**A pluralist account of spiritual exemplarity**

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**Forthcoming in:**

Tyler McNabb and Victoria S. Harrison (eds.), Philosophy and the Spiritual Life (London: Routledge, 2021).

**1. Introduction**

This chapter argues that the philosophical reflection on forms of spiritual life should take as a primary focus the historical and cultural variety of forms of spiritual exemplarity. What we find, across spiritual traditions, are certain persons who are distinctive as exemplars of a life devoted to the aspiration to, if not attainment of, some set of spiritual goods, such as virtue, saintliness, holiness, enlightenment, or other forms of intimacy or harmony with the deeper grounds or source of the world.

Traditionally, attention to spiritual exemplars has been part of theology and religious studies, rather than mainstream philosophy of religion, albeit with honourable exceptions. Victoria Harrison has developed a model of interreligious dialogue she labels ‘exemplar reasoning’, organised around the idea that, at least in the Christian and Muslim traditions on which she focuses, ‘selected individuals embody the values, and express the beliefs, at the heart of their faith tradition’ (Harrison,2011: 30). What these traditions offer are forms of ‘internally coherent religious life’, that are ‘structured around the embodiment of certain values’ (2011: 33). Similarly, the phenomenologist of religion, Mark Wynn, argues that understanding the lived experience of spiritual life is best achieved by scrutiny of those who exemplify ‘an ideal of life to which other human beings should aspire’ (2012: 127). Spiritual exemplars, on these views, are those who ‘embody’ in tangible form the values, goods, or ‘ideals of life’ integral to spiritual visions of human beings and their relation to the world.

Such projects should be welcomed as robust efforts to inspire philosophical interest in spiritual exemplars in relation to specific issues, such as interreligious dialogue and analysis of the lived experience of spiritual life. Harrison’s and Wynn’s work obviously has wider interest and significance, of course, including for such familiar topics in philosophy of religion as the nature of religious belief, responses to suffering, or the relation of religious convictions to ethical values. But much of what they say about spiritual exemplarity relates to their own interests and concerns, meaning that a space remains open for a more general framework for thinking philosophically about the nature and roles of spiritual exemplars.

In this chapter, my aim is to sketch out a general way of thinking about forms of spiritual exemplarity. It is based on Linda Zagzebski’s recent account of an exemplarist moral theory (2017). Its guiding conviction is that human beings primarily acquire virtues, excellences, and other attainments through encounters with people who exemplify them to an advanced or superlative degree. I argue we can use Zagzebski’s exemplarism to help construct a pluralistic conception of the variety of forms of spiritual exemplarity, as they appear within some of the major spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western.

Careful attention to these forms of exemplarity points to substantive amendments to Zagzebski’s exemplarism. I will argue, first, there are at least three main types of spiritual exemplar, distinguished by their fundamental *aspirations*: their underlying conception of the nature and demands of spiritual achievement. If so, there should be no talk in the singular of ‘spiritual exemplars’, only a variety of forms of spiritual exemplarity. Second, responses to exemplars are more complex and uncertain than the sequence of ‘admiration’ and ‘emulation’ suggests. By attending to encounters with spiritual exemplars across cultures, there is a dynamic and heterogeneous range of responses: an exemplar can evoke various positive and negative responses, and also appear ambiguous in certain respects. Finally, encounters with spiritual exemplars do not always or necessarily result in what Zagzebski calls *emulation*, the practice of taking something as a model for oneself. Spiritual exemplars can positively affect others in various other ways, for instance, by initiating or deepening an interest in spirituality, challenging a currently unreflective attitude towards an existing set of spiritual commitments, or by vividly manifesting a previously unknown or unappreciated form of spiritual life.

The chapter ends by proposing some potential ways to develop the project of studying the cross-cultural and historical plurality of forms of spiritual exemplarity. Such work evidently requires closer contact with theology, religious studies, phenomenology, and other disciplines that are too often neglected within the discipline of philosophy of religion. If studying spiritual exemplarity gives us a way to enrich that discipline, topically and methodologically, that is an additional advantage.

**2. Exemplarism**

A striking feature of the world’s ancient philosophical traditions of India, Greece, and China is the presence of special privileged figures who act as exemplars of virtue, wisdom, and other attainments constitutive of a good life. Some of the most obvious include Socrates, Kǒngzǐ, and the Buddha, celebrated as teachers and practitioners of philosophical ways of life. Over time, such exemplars were classified relative to the typologies of their cultures—the sage of ancient Greece, the Indian *buddhas* and *yogis*, the Confucian *jūnzǐ*, the Daoist *zhēnrén*, plus similar figures in other cultures outside the Greek, Indian, and Chinese philosophical traditions.

Although the history of exemplarism remains to be told, one can safely declare that the concept of exemplarity was increasingly marginalized within late modern Western moral philosophy—Kant, for instance, allowed only limited roles for human examples of goodness, which are almost entirely absent from consequentialist moral theories. The revival of virtue theory was in part an effort to restore sensitivity about concrete agents to moral-philosophical reflection, of course, at least if one regards virtuous persons as exemplary. By attending to exemplars in this chapter, the hope is that we can restore to contemporary attention a feature of moral practice and experience once regarded as indispensable to any serious effort to pursue a good life.

