicism and Epicureanism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Confucianism and Daoism. Such traditions may be classified as philosophical or as religious, or one can abandon that distinction as an artifact of later scholarship.

I will refer to these as *traditions of wisdom*, since they offer the components we need for a rich understanding of relations of wisdom to adversity. First, an articulated vision or conception of wisdom, virtue, and the good life; second, an exemplar figure, a sage; third, aset of narrative accounts of their exemplars’ lives, of how they engaged, reflectively and practically, with the world; andan account of their own understanding of the ways that adversity and wisdom can relate to one another.

A tradition of wisdom will therefore include not just theoretical articulation of a good life, but the concrete practical exemplification of one by a figure – a sage, an exemplar.Not every figure in the history of philosophy has these features, of course. Some sages preferred practical modes of teaching to theoretical expostulation. Others reflected on a good life, but without sustained reflection on adversities. But many of the great ethical and spiritual writings of those ancient traditions have these features – accounts of the good life, of virtue and wisdom, reflectively and practically cultivated, exemplified by a sage. Think of Stoic texts like the *Discourses* of Epictetus or *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, or the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, describing the last days of the ill and aged Buddha. First, though, I need to make some remarks on what I mean by an *exemplar*.

All traditions of wisdom have, at their heart, certain special figures who act as the exemplar – a living symbol – of the moral or spiritual goods of that tradition. Some are founders or initiators of the tradition, like Jesus or Kongzi, whose names they bear. Some are disciples, followers, and devotees, often organized into ranks, like monastics saints, or *boddhisattva*. Some are theoretical sophisticates, engaged in philosophizing or rational theology, while others are not. Some are moral teachers, others are spiritual leaders, some political figures, while others do all of these. Moreover, exemplars of wisdom are extremely diverse in their character, comportment, and ‘lifestyle’ – in their views on the significance to the good life of animals, natural places, art, music, civic or political participation, and so on. Given the diversity of exemplars of wisdom, then, we need some framework for talking productively about them. Otherwise, we run the risk of superficiality, of glossing over or downplaying substantive differences.

An obvious framework is *exemplarism*,recently developed by Linda Zagzebski in her 2017 book *Exemplarist Moral Theory*.[[8]](#endnote-8) It is a foundational moral theory, the core claim of which is that we earn virtues, roles, and ways of life primarily – and perhaps ideally – through encounters with people who exemplify them to a superlative standard. Such exemplars vary in *scope*: someone may exemplify a specific *virtue*, like kindness, or more broadly of a role, like ‘caregiver’ or ‘professor’, or, in special cases, a whole way of whole, as Jesus and Kongzi were of the Christian and Confucian life, respectively.

A further set of distinctions is between *types* of exemplar. Some are contemporaries, those currently living and available, at least in principle, for personal interaction. They may be intimates – friends, family, colleagues – with whom one has relationships of love, trust, or confidence. Some are historical figures, exemplars from the distant or recent history, known through oral, testimonial, or artefactual accounts of their lives. We can also include, as Zagzebski does, fictional characters – perhaps the authentic hero of some edifying existentialist novel. An exemplar of wisdom could therefore be an intimate or contemporary, an historical or legendary figure, or even a fictional character.

Depending on their type, exemplars admit of different modes of encounter, or of ‘observation’, as Zagzebski prefers. *Personal encounters* involve direct interaction or engagement with the exemplar, meeting them, talking with them, even living in close sustained association with them. Empirically rich and emotionally textured, these are perhaps the richest mode of encounter, however they are confined to intimates. Some exemplars are not available or accessible, at least by oneself, but here can sometimes rely on others’ encounters. *Testimonial encounters*, then, take the form of accounts of the exemplar given by others – orally, in anecdote or story, or in the narrative form of written accounts, letters, and biographies. This sub-set can be called *narrative encounters* and they have special relevance to historical exemplars of wisdom. Many ancient ethical and spiritual texts – like *Lunyu* and the Gospels – are designed to enable such encounters, or so I will argue.

