**Admiration, Attraction, and the Aesthetics of Exemplarity**

Ian James Kidd, University of Nottingham

Forthcoming in *Journal of Moral Education*

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to show that an aesthetics of exemplarity could be a useful component of projects of moral self-cultivation. Using some in Linda Zagzebski's exemplarism, I describe a distinctive, aesthetically-inflected mode of admiration called moral attraction whose object is the inner beauty of a person – the expression of the 'inner' virtues or excellences of character of a person in 'outer' forms of bodily comportment that are experienced, by others, as beautiful. I then argue that certain moral traditions deploy inner beauty within their practices of moral self-cultivation – a good example being Confucianism. Advocates of exemplarist moral education should therefore take seriously the ways that an aesthetics of exemplarity can play roles within projects of moral self-cultivation.

**Introduction**

There are many different ways that aesthetic activities, concerns, and sensibilities can play a role within projects of moral self-cultivation. Some argue that study of literature, music, and other arts can help to develop imaginativeness, empathy, and other dispositions that erode ignorance, selfishness, and obtuseness that stunt our characters. Some argue that classic art and literature grant us access to a rich, edifying inheritance of sensibility and understanding. Some argue that the aesthetic pursuits serve to develop traits, such as creativity and self-expression, themselves integral to the good life.

What such accounts tend to neglect or downplay, however, is a further way in which aesthetics can contribute to efforts at moral self-cultivation: let’s call is *moral beauty*, with the proviso that this term will be amended later. In its general form, the claim is that the cultivation of moral excellences can endow a person with aesthetically-charged qualities, experienced by others as a form of beauty. Within ancient Greek and Indian traditions, moral heroes were described as possessing a ‘beautiful soul’ or ‘beautiful mental factors’, a ‘charisma’ or ‘radiance’. In those traditions, moral beauty had various vital roles within projects of moral self-development (see Kidd 2017, Kidd 2018).

Appeals to moral beauty are less common within contemporary work on moral self-cultivation and education, for at least two reasons. The first is a general suspicion of the idea of beauty as something too subjective or unserious to ground something as important as moral education—beauty as a mere ‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’ of pleasure, for instance, that is ‘irreducibly subjective’ and which has ‘completely lost its meaning’ (Kirwan 1999, 112, 114, 117). Such attitudes are expressed in the various obituaries for beauty written by art practitioners and theorists in the last century (see, e.g., Steiner 2002), and were challenged by scholars who dispute the accuracy of the obituaries and urge a ‘restoration’ of beauty to its former, elevated status (see Cooper 2005, Mothersill 1984).

A second reason is a parallel suspicion to the very idea of moral education itself as a legitimate aim of the educational enterprise. Although it takes various forms, most concern a scepticism or rejection of the claim, once self-evident, that a core aim of education is to promote the moral development of children (see, e.g., Hand 2017). Some educationalists more moderately call for a reconceptualization of moral education as an aim, rather than its rejection. Whatever one’s views, there is work to do in rehabilitating moral education, if one wishes to argue for any substantive view about the importance to it of moral beauty.

Such attitudes of scepticism towards beauty and moral education place the idea of using moral beauty within projects of moral self-cultivation in a pincer movement. If beauty is too unserious a concept to take seriously, then the prospects are poor for moral beauty. If moral education is rejected, then defending substantive conceptions of it will be hard work. The task is therefore to simultaneously advance a conception of moral education complex enough to accommodate the concept of moral beauty. This paper is a modest effort in that direction. I try to do so by focusing on the ways that the moral beauty of *exemplars* have historically played in projects of moral education, focusing on classical Confucianism. What that tradition shows is that the manifest moral beauty of exemplars can attract and inspire people to projects of moral self-cultivation, indicating that an aesthetics of exemplarity can be effective as a component of moral education.

**Exemplarity, encounters, and admiration**

Central to many of the world’s ancient moral traditions are various forms of exemplar — of individuals who possesses certain types of excellence to an advanced, superlative degree. The centrality of exemplars to the moral life has recently been explored by Linda Zagzebski in her book, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (2017). Its core conviction is that human beings primarily learn excellences, virtues, roles, or ways of life through forms of encounter with people who exemplify them to a high standard—namely, exemplars. These may be big names, such as Jesus or the Buddha, or everyday figures from one’s own life, like the friend who exemplifies fairmindedness or the colleague who exemplifies the role of Professor of Philosophy. Certain special individuals might even exemplify an entire way of life, a whole integrated way of thinking, feeling, and acting, although they will be much rarer.