It is within this historical and philosophical context that Zagzebski develops her form of exemplarist moral theory, intended by her as foundational insofar as it takes its single point of origin in exemplars of goodness. Such exemplars play various roles in our everyday moral practice, initially by exemplifying forms of goodness, then by guiding and sustaining efforts to acquire such forms of goodness for ourselves—activities that can proceed prior to, and hence independently of, any moral theory on the part of the exemplar or the aspirants. Zagzebski is clear that theory and argumentation play a role in moral life, albeit in both a conceptually and sequentially secondary sense. An informed, reflective relationship with our moral convictions, on this view, might be desirable or even essential for certain advanced forms of moral practice—handling new or contentious moral situations, for instance. But much can be done by way of moral self-cultivation without intellectually demanding moral theorizing, something whose stipulation would constitute, in Amy Olberding’s phrase, an undue ‘bias against goodness’ (2012: 4). An exemplarist account of moral formation therefore relies much less on rational persuasion and moral theorizing. This being so, what is the exemplarist conception of moral reason?

Zagzebski argues that exemplarist moral reason has two primary components, at least as I’ll reconstruct it here, which are *exemplars* and *encounters*. Concisely put, certain types of encounter with exemplars provoke affective, cognitive, and practical processes that can result in the transformation of a moral aspirant. In Zagzebski’s terms, encountering an exemplar will trigger the positive emotional response of *admiration*, which, under appropriate conditions, initiates a process of *emulation*, where an aspirant models their conduct or character on the admired features of the exemplar. In its general form, exemplarism ‘begins with exemplars of moral goodness identified directly by the emotion of admiration’, who therefore appear to us as ‘the persons who are…most deserving of emulation’ (2017: 10, 15). To fill out this sketch, let’s say more about exemplars.

At its most general, an ‘exemplar’ is any person who is supremely excellent in relevant respects, whom Zagzebski described as marking the ‘the upper reaches of human capability’ (2017: 1). We can think about exemplars in terms of their *type* and *classes*. We can distinguish four types, depending on the physical and temporal proximity of the exemplar to aspirants. *Intimates* are living persons available, at least in principle, for direct encounters—perhaps the kind parent or generous colleague whom one could meet, converse with, or even live with in intimate association. *Contemporaries* are also living persons, but ones whom one has not encountered directly—an eminent moral hero, for instance, separated from oneself by social, geographical, or other obstacles, such as activists working in remote areas. *Historical figures* are deceased, therefore unavailable for direct or personal interaction, such as the Sage Kings esteemed by Confucians of the classical period or the heroes of the ancient Greek world. Such historical exemplars can still play various roles in contemporary moral life, of course, but only when they are sustained by memory, narratives, or tradition. Zagzebski is also open to the idea of *fictional exemplars*, who never actually existed but can still act for us as exemplars of forms of human excellence—a character from an edifying *Bildungsroman*, or the moral heroes of children’s literature.

An exemplar can change type over time, depending on the particularities of their life and postmortem fortunes. The Buddha began as a contemporary figure, attracting to himself various disciples for whom he was an intimate, offering direct instruction and example as they lived in close association with him in the early *sangha* (‘school’, ‘community’). After his death, of course, the Buddha became an historical figure, thanks to the organized efforts of his many followers who recorded descriptions of his life, character, and teachings, which were in turn sustained by institutionalized Buddhist communities. Such transition between types can also be seen in other paradigmatic moral and spiritual exemplars, whose lives and afterlives often follow a similar pattern: a charismatic exemplar attracts or gathers a group of disciples, united by a common commitment to a certain ‘way of life’, which they enact in some small, dedicated community, such as those that formed around Epicurus, Plotinus, and Kǒngzǐ. After the death of the exemplar, some of the disciples begin to collate and edit descriptions of their conduct, character, and teachings—the Gospels of the New Testament, the Islamic Hadith, and the Udāna and *Avadāna* (which detail the ‘inspired utterances’ and exploits of the Buddha) or the *Lúnyǔ*, which records the actions, sayings, and teachings of Kǒngzǐ. In most cases, the disciples and texts provide a basis for the formation of organized communities, the most successful of which mature into enduring traditions of increasing sophistication.

Since there are types of exemplar, we already have both plurality and an argument for a historical and cross-cultural dimension to the study of forms of exemplarity. Within some traditions, an exemplar acts as the founder of the tradition, as with Buddhism, giving them the privileged role of initiator of a tradition. Other exemplars, however, continue or renovate the tradition to which they belong—Kǒngzǐ, for instance, insisted that he ‘transmitted’ an earlier, venerable tradition of Rúism, rather than creating one anew, a claim to innovation he rejected. Some exemplars continued within ways of life that dominated an entire culture, while others were confined to moral sub-cultures or disappeared after their deaths, leaving no tradition of their own except in whatever influence they had upon other more enduring traditions.

