The exemplary and the right.
Contemporary virtue ethics, action guidance, and action assessment

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza

[PENULTIMATE DRAFT – PLEASE CITE PUBLISHED VERSION]

Exemplarity has been relatively neglected for long in moral theory and for several reasons. Suffice it to remind readers of the infamous Kantian suspicion of exemplarity conceived as foundational – rather than merely explicative – of a moral theory[1]. Most moralists after Kant seem to have taken his diffidence quite seriously, with the notable exceptions, in the 20th century, of phenomenologists like Max Scheler and the existentialist philosopher-psychiatrist Karl Jaspers[2]. In recent decades, however, due to the resurgence of the Aristotelian virtue-ethical tradition, this critical notion has been highly revived within the Anglo-American ethical debate. It is this discussion that I will focus my analysis on.

To some extent, every kind of virtue ethics is exemplarist in nature, as it makes the action of a virtuous or wise agent its primary notion and focus. However, in the last twenty years, an increasing number of qualified-agent virtue-ethical theories have tried, more specifically, to derive from descriptions of a virtuous or exemplary agent the characterization of other fundamental moral concepts, such as those of right action and duty. This tendency, to some extent, contradicts the spirit of the revival of virtue ethics in its original formulation[3], and its reason is to be found in an attempt to respond to objections about the inability of virtue-based theories to offer standards of action guidance and action assessment. According to a first objection (Louden 1984; Williams 1985; Schneewind 1997), approaches based on virtues, both ancient and contemporary, would not provide specific criteria for evaluating action, focused as they are on the formation and evaluation of the

[1] For an overview of Kantian skepticism of exemplars, see e.g., Louden 1992; 2009. For a rival interpretation, see Hovda 2018.

[2] In particular, Scheler's material ethics of value finds its full and complete framing only if illuminated by the notion of exemplarity, developed in the last part of his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* and central to the *Vorbilder und Fürer* collection. In both works, ethics is presented not as the search for a universal norm, but rather as focused on exemplarity, a force that does not proceed by replicating a pre-established model, but by transforming the subject. Rather than standardizing, exemplarity transforms the *ordo amoris* of those with whom it comes into contact. As Cusinato rightly observes (2011: 10-16; see also 2014), exemplarity shapes the *ordo amoris* and thus "functionalizes" each subsequent experience of the individual, determining the contours of possible experience and functionalizing its content in a psychological a priori. In a previous work (Vaccarezza 2020), I had mistakenly attributed this interpretation to Emanuele Caminada, editor of the Italian edition of *Vorbilder und Fürer*. I apologize with both him and Guido Cusinato, whom I owe this interpretation, for this.

[3] Hacker-Wright (2010: 209-210) appropriately notes that Anscombe's initial proposal aimed precisely at refuting the need for a criterion of moral rightness, as well as the priority of act-evaluation over agent-evaluation.

agent's character. If a right action flows from a virtuous character, how can one account for the right actions performed by the non-virtuous? Secondly, virtue-ethical theories would be inferior to utilitarian and deontological theories also from the point of view of action guidance, since they would not be able to indicate to a non-virtuous agent the action to be taken, for the very fact that the action to be performed is, by definition, the virtuous one, but the virtuous action is precisely that which is unavailable to the non-virtuous[4]. In other words, provided one is not (fully) virtuous, how is one to fathom what a hypothetical moral exemplar would do in their shoes in a given situation (Louden 1984: 229)? For some time now, virtue-ethicists have developed lines of response to these allegedly fatal objections, and they have done so, typically, by deriving the concepts they seemed to lack precisely from reference to exemplary figures, variously understood.

This paper will account for the importance of exemplarity within the contemporary virtue-ethical debate, both in its classic formulation and in the recent Exemplarist moral theory advanced by Linda T. Zagzebski[5]. Despite their differences, which I will discuss extensively, both approaches revolve around the characterization of an exemplary virtuous agent that serves as a standard for determining what, in a given situation, is right, wrong, dutiful, and forbidden. This move, in turn, allows these theories to formulate a theory of obligation that provides action guidance and action evaluation. Zagzebski's moral theory is rooted in direct reference to real-life or fictional individuals whose virtuousness triggers admiration and a desire for emulation, with respect to whom all moral concepts can be defined. This proposal, I will argue, alongside many theoretical advantages, employs a notion of *radical* exemplarity, i.e., it makes specific extremely exceptional agents the reference by which to identify virtues and right actions. This, I will claim, leads to undesirable theoretical consequences, above all a normalization of supererogation. In light of this and other weaknesses[6], I will re-examine more traditional virtue-ethical attempts to define moral concepts in terms of an *ordinary* exemplary agent, i.e., a fully virtuous or phronetic, yet not saintly agent. This account has the obvious flaw of overlooking important phenomenological features of everyday moral life, such as the admiration exceptional people inspire and the life-changing role they play; however, it also avoids the risks of a radical perspective outlined above. In conclusion of the paper, I will restore a different role for radical (i.e., exceptional) individuals, i.e., saints and heroes, within a virtue-ethical moral theory.

---

[4] Along similar lines, Cox (2006) has argued that Hursthouse's virtue ethical account of right action is self-defeating, in that anyone who deliberated in accordance with it would end up violating it.

[5] I have developed this argument more extensively in my latest monograph devoted to contemporary moral exemplarism. See Vaccarezza 2020b.

