

The Dark Side of the Exceptional: On Moral Exemplars, Character Education, and Negative Emotions

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza & Ariele Niccoli

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Abstract

This paper focuses on negative exemplarity-related emotions (NEREs) and on their educational implications. In this paper, we will first argue for the nonexpendability of negative emotions broadly conceived (section 2) by defending their instrumental and intrinsic role in a good and flourishing life. In section 3, we will make the claim more specific by focusing on the narrower domain of NEREs and argue for their moral and educational significance by evaluating whether they fit the arguments provided in the previous section. In section 4, we will propose three educational strategies to foster NEREs' positive moral role. In conclusion, we will point out that an exemplarist approach to character education would greatly benefit from a more fine-grained account of the emotions involved in the educational process and from a broader perspective on which of these emotions should be taken as valuable for educational purposes.

Keywords: exemplarism; character education; negative emotions

Introduction

This paper focuses on negative exemplarity-related emotions (NEREs) and on their educational implications. If it is true that exemplars can inspire gratitude, moral awe, admiration, or elevation, it is undeniable that seeing one's moral exceptionality may in some cases elicit negative emotions, such as envy, guilt, and shame. How, then, should educators deal with these reactions? In this paper, we will first argue for the nonexpendability of negative emotions broadly conceived (section 2) by defending their instrumental and intrinsic role in a good and flourishing life. In section 3, we will make the claim more specific by focusing on the narrower domain of NEREs and argue for their moral and educational significance by evaluating whether they fit the arguments provided in the previous section. In section 4, we will propose three educational strategies to foster NEREs' positive moral role. In conclusion, we will point out that an exemplarist approach to character education would greatly benefit from a more fine-grained account of the emotions involved in the educational process and from a broader perspective on which of these emotions should be taken as valuable for educational purposes.

1. Exemplarist character education and the role of admiration

A major role in exemplarism (Zagzebski 2010, 2015, 2017) is played by the emotion of admiration, through which we are able to identify exemplars and which is defined as a pleasant other-praising emotion directed at moral excellence, with contempt as its contrary. Such emphasis on admiration for exemplars has boosted an already-flourishing research field within educational studies—namely, the field focusing on emulation of role models or moral exemplars. This line of investigation is increasingly gaining popularity, to the point that something like an exemplarist approach is arising among Aristotelian character-education scholars (Kristjánsson 2006; Sanderse 2013; Sundari 2015; Croce and

Vaccarezza 2017). Emulating role models or exemplars, it is now increasingly argued, proves an effective way to motivate the young and teach them virtuous behavior, and exemplar-related positive emotions such as admiration should be highly valued to foster virtue acquisition.

So far so good. However, one might wonder, at this point, which emotions besides admiration should be the object of teachers' and educators' attention in this process in order for role modeling to be successful and morally valuable? Of course, there are other positive exemplar-related emotions whose significance for educational purposes should be more adequately considered, 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). But what about the negative emotions that may arise when witnessing moral excellence? Think, for example, of the envy one might feel toward a moral hero, who fares so much better than oneself as far as moral deeds are concerned; or of the shame these deeds might elicit on some occasion, perhaps when a situation would require heroic behavior and spectacular actions from the agent, while she finds herself incapable of emulating a real or imagined hero and therefore feels she compares poorly with such an ideal model. How should we deal with such emotional responses, both when they arise in ourselves and when we see them in the young as educators?

Here is the point where we part ways with Zagzebski. Zagzebski (2017, 58–59) takes negative exemplarity-related emotions (NEREs) as mostly obstacles to one's moral growth, or "lines of deviation" (58), and therefore thinks educators should do their best to prevent them. This claim, as is plain, tells a story about how the so-called negative emotions targeting exemplarity, starting from a painful emotion, lead far from admiration and thus from the path toward moral goodness. In contrast, we claim NEREs are significant dimensions of one's moral growth and well-being, as well as viable paths to virtue acquisition that should be included in an educational process rather than eradicated.

2. The reappraisal of negative emotions

Before focusing on particular exemplarity-related negative emotions and proposing our take on their moral and educational role, we start with a preliminary defense of negative emotions broadly conceived. Many sound arguments have been proposed in the past few years to vindicate negative emotions' role in well-being and morality, both appealing to their instrumental value (i.e., their potentiality for serving as *means* to reach some [morally] desirable or good state of affairs) and to their intrinsic value (i.e., their being plausible and good *ends* of a flourishing life). As we will show, even if the moral significance of negative emotions can be partly rehabilitated by appealing to instrumental reason, at least some negative emotions have intrinsic value to our moral lives.