The variety of exemplars is increased once we distinguish, as Zagzebski does, between their different *classes*. A class of exemplar is distinguished by its special relationship to some particular virtue and, perhaps, a wider set of associated sensibilities, concerns, and goals. The different classes are, moreover, historically contingent and culturally situated—the classical period of China is incomprehensible without the sage, while ancient Greece makes no sense without the hero, an ideal gradually pushed out of European culture by the saint (see 2017: 97). In these remarks, one sees the three classes of exemplar described by Zagzebski: the *sage* is an exemplar of wisdom, the *hero* is the exemplar of courage, and the *saint* is the exemplar of compassion, *caritas*, or concern for others. Since these three classes are non-exhaustive, one could offer other candidates, on the condition that they are both admirable and emulable. An interesting candidate is the Existential Hero, the exemplar of authenticity, of the sort sketched in the pages of Sartre, Camus, and other existentialist writers.

Two points should be noted about the classes of exemplar. First, they will take specific forms within and across different cultures. The sage, for instance, may be a generic class that we can find across ancient Indian, Greek, and Chinese cultures. But the specific forms of sages exhibit the considerable variety documented by historical studies of conceptions of sagehood by, for instance, Stephen C. Angle (2009) and Pierre Hadot (1995). Such plurality of classes is, then, accompanied by a plurality of sub-classes of exemplar, a point which I argue later should be integral to our thinking about spiritual exemplarity. Second, certain exemplars will be very difficult to assign to a single class. Some exemplars are sufficiently complex in their character, deeds, and teachings that they could be placed within different classes, at least depending on the particular aspects of their life to which one draws attention. Jesus, for instance, could be esteemed as an exemplar of courage (resisting Roman oppression) or wisdom (debating with the Pharisees) or compassion (ministering to the vulnerable). Such different classifications will reflect the particular agenda of different people, generating the sorts of difficult hermeneutic issues familiar to theologians. Indeed, these sorts of issues offer another reason to encourage closer contact between philosophy and theology, the latter of which has greater expertise concerning the formation, reception, and transmission of narrative accounts of exemplars.

Given these various types and classes, we can already note at least three features of a revised exemplarism as a basis for studying forms of spiritual exemplarity. To start with, the types of exemplar can be used to think about historical patterns in the trajectories of spiritual exemplars. Within a mature spiritual tradition, three main types of exemplar will be available: *intimates* (monastics, priests, imams), *contemporary* (senior figures in the spiritual hierarchy, like the Pope or the Dalai Lama), *historical* (Christian saints, Buddhist Patriarchs, the founders of the traditions). Next, the plurality of exemplars within a spiritual tradition will be organized ecclesiastically and institutionally. Such traditions have complex systems of grades and ranks connected to substantive practices of initiation and training, all guided by articulated visions of what it means to pursue and achieve spiritual attainment. In this way, exemplars are always of a piece with aspects of spiritual life often neglected by mainstream philosophies of religion—practices, narratives, communities, and traditions (see Kidd 2018).

A final feature of a revised exemplarism particularly appropriate to spiritual exemplars is the acknowledgement of the variety of responses they can elicit. Given the variety of types and classes, there is no obvious reason to confine the responses to admiration and emulation, on the positive side, or contempt and resistance, on the negative. Granted, Zagzebski gives us two caveats. First, there are other positive emotional responses directed to ‘supremely good persons’, including what she calls *adoration* and *awe*. Since their respective objects are the divine and transpersonal ideals, they offer interesting prospects for those spiritual exemplars taken to embody the divine or instantiate these ideals in tangible form, as with Jesus and the Doctrine of the Incarnation (see 2017: 44). But there are other potential positive responses, too, such as curiosity, delight, fascination, interest, or wonder, each of which are arguably distinct from admiration, construed as a positive affective response to a person or thing directed at what appears good and would be good to possess or acquire for oneself (see 2017: ch.2, 2–3).

Second, encounters with exemplars can provoke negative responses, too. Zagzebski describes several, like contempt, envy, spite, and what Nietzsche called *ressentiment* (see 2017: ch.2, 6). Whether one responds negatively depends, of course, on a variety of factors, many of which turn on the psychosocial profile of those who encounter them—some are, says Kierkegaard, incapable of ‘surrendering’ to those they admire, so drift into a corrosive envy. But culture is also an influencing factor, with Zagzebski worrying that many modern people evince a ‘refusal to admire the admirable’, due to a pervasive ‘suspicion’ that putative exemplars are not and cannot be as good as they appear (2017: 51, 58). A form of ‘polychromatic’ conception of exemplarity along these lines, inspired by Nietzsche, has been developed by Mark Alfano (2018).