            In what follows, my focus is the aesthetic dimension of moral exemplars, therefore on the two features of Zagzebski’s account where this is clearest—namely, our *encounters* with exemplars and the emotional response to them she calls *admiration*.

 An encounter with an exemplar can take at least three different modes, depending on their status in relation to the aspirant. To start with, *personal encounters* occur when an aspirant can directly observe or interact with a living exemplar, whether an intimate (such as a colleague or teacher) or a contemporary (such as a political leader or social activist). A personal encounter might be incidental or sustained, involving observing or talking with the exemplar—perhaps by hearing them preach or watching them at work. But some personal encounters can be more sustained, involving living in close association with the exemplar as a student or disciple, say. Such personal encounters will tend to have certain advantages – a greater degree of empirical complexity, for instance, and greater opportunities for dialogue.

Second, there are *testimonial encounters*, reliant not on first-person experience, but on the oral or written accounts of others with such experience. Since these are suited both to living and historical exemplars, they are particularly important within moral life. Certain exemplars cannot be personally encountered by certain aspirants, either because they are historical figures or because they are inaccessible for social, geographical, or other reasons. In these cases, the testimonies of others can provide us with rich, informative descriptions of the sayings, deeds, and characters of exemplars. Ideally, such distant exemplars would be well-served by a variety of testimonies from different agents, which increases the empirical coverage of the exemplar and, crucially, provides opportunities for critical comparison and corroboration of different accounts.

A third mode, perhaps a sub-set of the last, might be called the *narrative encounter*. After sharing testimonies about exemplars, many aspirants are naturally disposed to collate, record, and share their descriptions into the stable form of narratives, usually written texts. Although this might often be for practical or aesthetic reasons, in many cases the reason will be the moral one of preserving the edifying example and instructions of the exemplar; think of the Gospels of the New Testament, the Islamic Hadith, and the Buddhist texts classified as Udāna and Avadāna, which record the ‘inspired speech’ and exploits of the Buddha.

Such exemplarist narratives are central to Zagzebski’s account of moral formation, since they serve two crucial functions – to *activate admiration* and *enable emulation*. When we encounter an exemplar, we can experience a range of positive moral emotions, among which admiration has for Zagzebski distinctive roles in ‘systematizing and harmonizing our moral judgments’ (2017, 31). Central among these roles, arguably, is the idea that admiring someone is a primary means for recognising them as admirable, therefore as excellent – as a model of virtue, say. When admiring someone, we experience them as exemplifying some aspect or dimension of the good, whether that be an excellent virtue, role, or way of life. An exemplar manifests one or more forms of excellence—ethical, artistic, or whatever—and so is admirable for that reason.

Before connecting admiration with aesthetic experiences, there are two additional points to note. First, we can go wrong or be deceived in their experiences of admiration. We might admire the wrong people, or admire the right people but for the wrong reasons – perhaps for their popularity rather than their virtue. Exemplarist theory is therefore really concerned with *reflective admiration*, during which our initial experiences of admiration are subjected to a series of critical ‘tests’ informed by a taxonomy of forms of deviant forms of admiration, of the sort outlined by Zagzebski (2017, 50ff).

Second, admiration can take more complex forms than a personal moral-emotional response to a person; there can be practices of admiration which are ‘shaped by narratives that are part of a common tradition’ (2017, 16). Such *structured admiration* can take various forms, one of which is the provision, by a culture, of ‘shared habits of admiration’, applied to a canonical set of exemplars ‘collectively recognise[d]’ (2017, 234). Such habits and canon ensure that *these* figures are admired in *these* ways for *these* reasons, enabling a culturally and historically extended chain of personal and collective moral development.