A first, common line of thought defends negative emotions' moral role in instrumental terms (see, e.g., Ben Ze'ev 2000, 261-62). In this picture, negative emotions are positively evaluated because, despite motives and intentions endorsed or acknowledged by the agent, they incidentally produce good states of affairs, such as a passionate, engaged relational life instead of a cool and calculating attitude toward others; they protect one's values and intimate sphere or foster a healthy competition. These kinds of instrumental reasons have the merit to question moralistic or stigmatizing attitudes toward (usually) negatively evaluated emotions, but they lead to the unconvincing conclusion that negative emotions must be put up with as a matter of fact, and the best we can do is to manage them and take advantage of some of their more or less unintended effects.

A particularly good instrumental argument against excluding negative emotions from a well-developed moral life comes from clinical studies investigating the link between emotion suppression and mental disorders. It is not only plain that successful and effective emotion regulation is essential to mental health and well-being, but also that emotion suppression along with unwillingness to experience negatively evaluated feelings can lead to increased levels of anxiety and to mood disorders. On the other hand, emotional acceptance and acceptance-oriented strategies and therapies have so far led to

significant results when used in treatments for anxiety and depression (see Campbell-Sills et al. 2006; Hayes et al. 1999, 2004).

However, not only does our ordinary emotional landscape de facto include negative emotions, but, we claim, it also *should* include their appropriate forms¹ in an ideally well-developed moral life, in that they play a major intrinsic role in our full-fledged moral development (i.e., the formation of a virtuous character). We will now offer two arguments to defend the intrinsic value of negative emotions broadly conceived: the *epistemic-access* argument and the *right-mean* argument. While the epistemic-access argument claims negative emotions have a privileged role in our knowledge of value, the right-mean argument discusses the conditions for their moral justifiability (cf. Kristjánsson 2018, 19).

In the following section, we will then use two paradigmatic NEREs as illustrations of our more general arguments so as to assess whether specific negative emotions can play the intrinsically positive moral role we attribute to them in the context of witnessing moral exemplarity.

(i) *Epistemic-access argument.* The first reason for defending the intrinsic value of negative emotions is an epistemic one. The so-called negative emotions and their positive counterparts can be considered privileged (if not nonexpendable) sources of evaluative knowledge. All emotions, independently of their valence, have a unique power to disclose evaluative properties that cannot be entirely replaced by cool, unemotional reflection. As neatly expressed, for instance, by De Sousa, “There is no independent access to the world revealed by emotion”—that is, the “*relatively objective* world of human value” (2001, 120). Along the same lines, Deonna and Teroni (2012) hold that all the (justified) emotions, including those ordinarily labeled as negative, provide a distinctive and privileged kind of understanding of evaluative properties, moral properties included. As a result of their attitudinal theory of emotions, according to which emotions are evaluative attitudes epistemologically dependent on their cognitive bases, they admit that our evaluative knowledge is, in principle, inferable independently of any emotions (2012, 122). This does not imply that emotions are epistemologically superfluous. On the contrary, if compared with evaluative judgments reached through cool reflection, emotions constitute a privileged route, insofar as they provide a fine-grained understanding that integrates cognition, reasons to act, and distinctive patterns of actions in the face of evaluative properties (2012, 123).

How does all this apply to the so-called negative emotions? The label “negative emotion” can be misleading. Here we take negative emotions as emotions that present us with some relevant negative evaluative property of the world, though they are not necessarily painful experiences² and, even less, not to be negatively evaluated from a moral point of view. Anger, for instance, includes a negative evaluation of an action or a situation and reveals its offensiveness, without necessarily being painful to feel or express and without being in principle morally blameworthy. Compassion typically includes a negative evaluation of someone else’s suffering but is usually positively evaluated as a moral emotion, although it does not imply positive feelings. In both of these cases, it can be easily seen that knowing, selecting, and being aware of a given negative evaluative property of the environment or of ourselves can hardly be dismissed as itself negative. Once we disentangle the different meanings of the “negativity” of emotions, their epistemic role in disclosing (dis)values appears as a valuable one.