The upshot of these remarks is that encounters with exemplars can be complicated in the sense that they can elicit a wide range of positive and negative affective responses which are sensitive to the practices and contexts through and in which they occur. In the following section, my proposal is that a main purpose of spiritual communities and traditions is enabling *structured encounters* with exemplars. Since encounters with appropriate exemplars function to initiate and sustain processes of self-cultivation, there is an obvious motivation on the part of the members of spiritual communities to ensure they occur in maximally effective ways—a concern amplified by the soteriological aims of spiritual ways of life, to achieve salvation or enlightenment for oneself, if not for all sentient beings.

With these remarks on the complexity of exemplars in place, I turn to the related issue of the complexity of forms of encounters with them. The main theme of what follows is that the particular character of our responses to spiritual exemplars depends upon our sympathies to the specific aspirations which they embody. I distinguish three spiritual aspirations, which gather together different candidate spiritual exemplars from different traditions, which shape the sorts of responses an aspirant will have upon encountering them. I label these aspirations *allegiance*, *enlightened insight*, and *emulation*. If they are genuinely distinct, then we ought to abandon talk in the singular of a category of ‘spiritual exemplars’.

**3. Encounters with exemplars**

The variety of types of exemplar means that there are different *modes of encounter*, different ways that a person can interact with and be affected by an exemplar. Although Zagzebski does not distinguish these, they are significantly different from one another, not least because they depend for their form on the practices and traditions associated with them. One of the main functions of spiritual traditions, on my view, is that they facilitate *structured encounters* with their various exemplars that maximize, as it were, their potentially transformative power. An upshot of this is that our encounters with and responses to spiritual exemplars will be largely contingent on the ways they are structured by the practices, traditions, and contexts of a way of life.

*Personal encounters* involve direct contact with an exemplar, meeting or interacting with them on a one-off, repeated, or more sustained basis. Since this mode only applies to living exemplars, it has certain advantages: a personal encounter is likely to be empirically richer, more affectively charged, and has the potential to be dialogical. In the most fully developed kinds, a personal encounter involves living in close, sustained association with the exemplar, affording continuous opportunities for close observation of their conduct and acquaintance with their thoughts, feelings, and convictions. In these cases, the exemplar can act as both a practical model for a life of virtue and wisdom and a teacher or theoretician, promulgating a set of doctrines. Indeed, within the ancient Greek philosophical ‘ways of life’, the sages led a life which enacted their doctrines, thereby proving them in practice, as it were, erasing the distinction between theory and practice (see Vaccarezza 2020).

The second mode is the *testimonial encounter*, which rely on reports, recollections, and descriptions of those who had personal encounters of their own with an exemplar.They play on a natural tendency of many people, after encountering someone who impresses them, to excitedly tell others about their actions, deeds, or character. Such testimonies may be articulate or effusive, offering a general sketch of the exemplar or detailing some specific act or remark that deeply impressed the witness. Often, multiple testimonies are collected to form composite pictures of the exemplar, as other witnesses contribute their own stories and memories and, of course, their own ‘takes’ on them. Moreover, the oral testimonies are often selected, recorded, and edited in the form of narratives in a variety of genres, like the biographical and epistolary. Within spiritual traditions, such exemplarist narratives are one among a range of types of literature. Buddhism, for instance, includes *vinayas*, which detail monastic discipline, and *sūtras*, discourses attributed to the Buddha and his disciples, which come in a dozen varieties, such as instructions, verses, and stories of previous rebirths. Such texts provide the wider context for testimonial encounters, detailing historical, chronological, doctrinal, moral, and cultural dimensions of the life and practice of an exemplar.

Zagzebski argues that encounters with exemplars must have two features if they are to be positively transformative. First, they must *activate admiration* for the exemplar, which serves a double function of identifying exemplars of goodness and providing the motivation necessary to moral self-cultivation. Zagzebski actually characterizes exemplarism as a moral theory based on the emotion of admiration, although also notes various ways that admiring a person can degenerate—for instance, into mindless adulation or uncritical veneration. She therefore proposes various ‘tests of admiration’, performance of which is intended to ensure *reflective admiration* (2017: ch.2, sect. 6).

Second, encounters must *enable emulation*, giving aspirants sufficient information that they can model themselves on whichever aspects of the exemplar elicited their admiration—their actions, motives, habits, ‘life-style’, and so on. The dense, detailed descriptions of the character and comportment of exemplarist narratives do this, of course, as one sees in the Gospels, Hadith, and *Lúnyǔ*. But there are other responses to exemplars, beyond admiration and its negative counterpart, which Zagzebski proposes is contempt. Moreover, emulation is only one possible way encounters with exemplars can have positive effects on a person. Indeed, admiration and emulation are not necessarily appropriate to all exemplars, since different traditions typically stipulate forms of affective and practical responses to exemplars.

