

Let the donkeys be donkeys: in defense of inspiring envy

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza & Ariele Niccoli

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Once upon a time, Aesop says, there was a donkey who wanted to be a pet dog. The pet dog was given many treats by the master and the household servants, and the donkey was envious of him. Hence, the donkey began emulating the pet dog. What happened next? The story ends up with the donkey beaten senseless, chased off to the stables, exhausted and barely alive. Who is to blame for the poor donkey's unfortunate fate? Well, there could be disagreement upon this, but we think emulation is to blame. And it's on the kinds of envy-related emulation that we focus in this chapter.

More analytically, we aim at vindicating the role of envy for moral exemplars within an exemplarist character educational framework. In the first section, we recall the central tenets of an exemplarist account of moral progress, and highlight how negative emotions, in general, have suffered a bad press within character education, with exemplarism being no exception. Then we provide a brief outline of standard strategies of defending envy by appealing to useful taxonomies of envy (e.g., Taylor 1988; Protasi 2016; Fussi 2018). After that, we put forward our 'Donkey Objection' by recalling Aesop's fable on "foolish imitation", so as to show that when envy triggers mere emulation, it can bear devastating effects such as conformism and a lack of self-worth and personal integrity.

In response to this objection, we bring into play a distinction between two rival forms of imitation—emulation and inspiration—and we coin the label of "inspired envy" for those forms of imitation by inspiration triggered by envy that lead to self-improvement avoiding morally detrimental consequences¹.

1. The central tenets of an exemplarist account of moral progress

Exemplarism is a recent moral theory first advanced by Linda Zagzebski (2010, 2015, 2017), where the emotion of admiration plays a significant role. In Zagzebski's view, admiration for exemplars enables agents and communities to identify role models which set the reference of all main moral concepts, such as virtue, right action, duty, and so on. One of the most promising developments of exemplarism, which will be our background in this paper, is its application to moral education: given its intrinsic developmental potentialities, exemplarism has rapidly given rise to a distinct approach within Aristotelian character education, namely, exemplarist character education. The core assumptions of this approach are, roughly, that: (i) admiring and emulating role models or exemplars is the most effective way to shape a virtuous character (Kristjánsson 2015; Croce and Vaccarezza, 2017), and (ii) exemplar-related positive emotions such as admiration play a major role within this process (Engelen et al. 2018; Vaccarezza and Niccoli 2018). This can be seen as a further development of standard Aristotelian character education. Indeed, within the Aristotelian tradition (Sherman, 1997; Steutel and Carr, 1999), '[c]haracter is caught through role-modeling and emotional contagion' much more than being learned by studying lists of abstract values (Kristjánsson, 2015, 21; Croce & Vaccarezza 2017).

¹ We are most grateful to Sara Protasi and all participants in the "Moral Psychology of Envy Workshop" for their comments on the talk version of this paper. We are also very much indebted with Vanessa Carbonell for her helpful comments on a previous version of this chapter.

The main merits of exemplarist character education can be summarized as follows: (i) it assigns theoretical legitimacy to the phenomenological evidence of the primacy of role models in shaping character; (ii) it makes a strong case for emotional development as central to character education, and in particular, it accommodates within the theory the central moral emotion of admiration. However, these important theoretical gains come at a cost: namely, an almost exclusive focus on admiration. One might wonder, at this point, which emotions besides admiration should be regarded as a relevant source in this process for role modeling to be successful and morally valuable. One might think of other positive exemplarity-related emotions, such as adoration (Schindler 2013), elevation (Haidt 2003; Kristjánsson 2017), gratitude (Haidt 2003), moral awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003; Kristjánsson 2017), and inspiration (Thrash and Elliot 2003, 2004). However, such exclusive focus on positive emotions looks far from granted: the encounter with moral exemplars, besides eliciting admiration, can trigger a wide range of negative emotions. For instance, the exemplar, insofar as she displays a higher moral status, can be seen as embodying a moral standard one feels inadequate to attain, and therefore elicit shame; or, as possessing a (moral) good one lacks and is therefore envious of; or, finally, can make one feel guilty of not being able to meet as adequately as she does the moral requirements of a situation. In turn, these scenarios can be worsened if the exemplar in question is not a distant public or historical figure, such as a renowned moral hero or a saint, but a close-by morally excellent agent, with whom one can compare and compete. Provided that we can't help experiencing such emotions, nor can we prevent them from arising, what should we do with them?