The “negativity” of the emotions, in light of their fundamental epistemic role, simply reflects the fact that the field of (dis)values includes polarities, hierarchies, comparisons, and conflicts. Negative evaluating emotions hence afford intrinsic (though obviously fallible) epistemic access to a set of evaluative (negative) properties as well as providing patterns of reaction and readiness to act on them. This, one might respond, is quite plain in the case of widely rehabilitated negative emotions such as anger. However, we believe the case of other negative emotions, such as shame and envy, is far more controversial, and their epistemic role much more disputed. This is why, in section 3, we provide a defense of these two exemplarity-related emotions.

¹ By “appropriate,” we mean emotions that happen to be both fitting (i.e., they attach to their proper intentional object) and justified (i.e., the agent has good reasons for experiencing them) (see Deonna and Teroni 2012, 6).

² See, e.g., Kristjánsson (2003, 355–56).

(ii) *Right-mean argument.*³ The second argument we propose to re-evaluate concerning the intrinsic value of negative emotions is an openly Aristotelian one. Against general pictures that suggest or even allow a neat separation between positive and negative emotions, or that inappropriately conflate the valence and moral value of each set, a good theoretical tool is still represented by the Aristotelian theory of the right (or golden) mean, which applies “no less to negatively evaluating and painful emotions than to positively evaluating and pleasant ones” (Kristjánsson 2006, 48). The Aristotelian virtues, as is well known, are mostly a matter of experiencing emotions in the right way, where “right” is said to consist in an intermediate between excess and defect; this invitation to “intermediacy,” however, should not be taken as a praise of mediocrity or a flattened emotional life. Rather, the intermediate form of an emotional trait consists in being “affected when one should, at the things one should, in relation to the people one should, for the reasons one should, and in the way one should” (NE II.6, 1106 b21–23; passage quoted in Rowe’s 2002 translation). Intermediate emotions, that is to say, are justified, rather than simply moderate, emotional experiences. Also, intermediacy is fundamentally agent related. This means it cannot be fully established in advance, independently of any consideration of the agent’s own situation and condition.⁴

Thus, as Urmson points out (1980, 166), Aristotle seems to hold the view that every emotional trait can be legitimate and should be experienced by everyone, insofar as they all admit of a virtuous right mean between excess and defect. The classic example in this argument is anger. Experiencing an excess of anger (the vice of irascibility) does not simply mean feeling “too much” anger, but rather feeling it in an unjustified way. This might mean being angry at the wrong person (e.g., someone who has not really insulted or offended someone else), or in the wrong moment (e.g., during a funeral), or at the wrong thing (e.g., at a colleague’s legitimate criticism of one’s work), and so on. The same obviously holds for the defect: if one did not get angry at, say, their spouse’s offender, this would be a sign of a viciously detached character and of an equally vicious lack of commitment to one’s values. There is nothing wrong, that is to say, with anger in itself, which is a necessary emotional trait allowing its bearer to actively defend, and be affectively engaged with, her values and principles. A lack of such engagement, we claim, would mean a less-than-fully virtuous character, irrespectively of the acts effectively accomplished. Therefore, although excess and defect of each emotional trait should be ruled out by means of education and habituation, there is no emotional trait that, in itself, we should get rid of and that cannot be displayed in its virtuous (justified, intermediate) form.

3. Rehabilitating NEREs: a twofold exemplification

In this section, we turn to exemplarity-related emotions to show how they fit the two arguments in defense of negative emotions outlined so far at a paradigmatic level. As a prelude to our following discussion, we want to maintain that experiencing an emotion, and especially a moral one, besides revealing and disclosing values, is an intrinsically moral experience. Reacting emotionally to the presence of the value is an intrinsic manifestation of being morally good. If one remained unmoved when experiencing a value-laden situation, that would speak to their insensitivity to values rather than showing the morality of their character. Thus, negative emotions (not unlike the positive ones) warrant an engaged relation to the world and prevent indifferent attitudes.

In what follows, we use the case of shame in the face of exemplars to defend our epistemic-access argument, and that of envy of exemplars as a paradigmatic case of a right-mean emotional trait.⁵

Envy

³ Analogous arguments can be found in Kristjánsson (2008).

⁴ Cf. NE II.6, 1106 a30–33.

⁵ It is important to stress that we believe both emotions fit both arguments; it is only the lack of space that prevents us from defending this stronger claim.