A final mode to consider is the *imaginative encounter*. Sometimes one encounters exemplars in one’s imagination, using personal interactions or testimonial accounts as one’s basis. We can *imagine* how some exemplar might act, or what they might say, based on their actions, statements, and convictions. Obviously, modes of encounter fit different types of exemplar – I can have a personal encounter with a contemporary exemplar, but not with historical ones like the Buddha, whom I encounter narratively and imaginatively.

Zagzebski affirms that encounters with exemplars must do at least two things if they are to be morally or spiritually transformative. First, *activate admiration* for them of a motivationally potent sort. Second, *enable emulation*, by giving sufficient detail of their actions, feelings, and thoughts to enable us to take them as a model for oneself. An encounter with an exemplar of wisdom must inspire admiration for them, sufficient to drive us to want to emulate them as a model for a well-lived human life. My claim is that narrative accounts of exemplars of wisdom can only fully activate our admiration and enable us to emulate them if they depict their experiences of adversity. I then go on to show that this explains the style and content of those narratives – for what we find in the Gospels and *Lunyu* are precisely detailed accounts of how Jesus and Kongzi practically and reflectively coped with a range of experiences of adversity.

**Admiration, emulation, and adversity**

Many accounts of admiration and emulation focus upon positive dimensions of human exemplarity. The main reason for this is obvious: uplifting tales of outstanding moral heroes will often be more attractive if they acquiesce in what Barbara Ehrenreich calls ‘bright-siding’ – a determined emphasis on positive, inspiring and uplifting stories and people, that tends to occlude the more negative ‘dark sides’ of life, due to submission to a culturally entrenched ‘ideology of positive thinking’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

As the term suggests, ‘bright-siding’ involves focus on the positive dimensions of difficult experiences – chronic illness, for instance – in ways that neglect the ‘dark sides’. Accounts of chronic illness, for instance, must focus zealously on positive outcomes, like an enhanced appreciation of life, new virtues cultivated, relationships renewed, and so on. Deviations from such optimistic scripts, such as talk of suffering, pain, loneliness, or resignation, are often policed and criticized, the ‘dark sides’ airbrushed out. But these negative dimensions of human life must be acknowledged, not only in the interests of truthfulness, but because exemplarity often shows itself when they loom large. Experiences of adversity cannot disclose truths about human life if we fail to tell the truth about them. Susan Sontag explained that the motivation for her classic essay, ‘Illness as Metaphor’, was a desire for a more ‘truthful way of regarding illness’.[[10]](#endnote-10) That desire can express different things, but one is surely a sense that *telling the truth* about experiences of adversity, their ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ sides, is a way of registering the deep truths that human life is marked by affliction, dependence, and vulnerability.

Specifying the relationship between admiration, emulation, and experiences of adversity need to be handled carefully. There are two sets of worries. The first refer to the obvious fact that admiration and emulation can go wrong, degenerating into more corrupt forms. The second refer to concerns about the idea of *admiring* and *emulating* other people’s experiences of adversity, which might sound odd or even alarming. An energetic literature exists critical of talk of the positive effects of adversity, including the sort registered in cultural critics of ‘bright-siding’. Others challenge the perceived romanticisation of suffering and the apparent valorisation of adversity on a variety of moral and political grounds.[[11]](#endnote-11) In the case of exemplars of wisdom, the delicate task is finding ways to enable admiration and emulation of their ways of coping with adversity without this degenerating into corrupted forms. The fact that millions of people do, of course, derive edifying guidance from such narratives is a cause for confidence.