Zagzebski's answer is that negative emotions are unfortunate obstacles and threats to moral development we should try to avoid (2017, 58–59). In a previous paper, we have already noted that this approach towards exemplarity-related negative emotions is at best unfair, at worst harmful, for both instrumental and intrinsic reasons (Vaccarezza and Niccoli 2019).

In what follows, we develop that argument further and discuss how a paradigmatically negative emotion like envy should be taken into serious account within exemplarist character education. First, because – as said – moral exemplars, insofar as they are seen as bearers of virtue, can easily become the object of such emotion, a fact whose underestimation or neglect could lead to a diminished impact of an exemplarist educational program. Second, because – under certain conditions – envy can fuel a positive effort of genuine moral growth and prove a source of moral striving that should not be wasted. It is this second point that we focus on primarily here. To defend it, we draw on existing defenses of a benign form of envy and argue that a further clarification of its possible lines of development is in order.

2. Envy, emulation, and the "Donkey objection"

Some essential characteristics of envy are widely accepted (D'Arms 2017; Protasi 2016, 2021). First, envy obtains within a three-place relationship: the one who feels the emotion of envy (the envious), the one to whom the emotion is directed at (the envied, or rival), and the good possessed by the latter (in our case, a morally valuable quality). Secondly, envy implies a comparative assessment according to which the envious person perceives herself - in some respect - in a position of inferiority to the envied person. Finally, feeling envious is an unpleasant and even painful experience, so envy is an emotion with a negative valence.

As a result of these three characteristics, the prototypical reaction of the envious person is to try to bridge the gap with the envied person by damaging or depriving him of the envied good, which is why envy is traditionally portrayed as a morally reprehensible emotion. As if that were not enough, experiencing envy also harms the envious person who, feeling humiliated and miserable because of their own inferiority, further reinforces his disadvantage.

Despite its bad reputation, some philosophers and psychologists have recently attempted to rehabilitate the emotion of envy from a tout-court condemnation and argue that it can have a positive value under certain conditions.² To do so, they appeal to a distinction between two main kinds of envy: a 'benign', 'emulative' or even 'admiring' envy on the one hand, and 'malicious' or 'destructive' envy on the other. Such distinction resembles very closely Aristotle's discussion of envy (*phthonos*) and emulation (*zēlos*) in the *Rhetoric* (Aristotle 2007, 146, 1388a29–38)³, and has been recently re-elaborated by several scholars in order to defend a positive moral role for envy. Let's now consider the two most prominent analyses that identify types of envy, which are argued to be not only morally acceptable but even desirable, because of the transformative motivation they would induce in the envious subject. We'll then analyze the consequences of these defenses in the case of envy for moral exemplars, and move from the moral acceptability of envy to the more specific issue of the moral acceptability of envy for moral traits. It's important to note that, although we are considering the case of envy for moral traits, we don't aim at taking a stance over the moral vs nonmoral nature of some kinds of envy (see, e.g., La Caze 2001, 32). We don't claim, in other words, that the "core evaluative concern" (Ben-Ze'ev 2002, 148) of the forms of envy we consider is moral; rather, that moral qualities can be an object of envy, and that the moral acceptability of envying them can be assessed.

Gabriele Taylor makes a fundamental distinction between state-envy and object-envy. In state-envy, the envious is not focused on the good the other has (e.g., an indomitable yet humble intellectual honesty) but on "the other's having that good" (Taylor 1988, 234)⁴. State envy, in turn, admits a further distinction between "destructive" or "malicious" envy on the one hand and "emulative" envy on the other. While in the case of malicious envy, the gap between the envious and the envied is bridged by harming the envied, in the case of emulative envy, the envious person strives to raise his status in response to the perception of his own inferiority. In object-envy, however, the envious person is focused on the good that the envied person possesses and whose lack the envious realizes through envy. In this case, the envied has the function of showing the envious which types of goods he most desires⁵: this form of envy fades into admiration and helps to set the ideal standards to which the envious person aspires. That is why object envy can also be called ideal or admiring envy. Both emulative-state-envy and admiring-object-envy lead to emulative behavior in the broad sense of striving to become akin to the envied, in our case, akin to the envied moral exemplar.