[6] It is not for chronological reasons - which, indeed, would suggest postponing it - that I discuss Zagzebski's exemplarism before the second virtue-ethicist use of exemplars; rather, I choose to discuss it first to highlight its weaknesses and show how a standard virtue-ethical theory manages to avoid them.

1. Radical exemplarity

With her 2017 eponymous volume and various preparatory works published in previous years, Linda Zagzebski has given an extraordinary impulse to the revival of exemplarity within contemporary virtue ethics and has triggered intense discussions, not only in a purely theoretical but also in an educational context (Zagzebski 2015; 2017). Zagzebski's use of moral role models in her exemplarist theory, despite retaining some of the standard modalities, both in the categorization of the types of exemplarity, and in the analysis of their function, represents a radicalization of a neo-Aristotelian theory of virtues. If not in the letter, Aristotelian in spirit is Zagzebski's central intuition that moral dynamism starts from the identification, by the individual and the community, of an individual whose excellence triggers admiration and emulation and fixes the reference of the moral concepts of that community[7]. Of this broadly Aristotelian background, exemplarism uses the main categories, while attempting to update them, especially regarding the analysis of the emotion that underpins the whole theory, that is, moral admiration.

Zagzebski's exemplarism is a foundationalist moral theory, the foundation of which is, however, not a concept, but one or more persons. The construction of the theory begins with direct reference to supremely admirable exemplary figures, similarly to what happens for Putnam and Kripke's direct reference theory in the case of terms indicating natural kinds. Just as "water" and "gold" are terms that refer to indexically identified elements ("this thing here", where the "here" can be indicated with the gesture of pointing), good people are "like this person here", who therefore sets the reference of what a "good person" is (2017: 2). Likewise, basic moral concepts, such as virtue, good motivation, good end, right act, duty, desirable life, etc., can be defined in terms of this paradigmatically good or admirable person. The exemplars, therefore, have heuristic value, that is, they make the virtues visible and therefore easily identifiable, but, more importantly, they are foundational[8]. It is to them that the definition of the fundamental moral concepts of virtue, right act, duty, good state of things is anchored:

(1) A virtue is a trait we admire in an exemplar. It is a trait that makes a person like that admirable in a certain respect.

---

[7] See, e.g., Zagzebski (2017: 31): «I am going to propose a moral theory based on the emotion of admiration. It is a map of the moral domain that derives the good in the sense of the desirable from the good in the sense of the admirable. It also derives what we mean by a right act, a wrong act, and a duty from the admirable».

[8] Foundationalism is another major difference with standard qualified-agent views, which are best understood according to an epistemic reading. In other words, in views like Hursthouse's virtuous agents play an epistemic role of guiding towards what is antecedently right, rather than claiming that something is right because it is what a virtuous agent would do (Kawall 2014). This has led to a reason-based account of right action such as Valerie Tiberius' (2006), which partly bridge the gap between qualified-agent and target-centered accounts of virtue ethics and right action. Although this is an extremely important debate, for the sake of brevity I don't consider this contrast in this paper, and I limit my focus to radical vs ordinary exemplarity.

(2) A good motive is a motive we admire in an exemplar. It is a motive of a person like that.
(3) A good end is a state of affairs that exemplars aim to bring about. It is the state of affairs at which persons like that aim.
(4) A virtuous act is an admirable act, an act we admire in a person like that.
(5) An admirable life is a life lived by an exemplar.
(6) A desirable life (a life of flourishing) is a life desired by an exemplar.
(7) A right act for person A in some set of circumstances C is what the admirable (more specifically, practically wise) person would take to be most favored by the balance of reasons for A in C.
(8) A duty in some set of circumstances C is an act an exemplar demands from both herself and others. She would feel guilty if she did not do it, and she would blame others if they do not do it. (Zagzebski 2017: 21).

In providing this definition, despite the use of the term "practically wise"[9], rather than indicating the ordinary, hypothetical, or typical virtuous agent, as the criterion for deriving moral concepts, as do the standard Aristotelian theories that we will examine in the next section, Zagzebski places an exceptionally exemplary model at the foundation of moral concepts. Paradigmatic in her theory seem to be the exemplars that Zagzebski calls "moral saints", that is, the virtuous agents who possess the virtues at an exceptional level[10]. A similar definition is nothing more than a radicalized version of the standard exemplarism inextricably linked to qualified-agent virtue ethics, which we will examine in the next paragraph. In the first phase of her virtue-ethicist production, corresponding to her *Divine Motivation Theory*, Zagzebski adopted a strategy similar to the more traditional ones, centered on the motivations and dispositions typical of the phronimos conceived as an ordinary virtuous agent. In doing so, she defined what counts as right or wrong action by referring to the emotions, motivations, and dispositions of virtuous (phronetic) and vicious agents (2004: 159-160).
In this way, the exemplarity to which Zagzebski appealed was that of the ordinary virtuous agent and his motivations, dispositions, and actions. However, with the radical exemplarist turn, the model goes from ordinary that it was, to radical, recognizable through admiration and the tendency to emulation it arouses:

> In every era and in every culture there have been supremely admirable persons who show us the upper reaches of human capability, and in doing so, inspire us to expect more from ourselves. These are the people I am calling exemplars. […] Exemplars are not just good; they are supremely excellent. I said that they are