Encounters with exemplars begin with an experience of admiration. Zagzebski characterises this as a positive emotional response, a recognition that a person is, in a significant degree, an exemplar of the good. Admiration may be pretheoretical, since most people don’t have sophisticated ethical theories to draw on, but of course these can help to refine our practices of admiration. Crucially, Zagzebski emphasises that, to be reliable, our experiences of admiration ought to be reflective. Since we can admire the wrong people or admire the right people for the wrong reasons, reflection is going to be essential to ensure that admiration is ‘fitting.’ Otherwise, admiration is at risk of degenerating into corrupted forms, like fawning idolization, dogmatic veneration, loss of autonomy, or daunted subservience.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Certain admirable qualities and persons might also be ‘invisible’, if they are by their nature self-concealing. This may be especially true of many genuinely admirable experiences of coping with adversity. Some virtues are self-concealing insofar as their exercise tends to disguise the fact of their being exercised, such as restraint. Moreover, certain exercises of a virtue will only be apparent if one has special knowledge of that persons’s character and history. A student with a history of chronically low self-esteem and abusive neglect who attends and participates in class every week is an exemplar of courage, but only those who know them will see it. I have chronically ill friends who exercise a variety of virtues every day, but in ways invisible to strangers. So, admiration ought to be careful and reflective, especially since exemplary coping with adversity is often invisible to all but one’s intimates.

Encounters with exemplars must also enable emulation, the practice of taking a person as a model for oneself. I emulate a person if I try to model some dimension of my life and character upon them, likely that which activated my admiration. Initially, an effort at emulation will be unsophisticated, perhaps crude coping of how an exemplar acts, talks, or thinks. Over time, though, emulation can become more sophisticated. It acquires an increasingly degree of behavioral and psychological complexity. Emulators start to authentically internalize the feelings, convictions, and moods of the exemplar, adopting and customizing the associated modes of bodily comportment. Naturally, an advanced practice of emulation requires dense, detailed descriptions of the character, conduct, and ‘way of life’ of the emulated exemplar. Ideally, this is sustained by close personal encounters with continuous opportunities for observation of and discussion with the exemplar. One needs to know how they act, but also what they think and feel. Such sustained emulation is what one sees in many ancient philosophical communities. Think of the Confucian *jia*, Buddhist *sangha*, and the schools of Epicurus and Plotinus: small dedicated communities of people devoted to ethical self-cultivation, headed by a charismatic sage who provided theoretical and practical instruction in wise living.

I propose that exemplarism offers a powerful way to think about the nature of wisdom in ancient philosophical traditions. Those figures I called exemplars of wisdom are apt to activate our admiration and inspire and sustain emulate. The sages in these and other traditions were models of virtue and wisdom, exemplifying those qualities in the conduct and character of their life. Initially they were personally encountered by those of their contemporaries interested in their teachings. Near or after their deaths, those teachings were recorded in oral and, later, narrative forms. I now want to focus on a very striking feature of some of those narratives – the centrality to them of the adversities experienced by those exemplars.

**Narratives, exemplars, and adversity**

A good way to acquire wisdom, for an exemplarist, is to study texts that enable one to have narrative encounters with exemplars of wisdom. Such narratives must be apt to activate admiration and enable emulation, otherwise the exemplar will not appear to us as a compelling model of wisdom. Crucially, the exemplar must have undergone a set of experiences broadly similar to those had by aspirants. Otherwise their life will be too different from one’s own for emulation to be possible.

I propose that exemplarism can predict and justify the content and styles that narrative accounts of exemplars of wisdom ought to have if they are to activate our admiration and enable emulation. The separation of style and content is not sharp, of course, since they are tightly bound together in the ancient ethical and spiritual texts upon which I focus. Many of the ancient traditions of wisdom of course have many different genres of literature – epistolary, narrative, discursive, documentary. But the texts relevant here are the core texts that focus on the life, character, and conduct of those traditions’ exemplars of wisdom. Such *exemplarist narratives* have content and stylistic features that activate our admiration for an exemplar as depicted and enable emulation of them. Crucially, this includes intense depictions of their adversities.