Envy has long enjoyed a pretty bad reputation among philosophers. Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard are only a few of the many voices that have been raised against envy through the centuries, taking it to be, alternatively, a kind of sadness, a form of hatred, and a deadly vice. Outside philosophy, just to mention one case, Dante portrays the envious, in Purgatory, as living in a colorless world, punished with blindness for their incapacity to look at others without malevolent eyes during their earthly lives. These days, the condemnation of envy doesn't seem to have ceased, and advocates of the defensibility of envy, both among philosophers and psychologists, although increasing in number and authority, are still a minority group.⁶

What we argue in this section is that such a negative consideration of envy has been pretty unfair, especially when considering envy of exemplars. To rehabilitate its reputation, we will appeal both to Aristotle's account of emulation in *Rhetoric* and to more recent literature on the kinds of envy as an emotion, in order to show how, as a general emotion, it can play a relevant moral role, and, more specifically, when elicited by moral exemplars, it can prove a valuable moral and educational resource. This, we will claim, nicely illustrates our right-mean intrinsic argument.

Envy is generally understood as a painful (i.e., negative) emotion elicited by the perception of someone else's superiority or better position (see Taylor 1988; Protasi 2016). I cannot envy you, that is to say, unless there is something valuable you get and I don't, or you have and I lack, be it a working position we both want, a social or economic advantage, another kind of material good, or even—what we are concerned with in this paper—some kind of moral superiority. In short, envy arises from the unpleasant realization that you outperform me in some respect.⁷

From here onward, however, the different kinds of envy part ways, as the painful recognition of another's advantageous position may lead to different emotional responses and behavioral tendencies. We will focus here particularly on the distinction between state-envy and object-envy.⁸ State-envy is displayed in cases in which one is not envious of the good the other has, but “of the other's having that good” (Taylor 1988, 234). One's aim, in this case, is that of removing the disadvantage that causes one's comparatively worse position, so as to re-establish equality. To do so, two main alternatives are available to the subject experiencing state-envy: either she strives for improving her own position, or she wishes and tries to deprive the other of his advantage. The first case is commonly labeled “emulative” envy, the second “destructive” or “malicious” envy (cf. Taylor 1988, 235).

When, on the other hand, the main focus of the emotion is the good one lacks and one's shortcomings that prevent her from having it, the emotion goes under the name of object-envy. The envied has here only the role of showing a good that deserves to be wished for, or, in case a moral good is at stake, of presenting the envious with an admirable ideal that should be reached. That is why object-envy can also be called ideal or admiring envy.⁹

Such distinctions resemble very closely Aristotle's discussion of envy and emulation in *Rhetoric* (Aristotle 2007, 146, 1388a29–38). There, although he seems to conflate emulative and admiring envy, he nonetheless agrees with Taylor on the idea that emotions elicited by the perception of one's inferiority to another admit of different degrees of appropriateness and moral value. It is perfectly visible here how envy fits the right-mean argument outlined above. The argument had it that, for every given emotional state and trait, there is a legitimate form that consists in a virtuous right mean. Such a mean form, in turn, was intended not simply, in quantitative terms, as consisting in experiencing a proper intensity of that emotion, but rather in experiencing it in an appropriate,

⁶ 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.

⁷ A slightly different definition of envy, as a “feeling of undeserved inferiority,” can be found in Ben-Ze'ev (2016).

⁸ This is not to deny the importance of other distinctions and subdistinctions, such as primitive vs. sophisticated, and general vs. particular. Among other taxonomies, the most common distinguishes two main forms of envy: the malign and benign. Protasi (2016) distinguishes between emulative, inert, aggressive, and spiteful envy. Ben-Ze'ev (2016), on the other hand, only distinguishes between benign and malicious envy.

⁹ In our perspective, both admiration and admiring envy are globalist attitudes. This, we claim, is compatible with taking both as directed to the moral good the agent displays rather than to the agent herself. Cf. De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli (2018).

justified way; this means, mainly, to experience it toward an appropriate object and to act upon it in appropriate ways.¹⁰

Admiring object-envy, as opposed to both emulative and destructive state-envy, fits the right-mean requirements quite well. It is elicited by an appropriate object—that is, a truly desirable good another possesses, which is desired for its own sake rather than for the competition with another. The consequent action tendency, therefore, is likely to be an attempt to improve oneself and to attain the desired good. Emulative and destructive state-envy, on the other hand, are elicited by the wrong object—that is, the person enjoying a good, rather than the good itself. This is why they tend to be associated with, or easily transform into, jealousy, whose moral value is very questionable.¹¹ Also, they tend to cause a variety of immoral behaviors, all aimed at despoiling from the envied the moral good he enjoys. Finally, they seem to be “self-protective, and so self-deceptive and self-defeating” (Taylor 1988, 248) since they prevent the subject experiencing them from acknowledging her own shortcomings. So it seems that, even in the case of envy, there is at least one form whose moral value is unquestionable, since, despite being painful—or even because of its being painful—it affords invaluable self-knowledge and pushes the subject to realize her status and to improve it accordingly.