[9] Here, Zagzebski refers to the admirable as the practically wise. However, this looks at odds with the previous characterization she gives of exemplars as supremely admirable, which fits more the saint than the practically wise, as we will see in a few lines. Examples of such oscillations between the two accounts are frequent throughout the book.
[10] Zagzebski oscillates between defining the saints as paradigms of altruism, and the heroes of courage, and defining the former as possessors of all virtues - or at least most of them - at an exceptional level, and the latter of a single exceptional virtue on the other. In this paragraph, my criticism is addressed to the second meaning of moral saintliness, to be understood precisely as radical exemplarity. My goal is not so much to offer an exegesis of what the real meaning intended by Zagzebski is, but to extrapolate a notion of radical exemplarity such as the one that seems to emerge at times from her work, and assess its significance as a possible model of exemplarity within a virtue-ethical theory.

> supremely admirable. That is because I assume that there is something in us that detects the excellent, and that is the emotion of admiration. We identify the excellent with the admirable, and we detect the admirable by the experience of admiration» (2017: 1-2)[11].

Radical exemplarism seems to respond well to the need – fundamental for virtue ethics – of enumeration, that is, to allow the identification of the relevant virtues. It does so, in particular, by allowing a considerable margin of pluralism: the observation of exemplars of supreme moral realization, in the diversity of their existences, indeed allows to identify some virtues as central, and also to appreciate their equal goodness even in the profound difference of their expressions. Making room for a variety of admirable lives, therefore allowing pluralism, is an essential theoretical gain. And yet, this gain comes at the cost of some tension with a cornerstone of the theory itself, namely that exemplarism would have an advantage over standard virtue ethics in terms of action guidance, because it would be able to provide a more detailed account of the good life, precisely in that, rather than outlining it in its contours, it has it concretely embodied by a particular individual who excels in some virtue. Moral saints can be easily spotted: they capture our attention, arouse our moral emotions, and shape our moral imagination in a way ordinarily virtuous agents do not. Thus, radically exemplary lives allow to identify the virtues which the individual lives of the exemplars embody as fundamental and to grasp them as motivating, even in the plurality of their possible manifestations.

This is undoubtedly true; and yet, some perplexities emerge. Let us assume to admire more than one saintly role model and that their "rival" versions of the good life are compatible, albeit alternative. Imagine, for example, admiring both a doctor who has lived for decades at the service of the least in a humanitarian mission, a political activist who fights for human rights and the life of silent contemplation of a Tibetan monk. These lives are perfectly compatible and equally valuable at a sufficiently general level: they all agree in their tension towards benevolence, aspiration for peace, and altruism as fundamental constituents of the good life. But, on the other hand, it is not the case that all of them can simultaneously guide action: when it comes to the particular choices that substantiate those individuals' lives and give them unrepeatable uniqueness, taking them as models could lead to contradictory results and, rather than guiding action, paralyze it. That greater action guidance is linked to providing a more detailed description of a particular life, therefore, in the case of radical exemplarity seems false.

The examples provided by Zagzebski, as just shown, point mainly to radical exemplars, and it is precisely by this radicality that Zagzebski considers them mostly recognizable and assigns them an

[11] In this opening passage of the book, Zagzebski maintains that her theory covers exemplarity of saints, heroes and sages equally. However, such an all-encompassing account is untenable, for these different kinds of exemplars offer different kinds of action guidance and evaluation, as my discussion will show. This is why in this paper I propose to keep their roles separate to exploit and accommodate their diverse potentialities within a virtue-ethical moral theory.

emotionally attractive and motivating force. But if the radical model dictates the criteria for action, and if her life is radically exemplary, a second fundamental worry arises: Does the exemplary model's life consist of a "normalization" of the supererogatory?

As is well known, the old theme of supererogation received new life starting from the publication, in 1958, of the famous article by J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes", where the traditional trichotomy of duties, indifferent actions and wrong actions was deemed inadequate to account for episodes of heroism or moral sanctity, better understood through the notion of supererogation. This is the case, in Urmson's example, of a soldier who sacrifices himself to save the lives of his comrades, or of a doctor who chooses to abandon his quiet life of ordinary dedication to others to go on a mission to a country affected by an epidemic (Urmson 1958): these choices can neither be traced back to the rank of indifferent actions nor considered morally dutiful. Thus, the comrades of the heroic soldier who chose not to throw themselves on the grenade cannot be blamed for this, just as the colleagues of the doctor who left for the mission, who continued to lead a "normal" existence in their country and alongside their families, could never, for this reason, be accused of not having fulfilled a duty.