The power of exemplarist narratives is evident from the endurance of ethical and religious traditions, throughout the world, that are organized around the life and teachings of outstanding persons, such as Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad, or Kongzi. Within social psychology, this morally inspirational power is referred to as ‘moral elevation’, a term for the human tendency to respond to acts, stories, or images of great moral conduct by emulating or imitating them. According to a trio of recent authors, ‘the tradition of depicting the stories of sacrificing saints’ – of spiritual and moral exemplars experiencing adversities – through narratives can enable a ‘cascade of altruism, courage, and sacrifice’, evidently able to endure across generations.[[13]](#endnote-13) Studies indicate that experiences of moral elevation not only ‘cascade’, but also become amplified when they are reinforced in and through the wider social, material, and aesthetic culture of a community – such as religious rituals, recitation of narratives, and aural and artistic traditions. Although narratives are only one means of ‘moral elevation’, they sit within this wider structure of sensibility, practice, and community.

What sorts of style and content would we expect of exemplarist narratives? If a main attraction of exemplarism is its sensitivity to narrative, then we can ‘read off’ a set of stipulations from the features of the theory as presented by Zagzebski. To start with style, the narratives ought to be anecdotal, emotive, and structured in ways that convey the rhythms of a human life. An emotionally charged style rich in biographical, contextual detail creates a sense of contact with a person, of how they navigated their world. The structure may be discontinuous, weaving between themes and events, in a way that reflects the choppiness and flow of human life as lived – not at all an orderly, linear structure, of a sort that risks presenting life as more stable than it is. Such a style is, of course, quite different from modern moral philosophical texts – very impersonal, objective, detached, often in imitation of scientific literature.

Moving to content, the best exemplarist narratives will givedense, detailed descriptions of how the exemplar acted, spoke, felt, thought, and lived. Much of the texts would describe the ‘ordinary-everyday’ conduct of the, their daily activities, moods, concerns. Moreover, one would expect accounts of the people with whom they interacted and how their behavior changed in different context and situations. Such content is, again, not at all what one finds in modern academic writing, especially philosophical scholarship – not statements of arguments, methods, replies to objections, and the like. Of course, exemplarist narratives can and do include such material, but the majority of their content is of a different sort.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The Gospels and *Lunyu* have these sorts of style and content, which explains their power to create emotionally textured, imaginatively resonant encounters with their exemplars of wisdom. But care is needed: neither of those texts were authored by exemplars they depict, both being sets of selected remarks and observations, edited by their disciples. Moreover, there are complex historical and hermeneutical issues concerning the compilation, editing, and proper interpretation of those texts. One need not subscribe to a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ to be aware that the depictions have been structured by active scholarly and commentarial traditions, often with complex motivations and values, embedded within historical communities.

A striking feature of the content of exemplarist narratives are depictions of an exemplar of wisdom’s experiences of adversity, often of acute, graphic forms. Potent accounts are given of the variety of forms of adversity experienced by the exemplars, whether intensive and extensive, acute or prolonged. Moreover, such adversities are typically presented as integral to the ethical and spiritual formation of the exemplar – essential experiences, as it were, not incidental features. Indeed, attaining the status, ‘exemplar’, often seems to invite additional forms of adversity, either as threats to or trials of one’s vaunted exemplarity. Much of Jesus’ suffering was meted out to him as a consequence of the challenge his example and teachings posed to conventional Roman and Jewish life – a cause of his persecution, torture, crucifixion, and death.

Another way exemplarity can generate adversity is by making exemplars more vulnerable to frustration, disappointment, and despair. Kongzi was a ‘consummate’, outstandingly accomplished moral exemplar, devoted to ideals of ethical virtue, ritual propriety, and civic excellence. Unfortunately, the prevailing political corruption and moral lassitude of his society made the full realization and promotion of those ideals, alas, effectively impossible. Kongzi was deeply frustrated by this failure, a vulnerability inherent in his conception of ‘consummate’ moral exemplarity. If so, exemplars, even outstandingly wise ones, are vulnerable to a variety of adversities.

Consider three examples of depictions of the adversities experienced by three exemplars of wisdom – Jesus, Kongzi, and the Buddha – in the exemplarist narratives of the relevant traditions. Each offers instances of wise coping with a variety of forms of adversity in relation to a specific dimension of human affliction and vulnerability – namely, death and dying, whether one’s own or that of others. By focusing on morality, I set aside a range of other forms of adversity, such as alienation, frustration, and loneliness. Although these forms can commingle with mortality, often in complex ways, they can also occur independently of them—a sense of profound frustration with the meaningfulness of one’s life may be amplified by a sense of one’s impending death, but can occur independently of it, during periods of youth and health.