How about the specific case of envying moral exemplars? Which kind of envy are they more likely to elicit? Our claim is that, by definition, one’s construing another as a moral exemplar decreases the chances she will experience destructive envy, since she needs to construe her envy’s object (i.e., the person enjoying the good she lacks) as unworthy and undeserving. But if one construes another as an exemplar, this means she already values him as someone displaying some moral quality one values. One’s focus is on the moral good, which is the reason why envy arises in the first place. Thus, we claim, unless one is deceiving oneself by misconstruing the object, admiring envy is the most likely emotional response to moral exemplarity. The respective action tendency, in turn, is likely to be a commitment to the values another incarnates and lives by as well as an attempt to improve oneself morally.

Therefore envy of exemplars should not only not be eradicated in educational contexts, but guided toward its appropriate, right-mean form; more deeply, it is the very phenomenology of encountering an exemplar, in person or through narratives, that tends to elicit right-mean admiring envy by itself.

Shame

Shame is broadly understood, both in philosophy and psychology, as a negative emotion of self-assessment, focusing on some aspect of ourselves that falls short of a certain standard (e.g., Taylor 1985; Haidt 2003). Feeling ashamed may involve a feeling of inferiority, social rejection, degradation, and even humiliation, and may direct our attention to some appearance, action, or internal state that represents an important failure.

Confronting an outstanding moral exemplar who clearly exceeds our moral value, therefore, may elicit shame because both our reputation and our self-assessment could come under scrutiny. Our claim is that shame related to moral exemplars is a paradigmatic case in which the positive sides of this negative emotion are illuminated and are likely to be elicited. More specifically, we argue that the novice-exemplar educational relation is conceptually tied with a form of shame that instantiates the epistemic-access argument about negative emotions (section 2).

Two major divides can be found among contemporary philosophers, leading to different and contrasting views on shame. First, on the one hand, many theorists endorse a social view of shame,

¹⁰ This, it might appear, conflates the epistemic-access argument and the right-mean one. Although we are comfortable with admitting that the two arguments partly overlap, or, rather, they are interconnected and support each other, we also claim that they are clearly distinguishable, in that the former has to do with reliably accessing the relevant evaluative and moral properties, and the latter with feeling the way a virtuous agent would.

¹¹ On the differences between envy and jealousy, see, among others, Taylor (1988); Ben-Ze’ev (1990); Protasi (2017).

according to which the emotion of shame sanctions what is negatively evaluated by others.¹² On the other hand, a few theorists have recently argued that the presence of a public is not essential (neither as a concrete cause nor as a conceptual implication) and thus that shame represents a personal and potentially autonomous self-evaluation (e.g., Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2015).¹³ The second main divide concerns the pervasiveness of shame: A well-established strand holds that shame involves a global, hardly alterable negative evaluation of the whole self, and thus leads to avoidance and defensive reactions. By contrast, some scholars point out that shame focuses on some specific, negatively evaluated features of the self and that for this reason it can play a motivating role for personal improvement.¹⁴ These two divides and their implications influence the discussion on the moral role of shame and its educational value. A “mainstream interpretation” highlights the moral ugliness of shame, as a painful, debilitating, and ultimately harmful emotion. A more “heterodox interpretation” aims to rehabilitate the importance of shame as a relevant emotional resource for moral improvement and education (Kristjánsson 2014).

A nice way to relate a critical perspective and a sympathetic one is to think that different forms of shame occur at different stages of moral progress. Kekes distinguishes among three distinct forms of shame, showing a progressive deepness of moral concern: (i) propriety-shame, (ii) honor-shame, and (iii) worth-shame (1988).