Consider, then, some expanded possibilities that arise in spiritual traditions. Starting with positive responses, it’s certainly true that many spiritual exemplars will invite our admiration. But other positive emotional responses are also possible. A *sūtra* tells how a man came to ‘deep faith’ in the Buddha on witnessing his imperturbable calm during a storm, marvelling at ‘one able to live life in such peace’ (Gethin, 2008: 75). Wonderment of this sort is another sort of positive response, whether due to the exemplar’s serenity, calm, or manifest moral authority. Similarly, exemplars can elicit curiosity, fascination, and related epistemic emotions that are directed at the source or nature of their exemplarity, or at the content of their teachings, or both. When Jesus is asked, ‘Who are you’, the request is for an explanation of the nature and source of his superlative moral and spiritual excellences (John 1:22, 8:25; Acts 9:5). Finally, exemplars also elicit positive emotions such as joy and delight, a set of pleasurable feelings accompanying aesthetically-charged experiences of the beauty or ‘radiance’ manifest in their comportment. Such ‘moral beauty’ is attributed to exemplars of many spiritual traditions, from Sufi adepts to Buddhist monastics and the ‘charisma’ of sages from Plotinus to Kǒngzǐ (see Kidd 2017a, 2017b).

An experience with an exemplar can also take more ambiguous or negative forms, of course, especially when what is being exemplified is an acutely demanding ideal of life. Start, for instance, with ambiguous responses, where one is genuinely unsure about what one does or should feel about some exemplar. Confusion, puzzlement, and uncertainty are ambiguous responses, neither necessarily positive nor negative, at least in many of their typical forms. In some cases, one might genuinely lack understanding or appreciation of an exemplar’s actions or utterances, failing to grasp their significance in ways that could only be resolved by further enquiry. The famously iconoclastic actions of Zen Buddhists and Dàoists, for instance, include burning scriptures, impugning the Buddha, or wilfully transgressing established moral and social norms. What, in these cases, should one think? Certain Zen masters do things that one would usually regard as unconscionable, such as answering questions about the Buddha-mind by describing it as a ‘stick in a pile of shit’. In these cases, a due sense of respect and epistemic humility might lead one to demur, avoiding negative, critical judgment. But, still, one cannot really describe the response to them as positive. In most cases, confusion and the like are not regarded as states to desire or in which to persist.

Certain exemplars will also invite negative responses, at least at certain times or when performing certain actions or voicing certain views. Such negative responses can range from alarm and aversion to horror and revulsion. The most graphic examples might include graphic stories of Zen Buddhists cutting lumps of flesh from their bodies to illustrate their detachment from bodily attachments. But such cases might be fabricated, functioning as dramatic devices to illustrate teachings, so not intended as literal descriptions of Zen monastic practice. Other cases include asceticism, renunciation of personal contacts, extreme bodily mortification, and other forms of radical self-denial—think of the Anchorites, Stylites, and desert hermits of the early Christian tradition. In such cases, the costs of exemplarity might seem unbearably acute, meaning that although such figures may be, in a formal sense, spiritually exemplary, the idea of admiring them seems unacceptable, even grotesque.

The morally uncomfortable behaviour of many spiritual exemplars is an issue that has long precedent within the internal debates of spiritual traditions. Kierkegaard’s reflections on the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, after being commanded to by God is but one example. His response was to argue for ‘teleological suspensions of the ethical’, an act of faith that involves subordinating conventional moral convictions—like protecting one’s child’s life—to the supremacy of divine command. But not everyone is persuaded by this, for the reason that forms of spiritual life must still be congruent with the authentically felt social and existential realities of human life. If obedience to divine commands that result in acts of infanticide are preconditions for spiritual exemplarity, then—argues the critic—there is something deeply wrong with that conception of exemplarity. Similarly, if a Buddhist or Dàoist Way requires the progressive renunciation of familial relationships and social convention, the operative conceptions must be in error. Becoming enlightened or in harmony with Dào would be achieved only at the cost of effacement of something intrinsic to human life, which was an important criticism of both traditions levelled by Confucians.

Encounters with exemplars are therefore potentially deeply heterogeneous, admitting a variety of intermingled positive, ambiguous, and negative responses. This is true even when we make two concessions. The first is that one’s *reports* of one’s responses might be different from one’s actual responses—if, for instance, a person mindlessly conforms to culturally fixed scripts for describing their encounters with an exemplar, ones that gloss over the darker sorts of feelings one might have had. Not all accounts of encounters of exemplars will be honest in the proper sense, either because the aspirant ‘self-censors’, or mindlessly conforms to norms of reportage, or because the community and its spiritual authorities edits those reports. (One of my Christian students, on reading the Abraham story, once confidentially asked me if it was ‘okay’ to say they found Abraham’s willingness horrendous, rather than admirable.) Second, some of our initially ambiguous or negative responses may change over time, perhaps as one gains in understanding of the alarming, puzzling, or offending actions. The initial shock evoked by Zen iconoclasm will be diminished once one appreciates their purpose: to try to break the attachment of monastics to the image and teachings of the Buddha. Even so, the availability of such responses doesn’t entail their success within the relevant spiritual traditions—not all Buddhists are satisfied with Zen justifications for their iconoclasm.