In these cases, what might be primary are not personal moral emotions, but more collective practices and experiences of admiration. But cultures can also impede admiration of exemplars, in at least two ways. First, the movement from admiration to emulation is not automatic and can be obstructed by various personal or social factors—a debilitating lack of self-esteem, for instance, or rigid caste systems that stifle the moral aspirations of the members of certain oppressed groups (Tanesini 2016). Champions of exemplarism must be alert to such social inequalities and develop effective ways to correct such obstructions.

A second way that cultures could impede reflective admiration is by discouraging or impugning the disposition to admire exemplars. Zagzebski, for one, voices the worry that a main threat to admiration of moral exemplars is a contemporary culture marked by ‘general cynicism about the admirable that leads to a reluctance to admire anybody’ (2017, 45). With cynicism as the default, any experiences of admiration may be dismissed, passed off, or over time consistently dismissed such that the disposition to admire begins to atrophy. Naturally, Zagzebski does not deny obvious cases of false or fallen exemplars: a main challenge built into exemplarity is that of resisting the power over others which it can confer. Such justified suspicion can, however, mutate into an indiscriminate suspicion towards exemplars or to the very concept of exemplarity.

In later sections of the paper, these points about the complex, collectivised character of admiration are woven into an account of moral beauty of exemplars. Before that, I need to (a) describe the latently aesthetic aspects of Zagzebski’s account of our encounters with exemplars and then (b) develop these into a more substantive aesthetics of exemplarity. The main claim is that the bodily comportment of exemplars consistently expresses their virtues or excellences in ways that are typically experienced as beautiful.

**Admiration, attraction, and virtue**

Zagzebski remarks that ‘admiration grounds morality in exemplarism’, since ‘our moral beliefs and practices can be derived from admiration’ of exemplars (2017, 168). At several points, she uses an alternative term, ‘attraction’, as when characterising that admiration as ‘a kind of attraction that carries with it an impetus to imitate’, such that the admired object or person – some exemplar, say – ‘appears attractive, not repulsive or evaluatively neutral’ (2017, 20, 35). In some earlier writings, too, Zagzebski describes the admirable exemplar as ‘imitably attractive’, with a ‘power to move us’ (2006, 60). Since attraction and repulsion are terms belonging to an aesthetic vocabulary, correlated with beauty and ugliness, they act as a basis for seeking within Zagzebski’s account a latent sympathy to the idea of moral beauty and therefore to an aesthetics of exemplarity.

Actually, one can do better than sympathy, since she explicitly refers twice, within *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, to the concept of moral beauty. In each case, an exemplar is described as aesthetically pleasing in ways that inflect the experience of admiration. First:

It is a good thing that there are people whose moral beauty attracts us. We are usually drawn to them initially because we admire something easily observable about them – typically, their acts ... physical bearing or speech (Zagzebski 2017, 60)

Moral beauty is here characterised as a form of aestheticized appreciation, which makes the exemplar attractive, at least to certain people. Moreover, the moral beauty is located within perceptible, ‘observable’ forms of bodily and verbal behaviour. The second reference comes in a discussion of Confucius, an example of the sage, exemplar of wisdom. Zagzebski submits that sages are not primarily identified by reference to overt acts, but rather by certain forms of aesthetically inflected experiences of their demeanour:

[Sages] attract our attention because they convey a sense of serenity and emotional tranquillity, perhaps holiness. They have the harmony of soul that few of us have attained, and we can see that harmony in their outward demeanour (Zagzebski 2017, 174)

Later in the book, Zagzebski ascribes to Confucius, and perhaps also to other sages, an ‘special form of charisma’, a tangible ‘glow of serenity’, additional to and distinct from the ‘high aesthetic sense’ evinced in his refined artistic sensibilities (2017, 174).

Such remarks are strong evidence of a latent sensitivity to the concept of moral beauty present in Zagzebski’s exemplarism. It’s unclear, on her account, whether such aesthetically inflected experiences of admiration are confined to or distinctive of sages as a class of exemplar or to manifestations of their characteristic excellence, wisdom. I suspect not, for reasons which will emerge shortly. For now, we need an account that can resolve three uncertainties about the concept of moral beauty, as it stands: (a) the relation of the moral to the aesthetic aspects of the experience; (b) some justification for use of an aesthetic vocabulary, to prevent its dismissal as figurative or rhetorical; then (c) the provision of at least some robust practices for the cultivation, perception, and appreciation of moral beauty. Without such an account, it would be too easy for sceptics and critics to dismiss the concept of moral beauty, thereby impugning its role in projects of moral self-cultivation.