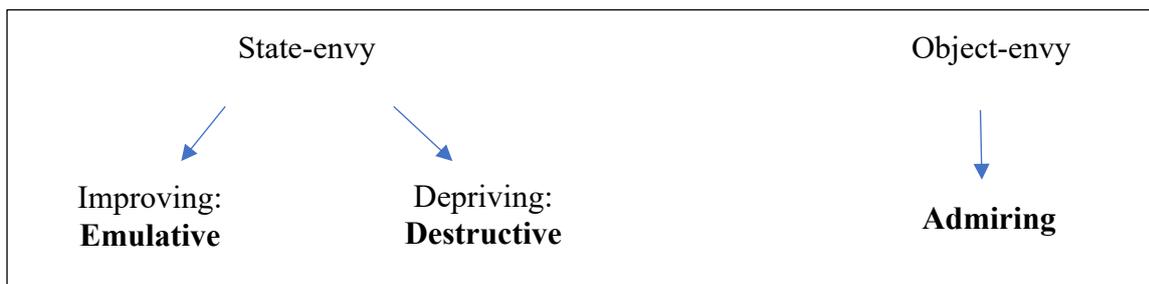


Figure 1: State-envy, object-envy and their emulative forms (Taylor 1988, 2008)

² Among them, La Caze (2001); Thomason (2015); Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2011) even argue that benign envy fares even better than both admiration and malign envy in motivating the subject to improve.

³ However, Kristjansson rejects the link between envy and emulation, claiming that while envy implies "pain at another's deserved good fortune [...] through emulation [...] we simply express, with admiration, the desirability of being like B in some respect, or having the same thing as B, without wanting to take anything away from B" (2006, 42)

⁴ It's likely that the object-state dichotomy breaks down when what is envied is someone's moral character. Thanks to Vanessa Carbonell for this remark.

⁵ It could also be the case that the envied shows the envier what goods he most thinks others desire, or will tend to judge him by. Thanks to Vanessa Carbonell for pointing this out to us.

Another influential analysis of envy is the one recently proposed by Sara Protasi (2016, 2021), according to which envy is differentiated into four varieties, identified by combining certain variables: the focus of the emotion (which can be directed at the good or the rival, as in Taylor's analysis) and the accessibility of the good (which can be perceived as obtainable or unobtainable).

	Obtainable	Unobtainable
Focus on the good	Emulative	Inert
Focus on the rival	Aggressive	Spiteful

Table 1: The four kinds of envy, including emulative envy (Protasi 2016, 2021)

In both cases, the only type of envy that is considered morally acceptable *and* not harmful for the envious is emulative envy. Leaving aside the more destructive and morally objectionable forms of envy (i.e., aggressive and spiteful envy), let us consider inert envy. Given that the good is perceived as unobtainable, this species of envy does not prompt any motivation to improve one's status but equally does not promote markedly malicious behavior toward the envied. On the other hand, in the grip of inert envy, "the envier experiences despair, frustration, self-loathing, and, often, shame and guilt for feeling envy" (Protasi 2016, 7; see also Protasi 2021, 55-61). Emulative envy, instead, would seem to have no negative consequences for either the envied or the envious. This variety of envy "is the result of being focused on the good and believing oneself to be capable of getting the good for oneself" (2016, 6).

To sum up, according to its advocates, benign envy can foster a process of emulation that is not only morally decent toward the envied (insofar as it doesn't imply malevolence) but also clearly positive for the envier (insofar as it implies the effort to improve one's own situation). However, we'll argue, even benign envy may bring about substantial threats, related precisely to its emulative nature.

A caveat is in order before proceeding. We don't mean to take a stance over which one is the right taxonomy of envy. Rather, our point is that whenever an emulative kind of envy is at stake, a further distinction has to be made as to the kind of emulation triggered. This, in the case of envy for moral exemplars, is of crucial importance to draw a fruitful exemplarist character-educational path. Therefore, we don't think we need to argue here for the existence of benign envy⁶.