The complexity of responses to spiritual exemplars cannot be mediated independently of the specific exemplars, traditions, and forms of life. Outside of those contexts, the best one can do is to lay out the range of potential responses, then to urge investigation of specific and local cases. Failure to do this will cause problems, mainly stemming from ignorance of reasons and convictions that are only intelligible within the relevant forms of life. Many contemporary philosophers of religion sympathetic to comparative and anthropological methods urge this sort of cautious humility. Mikel Burley, for instance, draws on remarks by Wittgenstein when arguing that the intelligibility of certain religious concepts, such as rebirth, often cannot be properly appraised independently of appreciating their ‘place’ within a form of life, a ‘particular network of belief and practice’ (2012: 262–263). Our operative conceptions of personhood and our background sense of salience and intelligibility are shaped by our own form of life, which limits their applicability to cultures where, for instance, rebirth is accepted. Something similar will be true about forms of spiritual exemplarity, which will often also find their deep grounding in forms of life quite different from our own.

An interesting way to emphasize the difficulties of appraising conceptions of spiritual exemplarity whose natural homes are other forms of life, as in the rebirth case, is to explore the distinctive *spiritual aspirations* underlying them. By the term *spiritual aspirations*, I mean a general form of desire to achieve a degree of intimacy or adaptation to the grounds or source of the world, of a sort that can afford normative guidance to one’s life and practice. Spiritual aspirations take many different forms, expressing themselves in and through the practices, beliefs, and forms of life available to people. Moreover, spiritual aspirations might only be recognized and taken up by people whose culture affords the relevant resources, most obviously a respect for spirituality. Certain people might find it difficult, if not impossible, to cultivate their native spiritual desires or sensibilities if their wider culture is hostile to them—by, for instance, aggressively stamping out organized religion. Cultivating spiritual aspirations can be a sensitive task, sensitive to our culture and the character of our life, and therefore easily obstructed (see Kidd 2012).

**4. Spiritual aspirations**

Across the major ancient traditions, eastern and western, there are at least three main types of spiritual aspiration. Although they are highly general in form, they are articulated and expressed by those who cultivate them within the terms of their traditions. At their core, each manifests as what John Cottingham describes as ‘deep yearnings’, ‘sensibilities and impulses’, that shape and motivate our aesthetic, affective, and moral life (2009: 13, 15, 19). Aspirations are fundamentally built into our orientation towards the world, akin to what William James called ‘temperaments’, all-encompassing ways of experiencing and relating to the world, that he describes as ‘inarticulate feelings of reality’ (1902: 74). Certain gloomier temperaments present the world as fundamentally cold, mysterious, or meaningless, a ‘vast slow-breathing unconscious Kosmos’, while others are more positive, including those which incorporate a felt conviction that the world is at base complete, safe, and orderly (1912: 277–278).

Applying these thoughts to an analysis of the fundamental forms and structures of the plurality of spiritual aspiration is a task for phenomenology of religion, of the sort exemplified in the work of Mark Wynn (2013). In what follows, my aim is to make plausible the three claims that (a) there is a plurality of spiritual aspirations that (b) motivate and sustain different conceptions of spiritual exemplarity and that (c) our responses to types of spiritual exemplar are substantially determined by our sympathy, or not, with the associated aspiration.

To start with, there is an *aspiration to allegiance*, where a person is exemplary when their life is a model of allegiance to one or more divine beings, construed as both creators of the world and the supreme moral authority. Exemplars of allegiance are models of a loving or faithful commitment to one or more divine persons, taking the form of an affectively charged *relationship* that characterizes their life as a whole. In her book, *Divine Motivation Theory*, Zagzebski articulates the aspiration to allegiance, for instance, with her focus on certain persons being ‘worthy’ of ‘loyalty, respect, or devotion’—emotions and virtues only intelligible in the context of interpersonal relationships (2004: 90, 123). Within theistic traditions, argues Zagzebski, God is the supreme exemplar, the being most worthy of our love, respect, devotion and related virtues of spiritual allegiance. Spiritual traditions guided by this aspiration will therefore tend to valorize those virtues and privilege those practices—such as worship and petitionary prayer—that help people achieve and maintain a relationship with the divine person.

A second aspiration concerns *enlightened insight*, where the exemplar is a model of a way of life guided by profound understanding of deep truths about the human condition in relation to the wider order of reality. Although this can take theistic forms, the natural home has been the Indian spiritual dispensations, most obviously Buddhism. Within that tradition, certain figures, such as the Buddha himself, are exemplars of enlightened insight into ‘Noble Truths’. Such truths are ‘noble’ because, once deeply cultivated, they transform the ways one experiences and responds to the world—for instance, to understand the noble truth that all beings exist in a state of *duḥkha*  (‘dis-ease’, ‘suffering’) is be transformed in the ways one acts, thinks, and feels. Buddhist exemplars are models of the compassion, virtue, and wisdom that comes from enlightened insight into the Noble Truths. Within this conception of exemplarity, there is no imperative to cultivate a loving, devoted relationship to a divine creator or moral authority. Moreover, there are roles for spiritual virtues like faith and devotion, but these will be different. Michael McGhee explains that the Buddhist virtue, *śrāddha*, often rendered as ‘faith’, really involves‘the development of confidence in a path or a process’—the Eightfold Path—which extends to the Buddhist monastics and teachers who can guide us along it (2000: 100f). Aspirations therefore shape the specific forms and range of spiritual virtues, making an important role for virtues of insight, such as mindfulness, whose exercise is vital to the deeply cultivated understanding of the relevant truths about our condition.

