

MORAL EXEMPLARS AND EXEMPLARISM

GUEST EDITORS' PREFACE

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This special issue aims at offering an overview of the extremely rich discussion which Linda T. Zagzebski's work on exemplarism (2006; 2010; 2015)—and conclusively formulated in her 2017 volume “Exemplarist Moral Theory”—has generated within virtue ethics. Zagzebski's theory is a neo-Aristotelian and virtue-ethical approach which—unlike what is the case with all other foundational theories—finds its non-conceptual foundation in the direct reference to morally exemplary individuals identified through the emotion of admiration. It is such exemplary figures, Zagzebski claims, who fix the meaning of all fundamental moral terms, such as virtue, good life, good end, right action, duty, etc. Her theory explicitly harks back to Hilary Putnam's and Saul Kripke's theory of direct reference, according to which natural kind terms such as “water” or “gold” are identified indexically, without the need to know their deep features. Ordinary competent users of English language pick out instances of gold by referring to something *like that*, with such and such superficial features: according to Zagzebski, the same can be said of good persons, whom we can identify by referring to persons *like that*—that is, moral exemplars we recognize because they are supremely admirable—even without possessing moral concepts.

On the exemplarist view, identifying and revising the exemplars that provide the ground on which a community builds its moral concepts is not a business for single individuals; rather, it is the community itself, through its linguistic network, its inner division of moral linguistic labor, and its narratives, that determines and verifies the ordinary meaning of moral terms. Clearly, moral experts have some sort of a privileged function, in that they are in charge of monitoring the development of the meaning of moral exemplarity based on their knowledge of its deep features.

Grounding the theory on the encounter with real, morally exemplary, human beings presents several advantages. One is that it allows to shed light on the priority of moral practices over moral theory as well as on an ordinary yet generally underestimated moral phenomenon such as the importance of following role-models that can shape one's hierarchy of values and the structure of one's moral character. Another is that, given the central role admiration plays within the theory, Zagzebski can provide an elegant account of moral motivation by situating the motivating element at the roots of the theory itself, as its own foundation. This feature constitutes the main ground of a renewed interest within the philosophy of education in the educational role of moral models, which was central in the ancient and medieval ages, yet the modernity set aside to avoid heteronomous and paternalistic drifts.¹

However, in addition to its evident merits, exemplarism raises several theoretical worries. One is that the central role of admiration commits the theory to account for the reliability of such an emotion, which does not seem immune from error. To justify admiration, the exemplarist needs to come up with a compelling theory of emotions and of their epistemic valence, which amounts to a hard task within a highly controversial domain. As an example, recall the ongoing dispute among perceptual theories (e.g. de Sousa 1987; Goldie 2000; Zagzebski 2003; Tappolet 2016), cognitivist theories (e.g. Nussbaum 2001; Roberts 2003), and attitudinal ones (Deonna -Teroni 2012; 2015).

Another worry concerns the “agent-based” spirit of exemplarism as a virtue theory, as it opens the doors to the common objections faced by such theories—most of all, to the charge of circularity. As a matter of fact, if the theory lacks a conceptual foundation that precedes direct reference to moral exemplars, it is far from clear how one can reflect on the exemplars and their exceptionality without incurring the problems with admiration. Zagzebski addresses this issue by appealing to the notion of conscientious self-reflection

¹ Detailed considerations on exemplarist approaches in the philosophy of education are included in Kristjánsson 2006; Sanderse 2013; Sundari 2015; Croce - Vaccarezza 2017.

that she has originally proposed in her volume *Epistemic Authority* (2012). Now, she refers to this rational attitude as a theoretical tool to assess whether the admiration for an exemplar is consistent with other emotional and cognitive states an agent entertains. However, on closer inspection this move is highly problematic, in that it is not clear how one can evaluate the appropriateness of one's own admiration based on its coherence with other emotions, when these emotions would need to undergo an analogous revision process to be considered reliable. The same worry arises if we need to evaluate admiration based on its coherence with moral beliefs, which should be grounded in the very same emotion. Finally, one might wonder how moral experts can know the deep features of exemplars so as to guide and revise the identification practices of a community or a linguistic network, if exemplars are both the only access key to moral concepts and the only way we have to fix the reference of such concepts.