To illustrate a potential objection against the view that emulative desire is a necessary and sufficient condition for benign forms of envy, let us make it more vivid with the aid of Aesop's fable, *The Donkey and The Pet Dog*:

A donkey used to see the master's pet puppy dog fawning on him day in and day out. The puppy ate his fill of food from the master's table and was also given many treats by the household servants. The Donkey said to himself, 'If my master and all the servants are so fond of that nasty little dog, then imagine what will happen if I do as the dog does. [...] As the Donkey was reflecting on his situation, he saw the master coming in. He let out a great 'hee-haw' and quickly ran to meet him, leaping up and putting his two front feet on his master's shoulders, licking the

⁶ Elsewhere we defend the claim that 'benign' or even 'virtuous' envy obtains (Vaccarezza & Niccoli 2018), but our point here applies to all the affective states that D'Arms groups under the label 'emulative desire' (2017).

master with his tongue and tearing the master's clothes with his hooves. The master collapsed under the Donkey's weight and at the sound of the master's shout all the servants came running. They grabbed sticks and stones and attacked the Donkey, beating him senseless and breaking his back and his legs. Then they chased him off to the stables, exhausted and barely alive. (Gibbs 2002, 294)

The emotion portrayed in this fable looks like a paradigmatic case of emulative envy: the two animals are peers who live in the same household, which means the goods enjoyed by the puppy are perceived as within the Donkey's reach; furthermore, the action tendency elicited is precisely emulation, for he tries to improve his situation by emulating a set of behavior displayed by the envied dog. However, as we can see, the Donkey ends up much worse off than he was at the beginning. Aesop's moral of the story is that "unworthy people should not try to usurp the position of their superiors". Ours, however, is rather different and points to the risks of *literal* imitation. This risk is reflected in a difference between envy and admiration at the motivational level. Although benign envy and admiration both promote an effort to elevate one's own situation (van de Ven 2015), they seem to differ in some respects. "Blatz et al. (2016) found that benign envy motivates people to copy the envied person and achieve short-term and specific goals, whereas admiration motivates people to achieve more long-term and abstract goals. Admiration thus tends to motivate people to emulate the achievements of the admired person or moral exemplar in less direct ways." (Engelen et al. 2018). It's precisely on this point that our objection and proposal are based. On the one hand, we intend to make explicit the dangers of literal imitation, and, on the other, to identify under what conditions envy can fuel a process of affective and motivational transformation. Even though the Donkey example concerns a case of envy for non-moral goods, we think the same pattern applies when moral goods are envied, and the behavior of moral exemplars is emulated. In such cases, consequences are even worse, for what is at stake is, more than the envier's chances to acquire some good, her chances of moral improvement.

We think that two main scenarios arise when a moral exemplar becomes the object of literal imitation, both leading to morally unwelcome consequences:

(i) *Failure scenario*: the envier tries to emulate the envied exemplar, but she fails. She feels powerless having failed to successfully replicate the envied exemplar's behavior and/or attitudes and develops a sense of a lack of self-worth and self-efficacy.

(i) *Success scenario*: the envier successfully replicates behavior and/or attitudes of the envied exemplar and develops moral conformism⁷.

Lack of self-worth has recently been highlighted as a major risk connected with experiencing envy (Perrine 2011; Ferran 2021). According to several scholars, the structure of envy entails, besides a focus on the good and a focus on the rival, a focus on the self (see Kristjánsson 2010; Fussi 2019; Salice and Montes Sánchez 2019). In this respect envy is an emotion of self-assessment that traces our own comparative inferiority about relevant values and goods that define the sense of identity of the self. Along these lines, Perrine claims that the feeling of inferiority involved in envy is conceptually connected with perceived diminished self-worth. On a more pessimistic account of envy, Ferran claims that genuine envy necessarily includes a focus on the self that reveals our own perceived powerlessness, which is more

⁷ By talking of single instances we're simplifying a bit: a more realistic picture would involve analyzing the developmental process that occurs over multiple iterations, where individual attempts may be failures and yet there may be progressive growth.

specific than perceived inferiority (forthcoming). In turn, feeling powerless leads to a diminished sense of self-worth⁸.

In our view, benign or emulative envy can also lead to experiencing a devaluation of the self, due to the failure of the emulative effort. Roughly, the idea is that a failure to become alike to the envied pushes back the envious person to a more intrusive – and morally questionable – kind of envy, in which the feeling of inferiority is associated with the feeling of powerlessness. As a result, a failed emulative process (i.e., literal emulation) promoted by envy (as well as others emulative desires) exposes the envious to the risk of diminished self-worth.