Within contemporary scholarship, the concept and experience of moral beauty is explored in terms of what Nancy Sherman named ‘the aesthetics of character’, the ways in which ‘our bodies and faces and tone of voice communicate to others the depths of our character’ (2005, 282). But her focuses is the pragmatic, communicative aspects of an aesthetics of character, rather than the *beauty* of character in itself, that being what Alexander Nehemas calls the ‘highest’ beauty – of the ‘inner qualities’ of our ‘personality’ or ‘soul’ shown in outward appearance (2010, 59, 7). Experiences of moral beauty are on Mary Mothersill’s analysis a form of good, that afford pleasure, delight, or joy and – importantly – are able to inspire love or longing (1984, 262). An account of moral beauty must therefore honour its aesthetic, embodied, and moral aspects, while also accounting for its ability to inspire longing, love, or attraction.

The relevant account is provided by David E. Cooper, who argues for a form of beauty that consists in the expression of virtues, construed broadly as the excellences or moral qualities of a person (2009, 2010). He proposes the term ‘inner beauty’, since the term moral, in its modern philosophical usage, has too narrow a meaning: the relevant range of excellences or qualities includes attentiveness, delicacy, equanimity, as well as familiar moral virtues, like humility and kindness. But the term ‘inner’ should not be read as implying any radical separation of the inner and outer aspects of a person—of body from character. Our inner qualities are typically expressed, if not constituted, by associated forms of bodily comportment—friendliness in a smiling demeanour or open body language. Achieving a consistent looping effect between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ might actually be one aspect of certain forms of exemplarity, since not everyone is naturally expressive, meaning that acquiring expressive capacities is a genuine attainment.

Attainment of inner beauty requires a person to possess a virtuous or excellent character whose typical expressions in and through their voice, body, and demeanour is experienced as beautiful. Cooper’s claim is that certain forms of natural or acquired bodily comportment can express a person’s virtuous character, showing themselves in ways of acting, moving, and speaking that are beautiful. Such expression provides the necessary ‘intimate connection’ between the inner and outer, as when we find a smile beautiful because of the warmth and friendliness which it manifests. Naturally, smiles can be feigned, or be motivated by malice, and one can be friendly even if one has the bad luck to be born with a dour, inexpressive face. But these cases are consistent with the central claim that bodily expressions of virtue are experienced as beautiful for the reason that they typically, under ordinary conditions, express virtues. Seeing the smile of the warm-hearted elicits pleasure in a way the smile of the malevolent does not.

Cooper’s account of inner beauty as the consistent bodily expression of virtues or excellences of character offers a way of developing Zagzebski’s several remarks on the moral beauty of sages and other exemplars. What needed explaining, recall, was the relation of the moral and aesthetic aspects of moral beauty and a justification of the use of an aesthetic vocabulary for ‘inner’ qualities rather than outer phenomena, such as sunsets and sonatas. The inner beauty account explains, first, the *moral* aspect of the ‘moral beauty’ of exemplars: what is being expressed are the various virtues or excellences they possess in the expanded sense used by Cooper, which encompasses such qualities as ‘serenity’, ‘emotional tranquillity’, and ‘harmony of soul’. Second, the account explains and justifies the *aesthetic* aspect of the moral beauty of exemplars: a set of ‘inner’ virtues of character are expressed in forms of outer bodily comportment available for perceptual experience. Upon encountering exemplars, we *see* tranquillity in their face, *hear* calm in their voice, and *sense* equanimity in their demeanour—this being Zagzebski’s point when talking of the ‘harmony’ of Confucian sages being ‘seen’ in their ‘outward demeanour’.

A third advantage of the virtue-based account of inner beauty is that it explains the phenomena of moral attraction, the capacity of exemplars to elicit admiration and attract people to the forms of goodness which they embody. Such inner beauty, firstly, attracts us aesthetically because it ensures the exemplar is experienced as beautiful, charismatic, radiant, or otherwise positively aesthetically valenced. Secondly, what the exemplar manifests in their words, posture, and demeanour are virtues or excellences. Taken together, we can say that the content and form of what the exemplar expresses is both aesthetically and morally impressive—or, better, that their inner beauty dissolves any distinction between those two domains, which might be one aspect of what Zagzebski called their ‘harmony’.