Propriety-shame focuses on social standards of decency and good manners. This kind of shame occurs when something that ought to remain hidden is seen by people external to one’s intimate and private sphere, at which point one recognizes that their reputation is threatened. Thus, this form of shame mainly involves appearance, public-image management, and privacy, rather than deep moral features of the self.¹⁵ However, the social dimension of shame doesn’t condemn it as always a superficial emotion. Among public standards, there are some norms clearly tied to honor, integrity, and status, and thus to morality: beyond mere appearance, *honor-shame* focuses on public standards that include significant moral concerns. Although honor-shame targets situations that carry a greater moral weight, this form of shame faces the charge of heteronomy. If shame has to do, above all, with honor and reputation, such emotion imposes on the subject the social point of view, or at least the evaluative perspective of another. Shame would be relative to heteronomous evaluative standards; thus it would be an obstacle to responsible moral agency.

A last form of shame, which Kekes labels *worth-shame*, focuses on personal commitment to highly regarded values, and is deeply related to our moral awareness. This sort of shame essentially involves an *intrapersonal* evaluation, whereby people get epistemic access to some relevant evaluative aspect of themselves. Character traits, thoughts, actions, or situations we are ashamed of are apprehended as cues of our severe difficulties with respect to the demands of a particular value (Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2012; Fussi 2018).¹⁶ Therefore, worth-shame shows how a so-called negative emotion can provide precious epistemic access to value. This sort of shame, in particular, implies the epistemic ability to compare the present moral self—its emotions and behavior—with a better moral setting as regards the demands imposed by some value one is committed to.

When shame occurs within an exemplar-novice relation, we claim, despite its painful feeling and the negative evaluation of some features of the self, worth-shame is the most plausible form of shame

¹² Classical philosophical accounts of shame by Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, and Sartre share this claim. More recently, the social view on shame has been put forward, among others, by Calhoun (2004), Williams (1993), and Wolheim (1999).

¹³ Fussi (2018) represents a good balance, explaining how in the emotion of shame a social evaluation concerning visibility and reputation and a deeply personal self-evaluation about our own identity and values intertwine.

¹⁴ Influential works that take shame as a global evaluation are Taylor (1985) in philosophy and Lewis (1971) in psychology. Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni (2012, 85, 102–5) provide substantial philosophical arguments against this position. For a defense of shame as a local evaluation in empirical psychology, see Gausel and Leach (2011).

¹⁵ Propriety-shame and embarrassment partially overlap, insofar as both address social norms such as good manners and etiquette. Anyway, shame is usually much more severe than embarrassment. For a specific analysis of embarrassment, see Purshouse (2001).

¹⁶ Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni (2012) have it that in shame we discover ourselves as exemplifying the polar opposite of this self-relevant value. According to Fussi (2018), in shame we perceive ourselves as exemplifying that value below a critical threshold.

involved, and is likely to initiate the moral learner's effort at making moral progress. Within the exemplar-novice relation, the apprehension of some shortcoming of ours is elicited, by definition, by an instantiation of what we take to be a valuable life. Thus, our moral failure will hardly be perceived as assessed heteronomously or as humiliating. If an exemplar is held to be someone capable of living by a deep personal commitment to some values, confronting oneself with her implies both engaging in a significant relationship and undergoing an intrapersonal evaluation. Thus, we claim, relations with moral exemplars provide an ideal context in which to criticize and re-examine propriety-shame and honor-shame.

Exemplarist character education, thus, should be aware of the negative side of shame, but at the same time take advantage of the emotion as a nonexpendable source of moral self-knowledge oriented toward moral improvement.

4. Strategies for improving an exemplar-based educational setting

Granted that being within an exemplar-novice relation represents, as we have shown, a privileged situation in which intrinsically valuable forms of negative emotions can be elicited, we want to take a step further and ask: Which kinds of educational setting best promote the activation of appropriate forms of negative emotions? To which kinds of exemplars should the educators point their students' attention for an effective character-educational process to be activated? What makes the task a tough one, we claim, is the risk of falling into two opposite kinds of problems. First, and on the one hand, there is a risk associated with presenting exemplars whose exceptionality makes them so superior to the novice as to rule out the possibility for any emotions, and not only the negative ones, to be elicited—that is, the “lack-of-motivation problem.”¹⁷ On the other hand, since Aristotle, philosophers have noticed how a high degree of virtuousness prevents degenerate forms of negative emotions from arising.¹⁸ This leads to the second problem, whose avoidance might appear at odds with the need for facing the lack-of-motivation problem. We may call it the peer-rivalry problem, in that relations with peers, whose achievements are perceived as attainable and imitable besides being more likely to foster admiration and a healthy competition, can also easily degenerate into spiteful and destructive forms of rivalry.