While lack of self-worth is objectionable for its psychological damage to the envier's self-perception and evaluation, conformism is widely regarded as posing a specifically moral threat to the agents who fall prey of it, besides jeopardizing the very possibility of attaining the envied good. From a virtue-ethical perspective, the reason why conformism is morally worrisome is that it implies mistaking moral guidance for technical advice (Annas 2004, 64). In other words, it makes it appear as if moral guidance merely meant being told what to do, rather than developing a virtuous character out of which becoming capable of making one's own choices. This, in turn, amounts to missing the target of moral development, i.e., becoming virtuous agents and good practical reasoners. In Kantian terms, conformism entails a loss of autonomy since it shifts the source of agency outside the self's practical reason. As Kant would put it (*G* IV 408; see also Louden 1992, 2009), subjecting oneself to an exemplar equals endorsing a heteronomous principle of action, which means bypassing one's own practical authority. From this perspective, conformism implies therefore a loss of integrity⁹: not only do criteria of action come from outside of the self's practical reasoning; they also bypass one's personal commitments and practical identities. Seen this way, emulative envy for moral exemplars turns out to be self-defeating: the whole point of envying a moral exemplar is leveling up to the exemplar by becoming morally better, but the result seemingly ends up being a loss of practical authority and moral integrity. All the envier is left with is a merely superficial adherence to morality, which is well below what is required to be morally mature, let alone exemplarily good¹⁰.

Our exemplarist character educational account suggests that emulative envy for moral exemplars can only be morally acceptable – therefore channeled, rather than educated away – once the risk of emulation becoming literal, Donkey-like, imitation, is ruled out. To do so, it is necessary to carve out a morally valuable instance of emulative envy by means of two moves. These two moves amount to a clarification (i) of the kind of emulation that can be morally acceptable; (ii) of the exemplars that are worthy of being envied, and of how we should construe them.

3. Complicating emulation

To reiterate, the first move to carve out a morally and educationally valuable form of emulative envy consists in clarifying what a morally acceptable form of emulation amounts to. In this section, we claim that emulation need not be literal imitation, but can take a different form, namely, that of inspiration.

⁸ The conceptual link between envy and self-worth is captured, in the psychological literature, by the empirical evidence of robust connections between envy and self-esteem. For an in-depth analysis of associations among self-esteem and both malicious and benign envy see Vrabell et al. (2018)

⁹ Despite our use of Korsgaard (1996)'s label "practical identity", what we endorse here is a very general meaning of integrity, even though we're aware that many rival accounts could take different stances over the threats of conformism. We think that all of them, however, agree in rejecting it.

¹⁰ Kristjánsson rightly points out that "merely with learning experientially to imitate a charismatic leader, we risk ending up with blind hero-worship: unenlightened conformity" (2006, 41).

To defend this claim, we bring into play a distinction (already advanced in Vaccarezza 2020) between two rival forms of emulation, namely, *imitation* and *inspiration*. While the former consists in literal replication of a model's behavior, which in the best-case scenario can only lead to conformism, the latter refers to being inspired by a model to develop one's own reflective and deliberative skills, so as to attain the good one aspires to in a personal, unique fashion. Along these lines, we coin the label of "inspiring envy" for those forms of emulation that are triggered by envy and lead to self-improvement without a loss of integrity and autonomy in the subject.

The source of the distinction between imitation and inspiration can be traced back to an old disagreement upon the role of models in ethics. Historically speaking, such disagreement is rooted in a broader divergence upon the relation between exemplary models and their copies¹¹. Three ancient paths to flourishing via reference to exemplary individuals can be identified in the Western philosophical tradition: (i) the Platonic mimesis of ideal models, (ii) the Stoic legacy focused on imitation of the Socratic sage, and (iii) the Aristotelian portrait of the phronimos as a source of inspiration. These three paths, originally intended to channel positive admiring reactions to the morally exceptional, seem to fit emulative envy as well, since they have different implications for whether, how, and to what extent one should emulate an (admired or envied) role model. The Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, both in its pagan and Christian versions, conceives of the model as a universal norm to which one should literally—albeit imperfectly—conform (see, e.g., Plato, *Timaeus* 28A-50; *Republic* 484CD, 592b; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 8.6; *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus* 16.57). The Stoic sage, embodied by Socrates, is the prime example of a saint—that is, a particular model who can be literally imitated to "become like him" (Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 95.1; *On Tranquillity of Spirit* 5.2; *On Kindness* V 6.1–7). Finally, the Aristotelian phronimos represents a non-generalizable living standard that can be imitated only by analogy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI).