The inner beauty of exemplars is primarily experienced as moral attraction: the aesthetically charged admiration for their virtues or excellences as expressed in forms of bodily comportment experienced as beautiful. Such an aesthetics of exemplarity fits Zagzebski’s remarks and – as I now argue – is also evident in the practices of moral education of a tradition with a robust exemplarist character – classical Confucianism.

**Confucianism and inner beauty**

Zagzebski suggests that exemplarism can be useful for moral education, meaning the practices which aim at ‘personal moral improvement’, to ‘develop and alter … moral sensibilities’ (2017, 8, 232). Unfortunately, little role is made for experiences of moral beauty in either her own remarks or the literature that has emerged devoted to exemplarist moral education. Perhaps the most sophisticated application of exemplarism to moral education is Michel Croce and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza’s pluralistic exemplar-based form of moral education. Although they talk of encounters with exemplars being able to ‘attract the notice’s interest’, to ‘inspire’ and sustain ‘strong attachment’, this is not specifically described as having an aesthetic dimension (2017, 6-7ff). Such neglect of the aesthetic is also evident in other work on exemplarist moral education (Engelden *et al* 2018, 348). To repair this neglect, consider the ways that moral attraction to exemplars functioned within classical Confucianism, whose exemplarist character is well described by Amy Olberding in her 2012 book, *Moral Exemplars in the* Analects.

Confucianism is the most enduring of the once-numerous ‘schools’ of the Chinese philosophical tradition, whose origins predate the life of its eponym, Confucius (551 – 479 BCE). Its abiding concern is moral self-cultivation, sustained practices that aim to endow aspirants with a substantive array of moral, artistic, and social competencies or virtues (*de*). Success in this endeavour, whose difficulty Confucius often emphasises, is marked by attainment of the status of *jūnzǐ*, a term originally meaning ‘aristocrat’, but revised to mean ‘consummate person’—the person whose humanity is fully realised, a complex ideal pursued by Confucius and his disciples.

The teachings and examples that inform Confucian moral education are recorded in the *Analects*, not a book authored by the Master, but rather an edited collection of anecdotes, remarks, and events. Such literary features make interpretation of the moral theory latent in the text a difficult task, replete with hermeneutical problems (see Rosemont 2013, chs. 2-5). For present purposes, I content myself with following Olberding and other advocates of a virtue-ethical readings of Confucian ethics, such as Angle and Slote (2013).

Within the terms introduced earlier, the literary style and content of the *Analects* enable sustained narrative encounters with a variety of exemplars, the most obvious being Confucius, despite his denials of his status as a *jūnzǐ* (5.27, 7.26).[[1]](#footnote-1) Exemplars can be outstanding for their aspirations to virtue, as well as its successful attainment, and the extent of Confucius’ moral self-appraisal is that he would ‘work at it without growing tired and encourage others without growing weary’ (7.34). Aspiration as a form of exemplarity is integral to moral self-cultivation because it underscores the need for sustained, disciplined practice and learning—the different stages of which we see illustrated in the characters, efforts, and failures of the various figures depicted in the *Analects*.

Olberding characterises the descriptions of the various aspirants and exemplars of the *Analects* as a form of ‘moral portraiture’, some of them highly dense and detailed, others focusing on some general features of their subjects (2012, 91). Such portraiture is one strategy for activating moral admiration, by providing images of the excellent or virtuous comportment of exemplars. Such narrative encounters will lack the empirical richness and affective immediacy of a personal encounter, although still succeed in conveying what Olberding calls Conficius’ ‘personal style’ or ‘demeanour’, this being ‘the manner in which one performs moral actions’, such as the acute correctness of his comportment and its sense of gracefulness, ‘power and ease’ (2012, 92, 90).