The radical exemplarist approach, focused as it is on the exemplary nature of exceptional figures who arouse deep admiration and emulative drive, seems to refer precisely to moral models capable of performing gestures such as those described by Urmson. In Zagzebski's terms, it seems inevitable that the right action is dictated by the behavior, sometimes saintly or heroic, of the moral model, which sets the reference for what is right, dutiful, and forbidden[12]. But that a life marked by an attempt to normalize supererogation is morally obligatory, as it seems necessary to conclude from the premises of a radical exemplarist theory, is a contradictory conclusion, as the supererogatory is distinguished by definition from the dutiful (see also Kawall 2009). A normalization, in the case of supererogation, equals a neutralization. Paradoxically, therefore, a single theoretical move (the raising of the radical model to a moral standard) would simultaneously neutralize both the idea of supererogation and those of moral holiness and heroism, which, if normalized, would lose their character of extraordinariness. Furthermore, it would expose radical exemplarism to another risk, namely that of depriving exemplarity of its desirability, and in doing so would undermine another cornerstone of the theory: the dependence of desirability on admiration. Without going into the merits of the empirical validity of the latter thesis, it is important here to underline how the normalization of the supererogatory is very difficult to reconcile with claims on the desirability of such a life. As Susan Wolf (1982) paradigmatically noted, that the moral perfection of a morally holy agent is a desirable

[12] A possible reply by Zagzebski could consist in arguing that there is a range of "right" actions, from the most ordinary to the supererogatory ones performed by the radical model, rather than restricting the field of right action to the latter. However, the deduction of the definitions of the central moral concepts from the operation of the radical model makes this hypothetical reply ineffective.

ideal of personal fulfillment is highly unrealistic. To put it more clearly: it is unlikely that this is what we would like for ourselves or our loved ones. In order to avoid this unfortunate outcome, radical exemplarism should draw a clearer distinction between the different functions that the different types of moral models can perform. In particular, it should clarify whether the ideal it is pointing to is that of moral holiness or the fullness of ordinary virtue. In the next section, I will discuss a different theory of exemplarity that, while moving from assumptions similar to radical exemplarism, precisely avoids such ambiguities and risks.

2. Ordinary agents and phronetic exemplarity

Within qualified-agent virtue ethics, the function of exemplarity is to provide an ordinary reference on which to base both the enumeration and identification of virtues and, most importantly, satisfactory definitions of what right, dutiful and forbidden actions are. Thus, for authors such as Annas, Hursthouse, and others, exemplarism consists in outlining a profile of the ordinarily virtuous agent, who can act as a guide to action through imitation and serve as a parameter for its evaluation. From these premises arise definitions of the central moral concepts such as that, perhaps the most famous, by Rosalind Hursthouse, according to whom:

> An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a *decision* is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called "right" or "good" (1999: 79)[13].

The characterization of an ordinary virtuous agent, here, serves as a standard for determining what, in a given situation, is right, wrong, dutiful, and forbidden, allowing a virtue-ethical theory to break out of the impasse of not being able to provide a theory of obligation that allows action guidance and action evaluation. However, even such a definition generates many problems. If it were true, Harman (2000) argues that the non-virtuous would find himself in the unpleasant situation of never being able to perform any right act, since he would frequently have to make moral decisions in circumstances in which the virtuous would not by definition find himself. Think, for example, of the situation of choosing how to remedy a wrong committed (for example, by returning a stolen sum) or dealing with the consequences of a previous moral error, as in the case of having to take care of a child generated by committing violence.

[13] In this work, I follow Hursthouse's account as the most representative of an exemplarist approach; however, rival accounts, such as agent-based and target-centered ones, offer different definitions. According to an agent-based account, a stronger motivation requirement is needed (Slote 2001: 38); on a target-centered account, an action is right just in case it is overall virtuous, and an action is virtuous in respect to virtue v just in case it hits the target of v (see Swanton 2003: 228).

Even more simply, think of the ordinary case of an agent who is not entirely virtuous but is aware of having to progress morally (the Aristotelian enkratic), who feels compelled to carry out an incorrect action, let us say to lie, but who, by virtue of his wish to improve, refrains with considerable effort from doing so. Of course, in such a case, a choice of this kind would not count as right action, because it would not be the one performed by the virtuous agent: the latter would not feel any effort in refraining from lying, nor would he need to deliberate on it (Copp & Sobel 2004). However, if this is the case, a virtue theory can serve neither to guide nor to evaluate actions and is not equipped to provide a theory of obligation. For this reason, it can only serve to offer an ideal with which to motivate moral improvement.

The key to finding a way out of this objection, which would be fatal to an exemplarism of the ordinary virtuous agent, is offered by Russell (2009) and van Zyl (2011), who introduce a helpful distinction between what is right and what should be done (ought). While duty (ought) concerns action guidance, or what a particular agent should do, the right has to do with action assessment. For a fully virtuous agent, the two poles coincide perfectly: there is never a virtuous action that is not also fully right and dutiful. Entirely excellent actions are those that express virtue and are therefore the only genuinely right ones, but the "remedial" actions of the non-virtuous are still right as actions to be performed because they represent a moral improvement and an approximation to the standard of morality. However, they do not draw on the level of an evaluation of full moral correctness but merely reflect what the agent ought to do[14].

What kind of exemplarity is configured once the anchoring of morality is untied from the reference to a radically excellent person and is brought back to the level of the moral agent as an example of ordinary virtue? Unlike the moral saint, capable of arousing admiration by virtue of a radically excellent life, which "normalizes" the supererogatory making it an obligatory point of arrival for every ordinary agent, the ordinary exemplary model represents the completeness of a fully virtuous life, and the achievement of non-radical excellence. In areteic language, this can be expressed in terms of the classic Aristotelian unity of virtues thesis: the idea, that is, that it is not only possible, but also morally required, that the fullness of each virtue corresponds to the possession of every other virtue, and therefore that an authentically moral character is overall virtuous. The ideal agent thus understood would coincide, more than with the saint, with the practically wise, or phronimos, who possesses the fullness of every virtue at an ordinary level.