These three ancient models present us with two more general ways of conceiving emulation. Socratic sanctity and Platonic ideal models call for *conformity* with an embodied or universal ideal, a standard the approximation to which indicates the trajectory of moral life. It is a standard, therefore, whose imitation implies an attempt at conforming. There may well be degrees in which this conformity obtains, yet the exemplar embodies a noninterpretable moral standard to which to conform. Be it a universal norm, such as in the Platonic tradition, or a particular saintly person, as in the case of the Stoic sage embodied by Socrates, emulation of the exemplar consists in an adaptation to the life of a particular person. If the model requires conformation, emulation can only take the form of an imitation, which means that literal imitation – common to Platonic and Socratic exemplarity – tends to realize the same type of action to the same degree as the model.

Unlike Socratic and Platonic exemplarity, the Aristotelian exemplarity of the phronimos *inspires* an analogical emulation—that is, an attempt to "do morally good" without prescribing any literal imitation of a specific course of action. Thus, it offers a formal, non-codifiable, kind of action-guidance, which avoids potentials allegations of heteronomy and conformism. Practical wisdom is equated by Aristotle with having an eye on the particular requirements of a situation (NE III.5, 1114b6), one which comes with time and moral training, and which enables one to find the right mean in each situation. The right mean, in turn, varies depending on the agent *and* the context (NE V.11, 1137b30–32): it would be pointless, therefore, to imitate what a sage does literally, for it may well be that what is wise and right for someone is excessive or defective for another (NE 1106b 1-5).

Along these lines, we propose to label *imitative* the envy triggered by moral exemplarity which results in literal imitation, and *inspired* the envy which is triggered by moral

¹¹ A broader defense of this point can be found in Vaccarezza 2020.

exemplarity, but elicits emulation by inspiration rather than a literal imitation of the role model. Inspired envy takes the envied moral exemplar as action-guiding in the formal way of inspiration to deliberate well, improving moral perception, consider the requirements posed by the various virtues, rather than construing the exemplar as a standard from which to deduce particular actions. The phronetic emulation that we label inspiration operates by analogy and calls for a revision of one's priorities based on an attempt to deliberate better and with more attention to a situation's moral features¹².

It seems uncontroversial that, if we conceive of emulation as a form of inspiration, rather than literal imitation, charges of conformism and lack of self-worth fade away; however, one might wonder whether letting the envied model inspire one's conduct still amounts to an instance of envy, rather than resulting in admiration.

To provide an answer to this objection, let us think about a case like the following:

S1. Elisa thinks that her friend Laura is much more morally admirable than she is. Elisa envies Laura and, at times, finds herself resenting her as well. At first, her negative feelings prevent her from asking Laura for advice, or even trying to emulate her; however, with time, Elisa realizes that she really cares about becoming as good as Laura.

In order to catch up, she begins to do the same things Laura does, with the unfortunate result of feeling frustrated, diminished or disempowered in her moral autonomy. However, if she is motivated enough, the persistent pain of witnessing Laura's moral superiority can eventually lead her to take a different route. She can start paying close attention to how Laura behaves, especially to how his moral reasoning works; she can look at how Laura always strives to do well, is open to criticism, is attentive to situations, and reflects on how to respond adequately. If Elisa succeeds in letting Laura inspire her, and so developing her own moral skills, envy can eventually make room for other emotions, since the gap which had triggered it has been filled.

What the vignette suggests is that emulation can be triggered by envy but need not remain anchored to it: when an inspired kind of emulation begins to take place, the envier enters a process of self-transformation. Inspiration, so to speak, despite being promoted by envy in the first place, acts as an intermediate step towards the overcoming of envy itself, which can make room to admiration or to other positive emotions. What was originally a painful feeling, becomes a valuable starting point for a virtuous developmental path.