The first is the last days of Jesus. After the Last Supper, knowing himself to be on the eve of his death and having predicted his betrayal by Judas, Jesus retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane:

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. *“Abba*, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Betrayed by Judas and seized by soldiers, Jesus is then brought before Pontius Pilate, to be tortured, crowned with thorns, beaten, spat on, and mocked by the crowd. The agonies of crucifixion continue until, after three hours, Jesus ‘cried out in a loud voice’, with horrible plaintiveness, *“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”*’ – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – and then died. [[16]](#endnote-16) Anticipating and then enduring peculiarly acute forms of physical and spiritual adversity, Jesus remained devoted to the moral and spiritual work for which he was exemplary – teaching, remaining true to his defined purpose, consoling his disciples, all the while unafraid to express the grief and despair that would have defeated those of lesser devotion.

The second example is the grief experienced by Kongzi. An abiding theme of the ancient Chinese tradition is the centrality of relationships with other persons to a flourishing, consummate life. Since those relationships can be terminated by death, namely of those whom we love, trust, and find fellowship, the adversities focused on by Kongzi. A particularly poignant case is the premature death of Yan Hui, renowned by all at the most naturally accomplished of all of Kongzi’s students, destined even to eclipse the consummate exemplarity of the Master himself—for instance, Yan Hui ‘loved learning … never misdirected his anger and never made the same mistake twice’.[[17]](#endnote-17) So intense was his grief, that Kongzi abandoned his usual composed comportment:

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master lamented, “Oh! Heaven has bereft me! Heaven has bereft me!”

When Yan Hui passed away, the Master cried for him excessively. The disciples reproved him, saying, “Master, surely you are showing excessive grief?”

The Master replied, “Am I showing excessive grief? Well, for whom *would* I show excessive grief, if not for this man?”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The Master’s excessive grief in this instance is a rare case of a failure on this part to conduct himself with continuous discipline, restraint, and caution – a poignant mark of the esteem in which he held Yan Hui. Although his disciples are puzzled, Kongzi explains that profound grief is appropriate in cases of tragic death, just as grief it itself an integral dimension of the experiences of human beings, understood relationally in terms of emotionally textured, socially structured roles like parent, child, and friend. But such excess is not a failure of exemplarity, argues Amy Olberding, since Kongzi is acting as ‘a model of the meaning and significance of grief in a flourishing life’.[[19]](#endnote-19) A wise person experiences grief, for its possibility is integral to meaningful relationships with others – a truth a wise person therefore accepts and embraces.

A third example of narrative depictions of the adversities experienced by exemplars is the record of the last days of the Buddha in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*. Aged, increasingly frail and ill, the Buddha, perceiving his imminent death, devotes himself to reiterating his teachings, organizing the monastic community, and spending time with his disciples:

But when the Blessed One had entered upon the rainy season, there arose in him a severe illness, and sharp and deadly pains came upon him. And the Blessed One endured them mindfully, clearly comprehending and unperturbed.

Then it occurred to the Blessed One: “It would not be fitting if I came to my final passing away without addressing those who attended on me, without taking leave of the community of *bhikkhus*. Then let me suppress this illness by strength of will, resolve to maintain the life process, and live on.”

And the Blessed One suppressed the illness by strength of will, resolved to maintain the life process, and lived on. So it came about that the Blessed One’s illness was allayed.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Despite his failing health, the Buddha devotes himself to the continuation of ethical and spiritual work: restating his teachings (*Dhamma*), giving instructions for the organization of the monastic community (*Sangha*), attending to the welfare of the monks, issuing admonitions and warnings, and generally devoting himself to ‘rousing, edifying, and gladdening’ his followers.[[21]](#endnote-21) The Buddha remained exemplary in this way by continuing to devote himself to the works of wisdom, compassion, and virtue constitutive of the Buddhist way of life. For his disciples, that he died so calm, serene, and composed was a further confirmation of his profound wisdom.