The final spiritual aspiration concerns *emulation* of the deep grounds or source of the world, something distinct from the interpersonal emulation central to Zagzebski’s account. A typical feature of traditions with this aspiration are parallels between the virtues of exemplars and the qualities or attributes of whatever is taken to be the grounds or source of the world. The Stoic sage, for instance, is rational, purposeful, acting for the betterment of all things, thereby emulating the Logos, the providential and purposive ‘Universal Reason’ which orders and sustains the material world. Marcus Aurelius explains that emulating the Logos enables a sage to achieve ‘deeper insight into the processes of the universe’, the fruit of which is that he or she comes to ‘love’ the world as a whole (*Meditations*,Bk.3, 2 and Bk.10, 21). But this goes beyond the enlightened insight of the Buddhist exemplars: for the Stoic sage’s characteristic virtues of rationality, purposiveness, and providentially are modelled directly on the Logos, a form of ‘cosmological ethics’.

An equally rich example of the aspiration to emulation is early Daoism. Its exemplars are *zhēnrén—*‘true’, ‘authentic’ persons—who evince the same telling parallels with *Dào*, the source or ‘wellspring’ of the ‘ten thousand things’ of the world. Using primarily aquatic metaphors, *Dào* is described as active, spontaneous, and non-contending, a set of qualities evident in the character and comportment of *zhēnrén*. Like water, *Dào* nourishes the things of the world while, in response, the Dàoist sages ‘nurture’ other creatures, by helping them to realize their own ways. Translating these conceptions of the grounds or source of the world into intelligible sets of virtues and ways of life is a philosophically delicate task (see Kidd, 2020a). These traditions lack crisply stated divine commands or a neatly articulated set of ‘noble truths’ about the world. Moreover, they affirm the ineffability of the ultimate object of emulation; the true way, as the opening lines of the *Dàodéjīng* famously announce, cannot be spoken of.

Hopefully the genuine, substantive differences between these spiritual aspirations is clear enough to secure my main claim that there *is* a plurality of aspirations. Aspiring to live in allegiance to the divine creator of the world is a different business, spiritually, than gaining an enlightened insight into deep truths about the world, which itself differs from an aspiration to model oneself on the grounds or source of that world. Crucially, such aspirations can merge with one another, both phenomenologically and doctrinally. The Christian doctrine of *imago Dei* arguably incorporates elements of emulation, since modelling oneself on God’s goodness and love emerges as a central aspect of Christian self-cultivation. But such efforts to combine different aspirations often provoke doctrinal disputation. Many Christian theologians rejected the aspiration to emulate God as heretical or hubristic, for instance for the reason that ‘fallen’ human beings corrupted by original sin are permanently unable to restore their original moral purity. Such disputes offer another way to explore the varieties of spiritual aspirations as they have guided and shaped forms of spiritual life across different traditions. Exemplars of allegiance are different from exemplars of enlightened insight, while these are different from exemplars of emulation.

The claim that one’s own particular spiritual aspirations shape attitudes towards forms of spiritual exemplarity is nicely illustrated by John Cottingham’s recent defence of theistic dispensations. Only a theistic framework, he argues, ‘provides a secure home’ for such attitudes as ‘humility, hope, awe, and thankfulness’, since such attitudes and virtues take their fullest form when expressed in a personal relationship with God. What is *deep* about theistic traditions, argues Cottingham, is that their ethical precepts are rooted in a metaphysical vision—a ‘“cosmic” dimension’, to which a spiritual person, once attuned, feels ‘called on to respond to’ through processes of self-transformation (2017: 25). Cottingham argues that this depth is absent from non-theistic spiritual traditions:

To be sure, many of the Eastern sages are famous for enjoining right conduct and the practice of virtue, so in this sense an ethical component is involved. But it is not a component that is intrinsically connected to the underlying vision of the cosmos; for the Eastern vision is one in which personal commitments and demands are based on an illusion, and ultimate reality is simply an impersonal continuum of conditions that arise and pass away (2017: 26).

There are two problems with this claim, setting aside the vagueness of reference to ‘Eastern’ traditions (Cottingham probably has in mind Buddhism and perhaps Hinduism). To start with, it’s wrong to say the ethical values of Buddhism are not ‘intrinsically connected’ to their metaphysical vision. The Noble Truths are, after all, truths about the world, as an arena of phenomena characterized by flux, impermanence, and lack of substantial ‘own-being’ (*anicca*, *duḥkha*, *anattā*). A deeply cultivated understanding of these truths registers itself in an ethically transformed comportment towards the world: wisdom and virtue are not two separate attainments that just happen to arrive together, but different aspects of enlightenment. The Noble Truths are ‘the most significant categories of existence’, explains one commentator, and ‘deep insight into their nature is what makes a person spiritually ennobled’ (Harvey, 2012: 51–52).