These considerations should suffice to show that the exemplarist theory has given rise to a lively discussion, as it is witnessed by the increasing number of conferences and events entirely devoted to this topic². This special issue aims at offering an overview of this flourishing debate. The first four contributions of the issue introduce several historical views of exemplarity and its relevance for moral theory and practice, thereby exploring the deep roots of Zagzebski's reasoning as well as potentially alternative, i.e. non-Aristotelian, models. In *Virtù esemplari. L'etica tommasiana tra neoplatonismo e aristotelismo*, Maria Silvia Vaccarezza adopts a Neoplatonic-Christian reading of Aquinas' ethics to shed light on the common features as well as the differences between Aristotelian and Thomistic exemplarism³. Jeremy Hovda, in *The Role of Exemplars in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, criticizes the standard reading of Kant as a fierce enemy of the use of exemplars in ethics by showing that moral exemplars are important to comply with imperfect duties. In his *Nietzschean Exemplarism*, Mark Alfano analyses Nietzsche's work through digital humanities and highlights the most relevant traits of his peculiar, i.e. pluralistic, version of exemplarism. Finally, Bianca Bellini, in *The Overarching Sway of Exemplars over Self-Knowledge and Self-Shaping. Their Nature,*

² The first international conference entirely devoted to this topic, organized by Aretai – Center on Virtues—of which the two editors of this special issue are members—has been hosted at the University of Genoa on October 5-6, 2017, with the participation of Linda T. Zagzebski as keynote speaker. A full list of participants and the abstracts of their talks are available at: <https://exemplarsgenoa.weebly.com/>.

³ When we discuss exemplarism in the classical tradition, we refer to a broad reading of this notion to indicate specific ways in which they consider the role of exemplary figures, without demanding that they provided a theory as fine-grained as Zagzebski's.

Reach, Impact and Inherent Link with Phantasy, explores the role of exemplarity in self-knowledge and its destabilising impact according to Max Scheler's perspective.

The following three articles tackle Zagzebski's view and challenge its key features. In the first essay, *Following the Wrong Example: The Exclusiveness of Heroism and Sanctity*, Simone Grigoletto individuates three problems inherent to Zagzebski's account of emulation and puts forth an alternative formulation of exemplarism which makes no use of emulation, as well as a notion of supererogatory that is compatible with exemplarism and gives saints and heroes an authentic role of moral guides. Sarin Marchetti, in *Two Varieties of Exemplarism*, inquires into whether we could replace the classical reading of exemplarism as the thesis that the moral exemplars fix the reference of what is a virtue with a broad, i.e. anti-theoretical, thesis that an individual can radically change their lives insofar as they are personally involved with the exemplar's life. Finally, Ariele Niccoli, in *Un riesame della teoria esemplarista delle emozioni*, takes into consideration one of the most problematic aspects of exemplarism, namely the theory of emotion on which it is based, to evaluate whether such cornerstone can adequately sustain the whole exemplarist structure.

The three final contributions of the issue develop several exemplar-based paths in the philosophy of education, which certainly amounts to one of the most fruitful outputs of the exemplarist theory, as anticipated above. Michel Croce, in *Il potenziale educativo degli esemplari intellettuali*, analyses the educational implications of exemplarism to show that the theory can be used to educate the young to intellectual virtues, thereby calling attention to an underdeveloped topic arising out of Zagzebski's work. Stephen Ellenwood, in *Helping Students to Find and Frisk Good Exemplars*, individuates several concrete ways to implement an exemplar-based educational programme and sheds light on several risks and precautions which educators should be made aware of while building such an educational curriculum. Finally, in *Teaching as Invitation to Reasoning*, Luca Tuninetti argues for the crucial role a teacher's moral exemplarity plays in the transmission of knowledge via testimony, by distinguishing between mere transmission of testimonial knowledge and argumentation.

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