[14] For Swanton, however, the way out of the objection lies in distinguishing between virtue and virtuous act, thereby giving up an agent-based exemplarist approach. According to her proposal, «An act is virtuous (in respect V) iff it hits the target of V» (2001: 39). In other words, for an action to be just or temperate a necessary and sufficient condition is that it hits the target of justice or temperance, even if does not exhibit a just or temperate state of character (see 2001: 37). Hitting the target of a virtue, in turn, is a form of success in being responsive to items in the relevant field.

As Russell (2009: 339-355) points out, there are two useful distinctions to be made to develop a credible thesis of the unity of the virtues: the first is the distinction between the virtues as trajectories or as directions; the second, between unity as an attributive thesis or as a model. The first contrast concerns the way in which the very nature of a virtue is to be understood. In the first case, virtue is conceived as a *trajectory*, that is, a tendency to permanently perform a certain type of acts inherent to a certain sphere of moral interest. Honesty, for example, would consist in never breaking a promise; generosity, in always striving to donate one's possessions in favor of the well-being of others; and so on. As effectively summarized by James Wallace (1978: 135), «the stronger the tendency, the more [virtuous] the person». Consequently, on the basis of a view of virtues as trajectories, the relevance and adequacy of the exercise of virtues to a given situation is at best fortuitous, just as it happens in the case of the virtues that Aristotle calls "natural" (NE VI. 13) precisely because, not being guided by phronesis, they are no more than "blind" tendencies only casually appropriate and therefore morally indifferent. On a rival view, which conceives of virtues as *directions*, the latter are indeed concerned with a specific sphere of action, but they also involve intrinsic rationality that leads them to deliberate, weigh reasons, balance the needs of different spheres; in short, to consider the overall moral profile of the situation in question. From this point of view, it is perfectly conceivable, for example, that a sincere person chooses to omit a truth or even to lie by virtue of an evaluation of the reasons that leads her to see the need of, say, saving a human life thanks to that lie, as more pressing. Her virtue consists, more than in a serial and automatic "telling the truth", in grasping sensitively the moral reasons connected to truthfulness, knowing how to give them the right weight in relation to different reasons.

The second distinction, between unity as an *attributive thesis* and as a *model*, has to do with the subject to which the unity should pertain. Within an attributive thesis, the unity of the virtues would be a description of how the virtues manifest themselves in any virtuous agent. On the other hand, according to a view of unity as a model, it would once again be a thesis concerning the nature of virtues, or the idea that the full development of virtue goes towards full integration or unity rooted in phronesis. This is therefore compatible - under certain conditions - with the fact that a given agent, while authentically tending towards unity and being on the path of development of such integration, is virtuous in certain areas but only enkratic, or even akratic or vicious in others. What matters is that that agent is developing, within a process of moral maturation, the sensitivity to reasons and the deliberative capacity typical of phronesis, which, over time, will increasingly integrate her character and make her capable of facing unprecedented situations.

If the unity of virtues is understood in this way, that is, as a model within a view of virtues as directions, rather than an attributive thesis of virtues as trajectories, it not only acquires plausibility

but helps to clarify the exemplarity of the phronimos, that we might call "exemplarity by inspiration" (for the label, see also Vaccarezza 2020). The unity that constitutes exemplarity consists of the increasingly secure possession of practical wisdom, which helps develop an increasingly virtuous character. Therefore, the imitation of the phronimos can only take the form of an inspiration to develop an analogous sensitivity to reasons and deliberative capacity. Being practically wise is more than reliably performing standardized acts; thus, there is no way to know in advance what the phronimos will do in a given situation, other than doing their best to hit the right mean[15].

It might seem that inspiration understood in this way is to the detriment of the action guidance and assessment insofar as it impedes to infer specific actions to be performed, as well as to evaluate the actions performed retrospectively. However action guidance, in this perspective, does not consist in the imitation of some particular actions, but in the inspiration to deliberate well (where necessary), to perceive well, exercising moral attention that progressively becomes part of the character, and "feel" well, in the sense of refining an emotional involvement with moral situations in their particularity[16]. What phronetic exemplarity actually prevents, as noted by Hacker-Wright (2010: 220), is not action guidance per se, but the possibility of action-guidance conceived as a decision procedure[17] which can do without the possession of moral wisdom on the part of the agent and shifts praise and blame from the agent to the theory. The same holds for action assessment, which is understood as a moral evaluation from the point of view of the agent rather than from nowhere. And from that point of view, it is always possible to ask oneself: "Did I act virtuously?", "Are the priorities on which I base my life plan really meaningful and morally satisfying, or would they require a revision? And if they are, have I safeguarded them, pursuing the ends I care about?", "Did I pay attention to the situation, or was I careless?", "Did I try, in case of doubt, to deliberate by carefully weighing the factors at play?", and so on. From the perspective of the external observer, however, what it is possible to establish is the correspondence of a given act to some virtuous ends, enumerated in the light of the wise as authentically moral, as well as the possible moral commitment of the agent in moral improvement in the areas in which she is lacking. As Hursthouse notes (1999: chapter 1), the objection overstates the problem, since all of us, even if not virtuous, know what it means to behave honestly or generously;