In what follows, we propose three strategies we believe can be useful educational tools in an educational environment in which moral exemplars are at play, in that they aim at finding solutions to both of the problems outlined above by integrating them into a cohesive educational path.

Come close, but slowly. The first proposal is to begin with distant exemplars. As mentioned, distance—in terms both of degree of virtuousness and of personal history, status, age, and the like—between exemplar and novice, despite potentially decreasing the will to emulate, significantly prevents the risk of frustration (in relation to envy) and humiliation (in relation to shame). This, for example, means beginning an exemplar-based educational path with narratives focused on distant moral saints and heroes,¹⁹ who are too far from the novice's experience to elicit in them defective forms of negative emotions. With time, however, educators should propose stories of closer exemplars so as to end up educating, not instilling destructive envy or shame in relation to peers, who are the most likely targets and causes of one's negative emotions.

Focus on the path. When moving to close exemplars, who are potentially more likely than distant ones to elicit degraded forms of negative emotions, educators should do their best to show that exemplary

¹⁷ In relation to admiration, it has been referred to as the “non-motivational admiration problem.” See Grigoletto (2018).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Rhetoric* II.10; *Summa Theologiae* IIae q. 36 a. 1 ad 2.

¹⁹ By saints we mean exemplars who appear to be morally perfect in all respects, and to possess all the main virtues; by heroes, we mean “imperfect” moral exemplars, who despite being exemplary in some respect lack virtue in other domains (see Wolf 1982; Blum 1988; Croce and Vaccarezza 2017).

people have become what they are by walking a long and often tormented path, and their moral qualities are far from inborn. This, we claim, should help the novice get closer to the exemplars without perceiving the latter's superiority as unachievable and inimitable (thus avoiding the lack-of-motivation problem), and should help the novice to empathize with the exemplars, thus counterbalancing the risks implied by closeness. Within an empathetic relation, envy and shame are more likely to be directed at the values embodied by the exemplars, rather than deviating into hostile, person-targeting, and superficial forms.

Exemplars of what? Our final strategy suggests preferring, at least at the beginning of an educational path, exemplars displaying some kinds of virtues over others. We maintain that some virtues or groups of virtues are more suitable to elicit appropriate forms of exemplarity-related negative emotions and should therefore be preferred or at least integrated within an exemplar-based educational program.

- (i) **Other-regarding virtues.** Focusing on exemplars of compassion, concern, kindness, and generosity means presenting the novice with caring, selfless role models, who are more likely to be construed as unwilling to shame them or to humiliate them. This, as we have argued in section 3, appears to be significantly related to the arousal of appropriate forms of negative emotions over their distorted counterparts. Also, destructively envying other-regarding virtues would be a self-defeating emotion, in that it would mean ipso facto missing any chance to equal the envied in relation to the envied trait.
- (ii) **Humility.** There are a few advantages to focusing on exemplars of humility. First, being wrongly ashamed in the face of humble people is much more unlikely than having the same response in the face of, for example, extremely courageous heroes. The exemplars' humility can hardly be seen as having to do with appearances or reputation; insofar as it is acknowledged as a valuable and desirable trait at all, it must activate a comparison between the present moral self and the moral demands of a better one. Also, when one acknowledges oneself to not be as humble as an admired exemplar, it is precisely the exemplar's humility that makes unlikely the possibility of being ashamed or humiliated.
As for envy, destructively envying humility proves to be a self-defeating emotion. When one is humble, they would hardly be proud of their achievements, and would rather minimize than parade them; this, in turn, decreases the chances for them to elicit state-envy.
- (iii) **Self-love and self-assessment.** Finally, presenting individuals capable of self-love and self-assessment makes possible focusing on personal improvement and flourishing, rather than on preventing unbalance, and developing a healthy image of oneself; at the same time, it inspires self-esteem, which is a key antidote to degraded forms of envy and shame.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have claimed that negative emotions can be considered as valuable paths to moral progress, and that the exemplar-novice relationship is a privileged way for intrinsically valuable forms of negative emotions to be elicited. Therefore, in conclusion, we suggest that an exemplarist approach to character education would greatly benefit from a more fine-grained account of the emotions involved in the educational process, and from a broader perspective on which of these emotions should be taken as valuable for educational purposes.

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