Illness, ageing, fear, grief, sadness, disappointment, frustration, persecution, torture, crucifixion, exile – such are the varieties of adversities experienced by the exemplars of wisdom in the ancient traditions of wisdom. Similar ways of responding to those adversities recur throughout the examples, suggesting common patterns of wise conduct, of which three stand out. First, the exemplars retain their commitment to a guiding ethical or spiritual vision, devoting themselves to activities – like teaching – that enable them to promote it. Second, the exemplars continue to live with a small group of disciples structured by deep relationships of confidence, trust, and affection (even if some disciples, being less than fully exemplary, fail to reciprocate). Third, the exemplars openly acknowledge the adversities they are experiencing, lamenting their suffering, expressing their grief, and registering their pains. Although other patterns of wise coping with adversity could be noted, these three suffice to characterize a set of exemplary means of experiencing adversity. Moral purpose, community, and open affirmation of the realities of what one is experiencing – these all allow the exemplar to continue to exercise and express virtues such as courage, trust, and truthfulness.

**Admiring, emulating, coping**

The inclusion of experiences of adversity into exemplarist narratives can be explained in several ways – for instance, the affliction and vulnerability intrinsic to human life in all its forms, exemplary or not. But exemplarism can offer further explanation of why inclusion of adversities matters to their guiding aim of guiding others to wisdom. The inclusion of experiences of adversity into exemplarist narratives does at least three related things.

For a start, such experiences can increase our admiration for the exemplar. It’s all well and good to admire those who flourish and live wisely under conditions of peace and stability; quite another to admire those who wisely navigate dangers and flourish despite adversities. Most virtues are accomplishments, but some will require more discipline and investment to cultivate and exercise than others – think of courage or tenacity. A narrative that depicts in vivid, evocative ways the struggles inherent in the attainment of wisdom is more likely to evoke our admiration.

Second, inclusion of encounters with adversity can, given appropriate conditions, enable more effective emulation. At the most basic, unless one has *some* idea of how an exemplar coped with adversity, one cannot emulate them at all. But in more complex cases, studying how exemplars experienced adversity offers concrete, warranted models for our own life. To know, for instance, that an exemplar remained convinced of the goodness of others offers guidance to emulative practice; so, too, is an appreciation that the practice and pursuit of wisdom is worth the costs. Specifying quite what is being emulated and how is a matter for case-by-case analysis, of course. What matters is that knowledge of how an exemplar coped with adversity enhances our ability to emulate them: for to fully take someone as a model for one’s own life requires as full a picture of how their lived theirs as is possible.

Inclusion of the adversities of exemplars of wisdom offers an expanded, enriched range of behaviors to admire and to emulate. Attaining and maintaining wisdom in an arena of adversity is all the more admirable and offers a richer basis for emulation.

A third, final reason to include the exemplar’s adversities is to affirm those deep truths about the human condition to which wisdom is ultimately directed. What the Buddhists call ‘Noble Truths’ merit their honorific status because they are the truths a person must deeply internalize if they are to live wisely. Instead of ‘bright-siding’ that whole array of forms of adversity to which we are vulnerable, exemplars of wisdom – Jesus, Kongzi, the Buddha – affirm their truth. But they also add a further truth: good lives can be lived if one can practically and reflectively accommodate to adversity, in a way that is truthful, devoted, and ethically disciplined.

Studying narrative accounts of exemplars discloses the many ways to conceive and pursue the aspiration to wisdom. The ancient traditions offer many possibilities –

meditation, spiritual practice, bodily disciplines, intellectual discourses, and emulation of exemplars, to name a few. No single exemplar need employ all of these, for there are many ways to seek edification. Which practices may succeed depends, among other things, on the particular nature of the adversities one faces, the social and moral resources available, and one’s background conception of the good. If wisdom can take many forms, then there is no need to stipulate, in advance, the activities and experiences through which it can be cultivated or expressed. What exemplars can do, and arguably have been doing, is to affirm the possibility of wisdom amid adversity. A further contribution they make is to test and model the character traits, dispositions, attitudes, relationships, and modes of life that can help us to live with amid adversity.