[15] Following this intuition, in several previous co-authored works, I have re-defined practical wisdom as ethical expertise. There, I claimed that in order to understand adequately the phronimos and the inspiration he arouses, we should conceive of him as the possessor of general practical wisdom that tends to extend to an increasing number of domains. This implies that neither he necessarily has all the virtues, nor a complete lack of integration is compatible with practical wisdom. Instead, we should think of integration in terms of "virtue molecularism", i.e., as the possession of a critical threshold of virtuousness in a sufficient number of domains. See De Caro, Vaccarezza & Niccoli 2018; De Caro and Vaccarezza 2020.
[16] Hursthouse herself adheres to a form of particularism or non-codifiability, according to which, although we can articulate rules embodying the demands of the various virtues, they cannot be but generalizations which cannot be applied without practical wisdom. This does not impede that virtue ethics can afford v-rules, such as "do what is honest, charitable, generous".
[17] See also Hursthouse (1991) and Annas (2003).

after all, we all have «some background moral training and some development of the virtues that aid us as we attempt to determine what to do» (Kawall 2014). But, it is true, in the perspective of phronetic exemplarity, the ordinary level of morality embodied by the practically wise cannot be codified in detail, nor can it be translated into criteria on the basis of which to evaluate any single action with certainty. However, this "weak" notion of right action, as Foot maintains (2001: 78), can be seen as an issue only when biased by a "stubborn prejudice (Hacker-Wright 2010: 221) according to which in order for morality to be rational it must conform to an instrumental scheme of rationality. In other words, virtue ethics «does not simply give a different set of answers to the same old questions; it involves a different view of what moral philosophy is all about» (van Zyl 2011: 220).

3. Rehabilitating radicality: heroes and saints

Once the centrality of phronetic exemplarity has been re-established, I will now argue that it is appropriate to rehabilitate two types of radical moral model, the hero, and the saint, and to assign each typology a different function within a virtue-ethical moral theory.

The first category of radical exemplarity is what we can conventionally call "heroism". Heroism is clearly a term too rich in history and full of meanings that are often in mutual contradiction to claim that it names a univocal reality. Limiting myself to the use that contemporary virtue-ethical moral theory makes of it, I will therefore artificially circumscribe its meaning[18]. In order to effectively distinguish the hero from the saint, I propose two sub-types of the first category. First of all, hero # 1 is someone who performs single morally exceptional *acts*, but of whose moral *traits* we know nothing. Think, for example, of a stranger throwing himself into the sea to save a drowning child. In bystanders, an inevitable emotion of admiration arises. However, there is no way to know the reasons that caused that action: for example, we may not know that on the seashore, observing the fact, there is someone to whom the hero wants to give a falsely positive image of himself, and in order to impress whom is willing to use a good dose of bravado and take a consistent risk; we could even imagine that our hero # 1 aspires to be recruited by a dangerous criminal organization, but is being held on the sidelines because he is considered a coward; or, even, that the child in question is the son of the boss of that same organization. Furthermore, it is not even possible to know whether such acts are habitual for that person or due to an impromptu impulse even if they are nobly motivated.

The second sub-type, hero # 2, includes who, as a result of repeated acts, can be considered the bearer of some virtuous traits at an exceptional level but who have developed them at the expense of

[18] Just to mention a few voices, Zagzebski (2017) assigns this label to models of courage, while Blum (1988) to those who embody some excellent traits but in the absence of an overall good life plan, unlike the saints, who in his conceptualization would represent ideals of virtuous perfection. Finally, Annas (2015) directly links heroism to supererogation.

other fundamental virtues. They have, so to speak, radicalized some virtues to become models in that respect while being in some fields well below the threshold of ordinary morality[19]. A classic example is Oskar Schindler[20]. The German businessman is an undisputed model of courage and altruism: not having hesitated to jeopardize his own life to save several hundred Jews during the Second World War using the pretext of hiring them as labor for his factory has rightly earned him, among other honors, the inclusion among the Righteous among the Nations. His history, made famous by Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*, never ceases to inspire and move. Unfortunately, however, it is also known that Schindler was anything but perfect: a serial traitor to his wife, indeed not an emblem of respect for his various simultaneous lovers; moreover, a habitual liar and deceiver, whose tendency to deceive was also part of the reasons for the success of his plan.

What role can we assign, within a virtue-ethical moral theory, to these two sub-typologies of the heroic model? The second kind of hero displays some excellent traits, but within a highly disunitarian personality, below the threshold of what we have seen is the acceptable disunity of the phronetic agent. Certainly, hero #2 can act as a moral trigger and a source of motivation; moreover, he seems to allow, concerning the virtues he embodies, their enumeration: by observing Schindler's character and learning about his intentions and motivations, an agent could easily understand the importance of courage and altruism as part of an authentically good life, learning them through the peculiar forms of application testified by the life of the hero, and feeling led to assign them a role. As for action guidance and action assessment, I argue that they are possible "sub condicione" and in relation to the extreme cases in which hero #2 exercises the virtues he possesses. Since his virtues do not belong to a morally integrated life plan, he cannot serve as an overall standard, but only with the addition of a conditional clause such as the following:

> Virtuous, therefore right, is, in an extreme situation that requires the virtues possessed by hero #2, that act that hero #2 would feel obliged to perform, *without prejudice to the compatibility of this act with the overall needs of morality*.