Olberding proposes that the *Analects*’ style and content are apt to capture central aspects of ‘the experience of exemplars’, since the diverse, anecdotal accounts of the Master’s embodied personal style are ‘well fitted’ to the guiding Confucian vision of the consummate life (2012, 90). When we are told that Confucius was ‘respectful and circumspect’ when visiting a village, to the point of seeming ‘at a loss for words’, only to speak eloquently, albeit with ‘caution and restraint’ at court or in the temple, there are lessons about consummate speech (10.1). The moral and social appropriateness of modes of speech depends upon one’s role, context, and relationship to those around – respectful circumspection for simple people, restrained eloquence among the noble. Gathered together, such portraits present actual or aspiring *jūnzǐ* as achieving ritually correct personal style and demeanour which manifests their virtues. But are these experiences of inner beauty?

Contemporary work on classical Confucian aesthetics focuses on such qualities as consistency, and harmony, which are morally textured, albeit in subtler ways than is often supposed (see Fu and Wang 2015). Specific accounts of the Confucian aesthetics of persons, however, tend not to focus on beauty, despite an interest in ‘somaesthetic expressions of … moral dispositions’ (Mullis 2017, 144). An exception, here, is Nicholas Gier, who speaks of ‘an aesthetics of virtue based on inner moral beauty’ (2001a, 42). But he strictly separates inner and outer beauties, obscuring the crucial claim that the ‘moral beauty’ of exemplars requires the outer expression of inner qualities. In a sense, such accounts identify the components, but do not bring them together in the ways indicated by Cooper’s account of inner beauty.

I propose that a Confucian aesthetics of exemplarity takes the following form. The consummate person cultivates and exercises their virtues or excellences, which are consistently expressed through forms of ritually structured bodily comportment – a harmony of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ which, when perceived by others, will typically be experienced as beautiful. Such Confucian exemplarist aesthetics preserves and unifies the main components identified by Gier, Mullis, Olberding, and others—the intimate connection between ethical and aesthetic qualities, say, and the vital importance of ritualised bodily comportment. Moreover, the account explains why *jūnzǐ* are morally attractive in ways that confirm their importance to Confucian projects of moral self-cultivation. When encountering such exemplars, their demeanour and personal style expresses an array of moral and cultural excellences, such as gracefulness, ease, ritual correctness and a dynamic harmony which is, itself, an admirable attainment.

Confucius often testifies to the relationship between beauty, bodily comportment, and virtues or excellences. Book ten is full of descriptions of his own comportment, as recorded by his disciples, which show how a consummate person aims to express the proper virtues, values, and motives through forms of outer behaviour that are both ritually correct and situationally appropriate. For instance:

When called on by his lord to receive a guest, his countenance would become alert and serious, and he would hasten his steps. When he saluted those in attendance beside him—extending his clasped hands to the left or right, as their position required—his robes remained perfectly arrayed, both front and back. Hastening forward, he moved smoothly, as though gliding upon wings (10.3)

Consummate comportment emerges, in such examples, as a complex, dynamic affair – always serious and attentive, sometimes formal and severe, at other times at ease and relaxed, and all the while manifesting an array of virtues and excellences. According to these accounts, such comportment harmoniously merged aesthetic and ethical values, unlike inferior forms of conduct, that might be ‘perfectly beautiful’ but not ‘perfectly good’ (3.25). Confucius often warned against such inferior beauties, which only *appear* beautiful, but lack the authentic motives, feelings, and values that elevate them to the status of ‘perfect beauty’—as when he says that music is not merely a matter of ‘bells and drums’ (17.11).

The ‘perfect beauty’ which emerges, from these remarks, consists of the ‘inner’ virtues of the person finding consistent, harmonious expression in their ‘outer’ bodily conduct and practice. Such inner beauty also plays essential roles in Confucian moral self-cultivation, which is the theme of the next section.

**Inner beauty and moral education**

It should be clear that inner beauty is an achievement, something difficult that merits admiration, hence its being a typical feature of exemplars of virtue and wisdom. There are difficulties in cultivating the relevant virtues and excellences, but also in acquiring the capacities needed to properly express and perceive inner beauty. Moreover, these capacities can only be properly cultivated and exercised under certain appropriately supportive conditions—a supportive culture of appreciation of inner beauty, say.