4. Understanding exemplars

So far, we've claimed that different kinds of emulation lead to opposite moral consequences. Now that we tackled the issue from the envier's standpoint, it's time to have a look at the envied, to see whether a different choice – or a different construal – of exemplars can foster a tendency to develop one kind of emulation over the other.

To put it more bluntly: who is a genuine exemplar, worthy of being envied in a morally acceptable and constructive way?

Our thesis is that, in order to pick a good instance of exemplary behavior that can foster the transformative process seen above, two kinds of alleged exemplars should be avoided. On the one hand, we should avoid seeing as moral exemplars agents who excel in some traits but are severely defective in other moral domains; a substantial lack of integration in their character may show lack of a more general responsiveness to reasons. On the other hand, we do not

¹² This distinction is, admittedly, speculative and requires empirical validation. Nevertheless, it's well-supported by ancient and contemporary philosophical discussion and is a research hypothesis worth testing.

propose that a moral exemplar needs to be perfect or possess all the virtues to an exceptional degree at once, which is highly unlikely with real people. But does a third option even exist?

We believe it does, but identifying it implies, somehow, challenging the question itself: exemplarity, that is, is not at all a matter of possessing one or more traits, but a whole different moral skill, as the centrality of phronesis in Aristotelian exemplarity suggests.

An exemplar genuinely worthy of being envied or admired, in our account, is someone who displays phronesis, conceived as overall ethical expertise, which manifests in several domains and reveals high responsiveness to moral reasons. This doesn't exclude that an exemplar have flaws; rather, due to her ethical expertise she acknowledges her shortcomings and strives toward progress. What makes one morally exemplary is *striving to respond to reasons*, rather than the possession of one, more, or even all moral traits. What triggers imitative, rather than inspiring, emulation is, in part, the tendency to focus on a trait or set of traits, instead of striving to be reason-responsive.

Such striving and expertise manifest themselves via virtuous actions; and yet, we should refrain from attributing to exemplars some static, automatic and easily replicable moral trait. Our claim, in short, is that genuine exemplarity is rooted in practical wisdom, of which specific virtues are manifestations in each different moral field.¹³ And practical wisdom, in turn, can be better understood as overall ethical expertise, i.e., as a unified skill, which, although being general in scope, improves gradually. In other words, we can deem as wise not only the agents who display an utterly virtuous character, but also those who (i) are affectively and cognitively oriented to an overall good life and *fare well* in at least some moral domains, but also (ii) acknowledge their shortcomings in other domains and try to improve there (De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli 2018).

To sum up, two opposite views of the proper object of moral emulation are at play here: on the one hand, the object of emulation is supposed to be a well-definable set of moral characteristics; on the other hand, the object of emulation is conceived as an open-ended, dynamic, and not entirely or directly replicable moral strive and orientation. And the moral status of the envy that is triggered depends as much on picking the suitable object of emulation as it does on working directly on transforming emulation.

However, "picking the wrong object" can obtain in two ways: first, it's the result of a *poor choice*, that is, the envier envies an unworthy target; second, it depends on a *poor construal* of an actually worthy target. Either way, an improper or improperly understood moral exemplar is more likely to let the wrong kind of envious emulation thrive, as we'll show in a moment.

As an example of the first way in which the envier picks the wrong object, think about a case where an envied exemplar behaves insensitively or arrogantly towards the envier without expressing a sincere will to improve her non-exemplary traits:

S2. Stefano thinks that his friend Marco is much more morally admirable than he is. Stefano envies Marco and, at times, finds himself resenting him as well. Marco makes no effort to alleviate Stefano's sense of frustration: either he simply fails to realize it, for he lacks humility and generosity, or he fosters Stefano's frustration by patronizing him and indicating him what to do to follow in his footsteps.

In this case, Stefano has reasons to divert his attention from Marco to more suitable exemplars as objects of envy.

¹³ We defend this non-standard interpretation of phronesis elsewhere (De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli, 2018; De Caro and Vaccarezza 2020).