Modern readers are not, of course, obliged to adopt these wise ways of life wholesale. Nor could we, in many cases. When consulting historic exemplars, a sense is often that our world is not theirs, our life and practice distinct from theirs. But then wholesale adoption is not our only option for learning from exemplars of wisdom. An informed acquaintance with a range of exemplars of wisdom shows us different ways to experience and cope with the adversities that attend human life. Narratives should be read and understood, following Arthur Frank, as ‘witnessing attempts to live in certain ways’, as efforts to ‘bear witness … to what goes into coping’.[[22]](#endnote-22) I propose that effective exemplarist narratives bear witness to both the accomplishments and adversities of those persons who exemplify wisdom. By conveying the often-acute psychological, emotional, and existential ardors of those experiences, such narratives give us more – not less – to admire and to emulate. In the process, they offer us a broader set of paths to wisdom.

Stirring as all this might be, however, care ought to be taken with the optimistic tone creeping into these remarks, which ought to reactivate concerns about ‘bright-siding’. It’s one thing to try to ‘bear witness’ to exemplars’ experiences of adversity, but quite another to do so in what Sontag called appropriately ‘truthful’ ways. It is one thing to acknowledge the morally and existentially gritty dimensions of human life, but quite another to actually explore them in uncomfortably honest ways. After all, what could be a more obvious example of bright-siding than to detail the varied and intense adversities of Jesus, Confucius, and the Buddha, but then end on cheerful talk of how, despite their sufferings, they maintained their virtues, continued to do good, and kept their faith? If exemplarism is not to be corrupted by bright-siding tendencies, then we need to stop and ask whether our reflections on exemplarist narratives are suitably attentive to the messiness of human life, even and perhaps especially the exemplary ones.

An excellent discussion of the difficulty and importance of exploring the moral, psychological, and existential messiness of exemplarity without lapsing into the overly tidy glossiness of bright-siding is a set of recent papers about Confucius qua exemplar. While affirming his status as a moral exemplar, a beneficiary of a set of moral and other goods, Amy Olberding urges us to take seriously his various *complaints* – about, say, the inevitability of compromise within the morally degenerate conditions of social life, a regular theme of his more brooding lamentations about the corruption of his culture.[[23]](#endnote-23) Confucius life evidently contained sorrow, disappointment, frustration, and heartbreak, despite a popular and scholarly tendency to treat these as passing obstacles swiftly and painlessly overcome. On this view, one can attain exemplarity with one’s core values, convictions, and ideals intact, as one emerges, triumphant, without remorse, complaint, or regret, in a way that Olberding rightly warns us seems far too psychologically tidy. As a commentator on her account puts it, such bright-siding treatments of exemplars ought to prompt worries about the ‘self-deception and self-serving bias that lurks beneath … judgments about the quality of one’s life.’[[24]](#endnote-24)