The cultivation of capacities for expression and perception of inner beauty are integral components of projects of moral education, at least within cultures where an exemplarist aesthetics is taken seriously. When undergoing moral education, one can acquire the capacities needed to cultivate their virtues, properly express them in their bodily comportment, and to appreciatively perceive the inner beauty of others. When a moral culture affords rich, structured opportunities to develop and to exercise these capacities, it can generate and sustain new forms or experiences of beauty—namely, inner beauty. When a culture is generative of novel beauties, let’s describe it as being *kaligenic*, from the Greek, *kalos*, meaning ‘beautiful’, ‘good’, ‘worthy’—a mixing of ethical and aesthetic meanings mirrored in the Chinese term, *mei*, a word whose roots are discussed by Zehou Li (2010, ch.1).

I want to argue that Confucianism aspired to be a kaligenic culture. Since it will be a large task to identify the range of kaligenic components of Confucianism over the course of its history, my aim here is just to sketch out some general features that help generate and sustain experiences of the inner beauty of *jūnzǐ*.

To start with, a kaligenic culture must *affirm* the existence and importance of inner beauty as a desirable attainment worth being taken seriously by those pursuing a flourishing life. Such affirmation helps to ensure that awareness of inner beauty is on the agenda of moral aspirants, thereby making it harder to dismiss or explain away. It can be implicit, as in Confucius’s comments that he taught ‘cultural refinement’ and ‘comportment’ (7.25) and is clearly attested to in descriptions of *jūnzǐ*, who – in the words of Nicholas Gier – ‘literally “image” the virtues in their bodies’, in ways that make ‘evident the fusion of the good, the elegant, and the beautiful’ (2001b, 283).

At other times, the exemplars in a kaligenic culture offer explicit, authoritative affirmations of inner beauty. Confucius offers such affirmations, as when remarking that the ‘harmonious ease’ of their respectful, courteous ritual practice ‘makes the Way of the Former Kings so beautiful’ (1.12). Renowned disciples, such as Mencius, similarly praised the ‘rightness, decorum, and wisdom’ of the *junzi*, which is not only ‘rooted in his heart’ but also ‘apparent in the brightness of his countenance’ (*Mencius* 7A21). Such explicit affirmations of inner beauty are practical and motivational: many aspirants will initially lack any sense or experience of inner beauty, making it harder for them to appreciate their nature or significance. If so, affirmations act as a source of confidence about the reality of the phenomenon to sustain their self-cultivations despite their initial uncertainties.

A second kaligenic feature of a culture is the availability of socially embedded *practices of expression*, which guide aspirants in the correct manifestation of virtues in their bodily comportment. Chong Kim-Chong refers to Confucian ‘training in a certain ethico-aesthetic character, one which pays attention to form’ (1998, 70). By attending to the beautiful comportment of consummate persons, one engages in an empirical investigation of virtue—what Zagzebski calls ‘observation’ of how virtue *looks*, *sounds*, and *feels*. The Confucian emphasis on ritual conduct provides a socially-entrenched system of expressive practices, stipulating the proper embodied forms of respect, filial piety, humility, and other virtues in such actions as greetings, bows, and salutations.

The third and closely related feature of a kaligenic culture are a set of *practices of perception*, mastery of which enables a person to detect and appreciate the inner beauty of others. Since inner beauty might be subtle, such practices play a real role in moral life, especially within cultures that privilege collectivist conceptions of human flourishing. The *jūnzǐ*, for instance, enjoys experiencing the ease, harmony, and beauty of ritually correct conduct and therefore actively attends to others’ comportment with an understanding the significance of personal and contextual factors – hence the focus in the *Analects* on the aesthetic micro-practices embedded in everyday activities like arranging mats, eating food, and greeting guests (see, for instance, 10.10 ff).

The practices of expression and perception are obviously embedded within the wider structures of ‘rites’ famously prized by Confucians, the whole array of moral and social norms and practices that facilitate mutually meaningful social life. Although rites serve many practical and moral functions, such as ensuring order and harmony within a community, this does not exhaust their functions. Confucius, in fact, often shows his frustration at narrow conceptions of the nature and significance of the rites, like when they are identified with their external forms without being performed with the proper ‘spirit’, motives, or emotions – to be ‘present’ in the rites, knowing that emotions such as respect and grief are the true ‘roots of ritual’ (3.4, 3.12, 3.26). For this reason, inner beauty and ritual conduct ought to be, to a degree, reflective of the distinctive feelings and character of each particular agent. An authentic form of inner beauty must always involve a ‘personal appropriation of norms’ (Gier 2001b, 299).