Here, the envied lacks phronetic expertise and exhibits only isolated moral traits. His arrogance and lack of thoughtfulness are likely to elicit frustration or, in the best-case scenario, an attempt to literal imitation. An arrogant agent is likely, among other things, to enjoy being emulated literally, or to patronize their envier. It will hardly be the case that they realize the envier's pain with genuine empathetic concern and encourage autonomy in the envier. In this case, the envier should avoid focusing attention on such persons, and instead pick genuine exemplars. There's nothing to envy, so to speak, nor to emulate in any ways.¹⁴

As an example of the second way in which the envier picks the wrong object, think about a case where the envier lacks relevant moral education or maturity, and isn't yet capable of responding appropriately to the exemplar. In this case, the envier may bear responsibility in nurturing inspiring envy rather than rival forms:

S3. Filippo thinks that his friend Roberta is much more morally admirable than he is. Filippo envies Roberta and, at times, finds himself resenting her as well. However, Roberta is sufficiently ethically competent to be attentive, humble, and generous, so she perceptively realizes Filippo's envy and makes every effort to alleviate her sense of frustration. In particular, she always encourages Filippo to find his unique way of being virtuous and supports his attempts to do well.

Despite Roberta's supportive and attentive attitude, Filippo still fails to construe Roberta properly. He can keep feeling bad about her accomplishments; he either spoils her qualities by gossiping behind her back or tries to imitate her literally to catch up with her. In this latter case, Filippo can try to imitate something Roberta does or one or more traits she displays. Such an attempt implies that Filippo misrepresents Roberta's role and nature as a moral exemplar by conceiving her as the possessor of some static, perfectly identifiable, and distinct trait that he could possess in the same way as Roberta does. This, besides implying a lack of autonomy, also fails to hit the target: what the envier would gain from such literal imitation of a trait or behavior is different from what makes the exemplar morally superior. If this is the case, it's time for Filippo to change his attitude. Roberta is an ideal model for whom Filippo can try to foster and nurture a different emulation.

To summarize, even if the envious person experiences a benign form of envy, there remains ample scope for becoming entangled in a type of emulation that is sterile and harmful. On the other hand, under certain conditions, emulative envy is an excellent opportunity to trigger a process of (self-)education and moral progress.

Conclusion: moral progress and educational implications

We conclude with some brief remarks on real-life interactions with exemplars. It appears that the different kinds of emulation, both in the case of admiration and envy, are sometimes ways in which the very same exemplary individuals may be admired/envied and emulated, rather than categories under which be subsumed. This means that it's perfectly possible that an exemplar is imitated by someone and is a source of inspiration for another, or that the same person learns through time how to develop a more mature form of emulation out of an initial attempt to imitate the exemplar literally. In the specific case of envy, a genuinely exemplary person can be the object of both destructive envy and emulative envy, and the latter can obtain in either an imitative or an inspired form.

¹⁴ The scenario discussed here would be categorized as one of social dominance by Jens Lange and Jan Crusius; see their discussion in their contribution to this volume, "How Envy and Being Envied Shape Social Hierarchies".

What conclusion can we draw concerning exemplarist character education? From an educational perspective, the possibility of a transition from imitation to inspiration appears necessary to avoid frustration and a diminished sense of the self in those who are particularly fragile in this respect, namely the young. Also, particularly in the case of the young, we should refrain from letting education via role models become disrespectful of their autonomy.

We have already claimed that inspiration can promote moral progress and a transition away from envy. In these concluding remarks, we want to highlight that, in educational settings, this should not be conceived of as an abrupt change. Rather, the transition from a form of literal emulative envy to an inspiring one is to be seen as a slow educational path that moves from imitation to inspiration (see also Vaccarezza 2020)¹⁵.

This intuition is tentative and would require empirical evidence to be supported; this is why we don't even attempt to make more specific recommendations concerning different ages and developmental stages. All we do here is to propose a developmental trajectory for envy to become a morally fruitful starting point, and suggest that such trajectory, if empirically confirmed, should become the backbone of an exemplary character educational program with respect to envy. In conclusion, exemplarist character education should be *pluralistic* and *developmental*: it should accommodate and organize within an organic and feasible educational path different positive and negative emotions, exploit their potentialities and the diverse kinds of imitation they inspire, and foster the transformation of morally questionable forms into morally commendable ones.

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¹⁵ On a similar note, Archer and Matheson (2020) provide a diachronic account of admiration.

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