Since these worries are best explored with sustained reference to specific texts, narratives, and exemplars, such as the case of Confucius’ complaints, I confine myself to just one suggestion. This is that we ought to engage with exemplarist narratives with an active suspicion of our tendencies to drift into bright-siding tendencies, especially if and when our culture is suffused with some form of ‘ideology of positive thinking’. What we might call a principle of hermeneutical suspicion should ideally be directed inwards and outwards, manifested in an awareness of hermeneutical tendencies to resist, such as an implicit desire to suppose that attainment of exemplarity – to quote a commentator on Confucius - ‘insulates’ the exemplar from the anxieties of ‘ordinary people’, such that an exemplar ‘remains devoted even when the complexities of life conflict his conscience’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Such tendencies are understandable, of course, but they ought to be resisted, on at least two counts. First, they can lead to bad hermeneutical practice, such as ignoring, downplaying, or glossing over the darker or gloomier sections of narratives accounts of exemplars. Achieving the very delicate balance between the darker and lighter sides of an exemplarist narrative in ways sensitive to the existential situation of those studying or reading them is enormously difficult, especially for those with pastoral duties and responsibilities. But it also matters deeply. Second, bright-siding approaches to narrative accounts of exemplars and their adversities can also encourage and entrench forms of bad existential practice. By that, I mean ways of coping with the human condition that are liable to diminish our capacity to acknowledge and respond positively to its various adversities. An important example is the familiar tendency to entertain untenable hopes that the manifold adversities that complicate the path to virtue can be overcome without any retrospective negative affect – no remorse, regret, or dismay, say. As we saw in the case of Confucius, even the most accomplished exemplar can still have a set of sincere complaints about certain aspects of their life, some of which arguably arise because, not despite, their exemplarity. Attainment of exemplarity does not insulate an individual’s life from the adversities intrinsic to the human condition. Olberding makes clear the complexity and delicateness of an existentially and hermeneutically admirable approach to exemplars, narratives, wisdom:

[T]he *Analects* … is commendably modest in what it expects to follow from the life of virtue [and] successfully avoids any chimerical claims regarding what such a life can promise. Its estimations of virtue’s outcomes humanely acknowledge the force of prosaic concerns for basic material needs, security, and so forth, as well as the pains of having a life in which these are denied. There is here no conquering triumphalism, no definitive suggestion that virtue is a distinctively sufficient good that renders lesser goods superfluous, and nothing that disdains as plebian commonplace human cares. Confucius’ satisfaction with himself does not overmaster his sorrows[[26]](#endnote-26)

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**Notes**

1. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Alasdair Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need The Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 8 f. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 1 f. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. W. von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The intrinsic vulnerability of human beings to affliction and painful dependence as it manifests in experiences of somatic illness is explored by Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Ian James Kidd ‘Phenomenology of Illness, Philosophy, and Life’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 62 (2017): 56-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, revised edition (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 82. See further Marilyn Friedman, ‘Feminism in Ethics: Conceptions of Autonomy’, in Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 205 – 224. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labour: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (London: Granta, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See, *inter alia*, Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Havi Carel, ‘Virtue without Excellence, Excellence without Health’, *Aristotelian Society: Supplement* 90.1 (2016): pp. 237-253; [redacted]. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Alessandra Tanesini, ‘Teaching Virtue: Changing Attitudes’, *Logos & Episteme* 7.4 (2016): pp. 503-527. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Craig T. Palmer, Ryan O. Begley, and Kathryn Coe, ‘Saintly Sacrifice: The Traditional Transmission of Moral Elevation’, *Zygon* 48.1 (2013): 107 – 127. (Quotations from p. 108.) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Interestingly, a standard pattern emerges in many exemplarist traditions. After an initial narrative describing an exemplar’s character and life, there emerge texts with more argumentative and style and theoretical content – discourses and treatises, say. [redacted]. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mark 14.32 – 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Mark 15.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Confucius, *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, translated by Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), § 6.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Confucius, *Analects*, § 6.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Amy Olberding, ‘The Consummation of Sorrow: An Analysis of Confucius’ Grief for Yan Hui’, *Philosophy East and West* 54.3 (2004): 279-301. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Maha-parinibbana Sutta: Last Days of the Buddha*, trans. Sister Vajira and Francis Story, 2.28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, 1.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Arthur Frank, *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), pp. 14 and 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Amy Olberding, ‘Confucius’ Complaints and the *Analects’* Account of the Good Life’, *Dao* 12 (2013): 417-440. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Manyul Im, ‘A Good Life, an Admirable Life, or an Uncertain Life’, *Dao* 14 (2015): 573-577. Quotation from p. 576. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Michael D.K. Ing, ‘The Limits of Moral Maturity’, *Dao* 14 (2015): 567-572. Quotations from pp. 571 and 572, respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Olberding, ‘Confucius’ Complaints and the *Analects’* Account of the Good Life’, p. 439. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)