Without a doubt, hero #1 can play a trigger function of moral motivation too: witnessing an act of - at least apparent - courageous altruism undoubtedly moves the viewer, arousing their admiration. However, it seems difficult to ascribe to hero #1 much more than this; since what he testifies is not a trait but a single action, it is not possible to emulate him, except in the minimal cases in which there

[19] Unlike phronetic agents as I have described them in the previous section, who may well be far from perfect but are aware of their limits and strive to improve their practical wisdom.

[20] These considerations are merely intended to illuminate the distinction between saints and moral heroes, without in any way aiming to diminish the moral value of the extraordinary actions performed by Oskar Schindler nor his memory and that of his human life. The very fact that Schindler is indicated here as a champion of moral heroism should, I hope, dispel this doubt.

is an absolute identity of circumstances. In any case, deriving the criteria of action, even in these minimal cases, must be subjected to the same conditional clause applied to hero #2. In both cases, the relative ability to guide action can only take the form of a literal imitation, rather than phronetic inspiration, since neither have wisdom to regulate their action.

The second category is that which I choose to call "saint", meaning who follows and realizes an ideal of a radical virtuous life, adapting her entire personality to it, at least in intentions. These are the figures often pointed out by Zagzebski as the foundation of moral concepts and the entire exemplarist moral theory. Think again of a doctor who chooses to leave for the Third World, leaving behind a peaceful life of professional and personal satisfaction in her country. Let's assume, by hypothesis, that (i) we know our doctor enough to believe that, unlike hero #1, her altruism is due to a trait, and does not represent purely an act (perhaps dictated by boredom or mid-crisis age) and (ii) unlike hero #2, she does not reveal severe moral flaws in any field. She is an honest citizen; she does not have the habit of lying; she shows respect and kindness for those she interacts with. She is not perfect, as no real agent can be, but she is undoubtedly a fully moral human being, who does not develop some virtuous traits to the point of becoming immoral in other fields, and who therefore maintains a threshold of wise integration that preserves her from this risk. Her excellence does not consist in heroically realizing all the virtuous traits that substantiate an excellent life but rather in radicalizing some virtues without prejudice to others.

This radicalization means raising the demands of the radicalized virtue, and perhaps some other related traits while keeping the remaining components of a virtuous life at an ordinary level. It is not necessary, for example, that the doctor in question is so incredibly courageous as to put her life at risk by choosing as a destination a country that is the theater of war, or that, in order to exercise her generosity extremely, she adopts a lifestyle in which temperance borders on asceticism, to be able to give all the extra to the needy. Certainly, "combinations" of this kind are possible and documented by facts, but they are not all compossible, nor do they need to be. The saint, therefore, while never radicalizing some virtues to the detriment of other moral demands, displays some virtues at an exceptional degree. We have already seen that if we tried to derive an account of duty and right action from the saint, we would risk normalizing supererogation, with all the undesirable theoretical and practical consequences it implies. What place, then, should we assign to this important figure? In relation to the virtues that she radicalizes, my proposal is that the saint sets the standard of the supererogatory for the ordinary agent[21]:

[21] Along similar lines, Hursthouse (2006) proposes that an action is supererogatory when it is hard even for a virtuous agent to perform it given the circumstances.

> A supererogatory action is, in an extreme situation that requires the virtues possessed by a saint, that act that the saint would feel obliged to perform, and that is not required of an ordinarily virtuous agent.

The saint, therefore, given her radical nature, can provide "literal" action guidance only for performing supererogatory acts within the sphere of the virtues she achieves at an extraordinary level[22].

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that a proper rehabilitation of exemplarity within a virtue-ethical theory should avoid referring to saints or heroes as standards of right action and assign priority in this respect to phronetic exemplarity: while radical exemplars can serve as standards for right and supererogatory actions in an extremely limited set of circumstances, it is ordinary virtuousness typical of the practically wise that can guide choices and retrospectively evaluate actions in standard cases. This leaves to some extent virtue-ethics prey of objections directed to its particularistic way of evaluating and guiding action; however, such criticism should, in my opinion, be rebutted by restating the legitimacy of plural methods in moral theory, with emphasis on standardized universal decision-procedures as just one among many possible options.

References

- Annas 2003: Julia Annas, *Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing*, «Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association», 78 (2003), 2, pp. 61-75.

- Annas 2015: Julia Annas, *Virtue and heroism*, «The Lindley Lecture», The University of Kansas October 23, 2015.

- Badhwar 1996: Neera K. Badhwar, *The Limited Unity of Virtue*, «Nous» 30 (1996), 3, pp. 306-329.

- Blum 1988: Lawrence Blum, *Moral Exemplars: Reflections on Schindler, the Trocmés, and Others*, «Midwest Studies in Philosophy» 13 (1988), pp. 196-221.

- Copp & Sobel 2004: David Copp and David Sobel, *Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics*, «Ethics», 114 (2004), pp. 514–54.

- Cox 2006: Damian Cox, *Agent-Based Theories of Right Action*, «Ethical Theory and Moral Practice», 9 (2006), 5, pp. 505-515.

- Curzer (2012): Howard Curzer, *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2012.

- Cusinato 2011: Guido Cusinato, *Sull'esemplarità aurorale*, in Emanuele Caminada (ed.), *Modelli e capi*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2011, pp. 7-28.
- Cusinato 2014: Guido Cusinato, *Periagoge. Teoria della singolarità e filosofia come esercizio di trasformazione*, Verona, QuiEdit 2014.