Importantly, such practices should not only enable perception of inner beauty, but also encourage its appreciation, urging one to experience it with delight. Since for a Confucian, explains Chong Kim-Chong, education aimed to instil ‘not only knowledge of the rites, but delight in their form’, a person is at fault if they act in ritually correct ways, but without accompanying joy (1998, 87). So, too, a person who perceives the inner beauty of others, especially exemplars, without any sense of pleasure, joy, or delight – a claim that is defended by Ha Poong Kim (2006). Delight in virtue is itself an excellence, not least since beauty can attract and sustain our attention and motivate us to learn and care about goodness.

A final feature of a kaligenic culture is the deployment of inner beauty as a means of *attracting* people to the good life, a tendency that explains and justifies the effort involved in cultivating those expressive and perceptual capacities. Persons with inner beauty, argues Cooper, are attractive in the sense of their ‘exerting an energy or radiance that draws people’ to them (2018, 131). Such inner beauty radiates outwards through a person’s demeanour, actions, and voice, capturing people’s attention, then securing their interest, curiosity, and even devotion. In the classical Chinese tradition, the virtue of the consummate person was regarded as having the power to attract and compel other people—to ‘transform’ even ‘uncouth’ barbarians, says Confucius (9.14). In the famous image, ‘the Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass— when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend’ (12.19).

Such energy, radiance, or power is a characteristic of inner beauty, which an exemplar can use to first attract other people to the moral life, then to try to sustain them through its difficulties. An obvious way to make the moral life attractive, despite its difficulties and demands, would after all be to make those who have achieved such excellence themselves literally attractive, in the appropriately morally-inflected ways. It also explains what is distinctive about the specific mode of admiration that I called moral attraction: some exemplars elicit strongly positive aesthetic responses, as well as positive emotional responses, since certain forms of exemplary conduct will take on pleasing, beautiful forms in a way that others do not. Compare the beauty of a ritually correct Confucian *jūnzǐ*, marked by ease, grace, and harmony, with the admirable, but not aesthetically pleasing appearance of a grimy, exhausted Medicine sans Frontieres doctor. Since only some forms of manifest virtue can take beautiful forms, only some exemplars will be detectable by their beauty.

These four features of a kaligenic culture are all present in Confucianism, which makes it a kaligenic culture, able to generate new forms and experiences of beauty. Its array of rituals, artistic and musical practices, historical narratives, catalogues of exemplars - and much else - create a rich context within which aspirants can develop and exercise the capacities needed to achieve inner beauty for themselves, while also perceiving and enjoying that of their fellow aspirants, too. Put another way, part of what one learns during the Confucian projects of moral education are effective means to cultivate, express, and perceive one’s own and others’ inner beauty. Acquiring virtues and other artistic and cultural attainments can be marked by the progressive attainment of inner beauty, for oneself, and the reciprocal appreciation of that of others, too. In this sense, moral self-cultivation is aesthetically enriching—or, better, to become consummate overcomes the distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic until one becomes, as Confucius put it, at once ‘perfectly good’ and ‘perfectly beautiful’ (3.25).

An eminent commentator remarks that the *Analects* incorporates practices of moral self-cultivation such as ‘emulating and internalizing … ideal models of behavior and speech’, with Confucius as the primary exemplar (Slingerland 2006:239). The more one succeeds in emulating such consummate exemplars, the more is able to manifest those internalised ideals in one’s comportment, thereby gaining inner beauty – the beauty in the grace, ease and harmony of the *jūnzǐ*, the consummate person. Such forms of aestheticized moral attraction and embodied moral beauty should be investigated by contemporary advocates of exemplarist moral education. Attention to traditions that incorporate such experiences and concepts, such as Confucianism, can also hopefully inspire interest in exemplarist aesthetics.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to an audience at the University of Genoa and two anonymous referees for their encouragement and comments, to the editors for their kind invitation, and to Linda Zagzebski for inspiring my initial interest in this topic.

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1. References to the *Analects* are to book and section. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)