A second problem is the presupposition that ethical values cannot be grounded in a world whose fundamental characteristics are illusoriness, impermanence, and what Buddhists call ‘dependent co-origination’ (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Clearly this sort of metaphysical vision offers few prospects for trying to ground ethical imperatives in the stable will or purposes of a divine being as disclosed through revelation or prophecy or apprehended directly. But other possibilities are available. A good example is found in Buddhism and other traditions that employ the aspiration to enlightened insight: certain spiritual virtues, dispositions, and ways of life are consonant with what one takes to be an authentic sense of the way of things, in the sense that their exercise or pursuit does not occlude or atrophy that sense. Compassion is consonant with a ‘deeply cultivated’ appreciation of creatures and things as existing in a state of ‘dis-ease’, such that its exercise resonates appropriately with one’s reflective sense of the nature of the world (see Cooper 2012). Similarly, certain practices are judged consonant with or appropriate to a metaphysical vision of the world as impermanent flux, such as those aimed at mindfulness and meditation. Michael McGhee explains that these create ‘calm conditions of receptivity’ from which ‘springs a vision [of] and an orientation’ towards the world which will be ‘manifested in the instinctive turn towards ethics’ (2000: 111, 100).

It takes careful philosophical effort to present and defend these sorts of ideas and also to explain how they play out within the relevant traditions using terms and concepts more familiar to critics who lack training within the Asian tradition. An extended exercise of this sort on behalf of consonance and its relation to humility is offered by David E. Cooper (2002: chs. 11–13). Advocates of theistic forms of spirituality who want to deny or dispute the possibility of grounding ethical values in visions of the world as impermanent flux ought to engage with the sorts of arguments advanced by Cooper and others with an informed acquainted with those traditions.

In at least some cases, the worry is that critics are appealing to certain ideas about spiritual forms of life that are actually particular to certain traditions, cultures, or aspirations—a tendency apt to encourage a presumptive privileging of familiar forms of spirituality which distorts one’s ability to engage fairly with alternatives by treating them as if they are trying to express and fulfil the same aspirations as one’s own. When Cottingham remarks that ‘intimations of the divine reality’ are part of ‘our ordinary human birthright’, the worry is that he is inflating the set of ways of expressing and realizing the aspiration to allegiance particular to the Western monotheistic religions into a human universal (2014: 63). It is, at the least, question-begging to regard that specific aspiration as *the* ‘human birthright’, since one could, if one preferred, attempt similar privileging for the aspirations to enlightened insight or emulation. A wiser strategy might be to quiet the urge to privilege—something I argue for at length in Kidd (2020b).

I suspect that the plurality of spiritual aspirations will help shape the values, beliefs, practices, sensibilities, and explicit doctrinal and metaphysical commitments of spiritual traditions in all sorts of ways. Allegiance, enlightened insight, and emulation can shape, *inter alia*, the salience of certain practices, significance of certain experiences, and intelligibility of certain doctrines. In relation to the theme of this chapter, spiritual aspirations also shape conceptions of spiritual exemplarity, such that instead of thinking and talking about a singular class of ‘spiritual exemplars’, our better strategy is to distinguish *exemplars of allegiance* (like Abraham) and *exemplars of enlightened insight* (like the Buddha) and *exemplars of emulation* (like Stoic sages or Daoist *zhēnrén*). Recalling the remarks by Harrison and Wynn quoted at the start of this chapter, there are many spiritual ‘values’ and ‘ideals of life’ and an equally diverse range of ways they can be ‘embodied’. Such pluralism brings into relief the deep differences between these figures and so helps to guard against the risks of denying, ignoring, or glossing over substantive points of difference—the claim, for instance, that the great spiritual figures of the Eastern and Western traditions are, ‘ultimately’, preaching the same message of wisdom, compassion, and universal love.

To summarize: the exemplarism developed by Zagzebski offers a productive framework with which to think about spiritual exemplarity, if amended to acknowledge (i) the heterogeneity of potential responses to exemplars and (ii) the plurality of forms of spiritual exemplarity. An effective strategy for pluralization is to explore the different aspirations, although there are no doubt other ways, too. Developing these ideas requires careful investigation into the variety of forms of spiritual life across and within cultures and traditions, of a sort that invites, if not demands, the contributions of anthropology, theology, and religious studies. An exemplar will always emerge from a certain context or form of life that shapes people’s sense of what sorts of life are admirable and intelligible and which also offers a background array of images, metaphors, and other resources upon which people can draw when trying to pursue or create forms of exemplarity. Study of spiritual exemplars will therefore always refer us to the wider forms of life which shape how certain people can conceive, pursue, and attain forms of spiritual life.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the comments and discussion of an audience at the 2017 conference of the British Society for Philosophy of Religion and to the Editors of this volume for the invitation to contribute and their comments on the final draft.

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