[22] I have already defended a connection between heroic virtue and supererogation in a previous article (Vaccarezza 2019). For further discussions on the compatibility of virtue ethics and supererogation, see Curzer (2012); Kawall (2009); Stangl (2016); Wilson (2017).

- De Caro & Vaccarezza 2020: Mario De Caro and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, *Morality and Interpretation: The Principle of Phronetic Charity*, «Ethical Theory and Moral Practice» 23 (2020), 2, pp. 295-307.

- De Caro, Vaccarezza & Niccoli 2018: Mario De Caro, Maria Silvia Vaccarezza and Ariele Niccoli, *Phronesis as Ethical Expertise: Naturalism of Second Nature and the Unity of Virtue*, «Journal of Value Inquiry», 52 (2018), 3, pp. 287-305.

- Foot 2001: Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

- Hacker-Wright 2010: John Hacker-Wright, *Virtue Ethics without Right Action: Anscombe, Foot, and Contemporary Virtue Ethics*, «Journal of Value Inquiry» 44 (2010), pp. 209-224.

- Harman 2000: Gilbert Harman, *The Nonexistence of Character Traits*, in Alex Byrne, Robert Stalnaker, and Ralph Wedgwood (eds.), *Fact and Value*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, pp. 117-27.

- Heyd 2015: David Heyd, *Can Virtue Ethics Account for Supererogation?,* in Christopher Cowley (ed.), *Supererogation*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 77 (2015), Cambridge University Press, pp. 25-47.

- Hovda 2018: Jeremy Hovda, *The Role of Exemplars in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, «Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics», 20 (2018), 2, pp. 31-44.

- Hursthouse 1991: Rosalind Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion*, «Philosophy and Public Affairs» 20 (1991), 3, pp. 223-246.

- Hursthouse 1999: Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

- Hursthouse 2006: Rosalind Hursthouse, *Are virtues the proper starting point for morality?*, in J. Lawrence Dreier (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, London, Blackwell 2006, pp. 99-112.

- Kawall 2009: Jason Kawall, *Virtue Theory, Ideal Observers, and the Supererogatory*, «Philosophical Studies» 146 (2009), pp.179-19.

- Kawall 2014: Jason Kawall, *Qualified Agent and Agent-Based Virtue Ethics and the Problems of Right Action*, in Stan van Hooft (ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, Durham, Acumen 2014, pp. 130-140.

- Louden 1984: Robert B. Louden*, On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics*, «American Philosophical Quarterly» 21 (1984), 3, pp. 227-236.

- Louden 1992: Robert Louden, *Go-carts of Judgement: Exemplars in Kantian Moral Education*, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 74 (1992), 3, pp. 303-322.

- Louden 2009: Robert Louden, *Making the law visible: the role of examples in Kant's ethics*, in Jens Timmermann (ed.), *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2009.

- Nagel 1979: Thomas Nagel, *The Fragmentation of Value*, in Id., *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1979, pp. 128-141.

- Russell 2009: Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009.

- Schneewind 1997: Jerome Schneewind, *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997.

- Stangl 2016: Rebecca Stangl, *Neo-Aristotelian Supererogation*, «Ethics» 126 (2016), pp. 339-365.

- Swanton 2001: Christine Swanton, *A Virtue-Ethical Account of Right Action*, «Ethics» 112 (201), 1, pp. 32-52.

- Swanton 2003: Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

- Tiberius 2006: Valerie Tiberius, *How to Think About Virtue and Right*, «Philosophical Papers» 35 (2006), 2, pp. 247-265.

- Urmson 1958: James O. Urmson, *Saints and Heroes*, in Abraham I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy,* University of Washington Press, Seattle 1958, pp. 198-216.

- Vaccarezza 2019: Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, *An Excess of Excellence: Aristotelian Supererogation and the Degrees of Virtue*, «International Journal of Philosophical Studies», 27 (2019), 1, pp. 1-11.

- Vaccarezza 2020a: Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, *Paths to Flourishing: Ancient Models of the Exemplary Life*, «*Ethics and Education»* 15 (2020), 2, pp. 144-157.

- Vaccarezza 2020b: Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, *Esempi morali. Tra ammirazione ed etica delle virtù*, Bologna, il Mulino 2020.

- Van Zyl 2011: Liezl van Zyl, *Qualified-agent virtue ethics*, «South African Journal of Philosophy» 30 (2011), 2, pp. 219-228.

- Walker 1993: A.D.M. Walker, *The Incompatibility of the Virtues*, «Ratio» 6 (1993), 1, pp. 44-60.

- Wallace 1978: James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, Cornell, Cornell University Press 1978.

- Williams 1982: Bernard Williams, Conflicts of values, in Id., *Moral Luck*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1982, pp. 71-82.

- Williams 1985: Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Harvard University Press, Harvard 1985.

- Wilson 2017: Alan Wilson, *A Dilemma for Neo-Aristotelian Supererogation*, «Ethics» 128 (2017), 1, pp. 199-211**.**

- Wolf 1982: Susan Wolf, *Moral Saints*, «The Journal of Philosophy» 79 (1982), 8, pp. 419-439.

- Zagzebski 2004: Linda T. Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

- Zagzebski 2015: Linda T. Zagzebski, *Admiration and the Admirable*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», suppl. 89 (2015), 1, pp. 205-221

- Zagzebski 2017: Linda T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.