

FOLLOWING THE WRONG EXAMPLE: THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF HEROISM AND SANCTITY

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ABSTRACT

Are ordinary moral agents able to follow the moral lead of heroes and saints? In her *Exemplarist Moral Theory* Linda Zagzebski provided an exemplarist account to morality grounded on admiration. She focused her research on three possible kinds of exemplar: the saint, the hero and the sage. In this paper, I hold that there are at least two possible ways of following an exemplar (*inference* and *strict emulation*). Furthermore, I will try to show that when we take morally exceptional agents (in particular heroes and saints) as exemplars to be emulated, some theoretical and normative problems arise. In particular, I will outline the *Feasibility Problem*, the *Non-motivating Admiration Problem* and the *Distortion of Duty*. Given these issues, I suggest an account of supererogation for this moral approach. I argue that this will provide some theoretical advantages for exemplarism, together with a new attention for extraordinary moral acts. The admiration of praiseworthy deeds, similarly to exemplars, can provide valuable moral guidance.

KEYWORDS

Exemplarism, Supererogation, Ought Implies Can, Moral Motivation, Maximizing Duties

1. INTRODUCTION

In her *Exemplarist Moral Theory* Linda Zagzebski provides a remarkable outline of a moral theory grounded on the admiration for moral exemplars. Her core assumption is that admiration for a given exemplar of moral excellence (be it an actual person or a fictional character) leads to development of the moral character of the admirer. This dynamics will help in many aspects of one's own moral life: moral motivation, the identification of one's idea of a flourishing life, the recognition of one's duties and the fundamental elements of right conduct. While I hold that Zagzebski's theoretical insights represent a fruitful contribution to the moral debate, I will question some features of her

theory and in general of exemplarist approaches. Specifically, I will examine the role that heroes and saints might have in the moral deliberation of the ordinary agent. I believe that there are ways in which this sort of exemplars might turn out to be problematic for our conception of moral duties expanding the demandingness of our moral systems. Zagzebski (2017, p.24) acknowledges that, in the past, it has been pointed out that it might be too ambitious to emulate a saint, for example. Abraham I. Melden (1984), while referring to the debate on supererogatory acts, claimed that saints are unlike other moral agents (p.77) and, as such, we, ordinary agents, cannot easily obtain what they have achieved. I will try to further develop Melden's line of argumentation in order to show that when it comes to heroes and saints we might be following exemplars in the wrong way. This is especially true when we take the extraordinary deeds of heroes and saints as our unit of moral measure. While this might be problematic for Zagzebski's account of exemplarism, I do not think that we need to reject the usefulness of the exemplarist approach to moral theory. In fact, if my point holds to be true, it would simply mean that exemplarist moral theorists need to further develop a reliable way to pick the right exemplar to follow.

2. TWO WAYS OF FOLLOWING AN EXAMPLE

The exemplarist approach to morality entails the admiration of moral exemplars in order to guide the action of the single agent. As Zagzebski rightly pointed out¹, narratives of exemplars (be them actual or fictional) play an important role in our moral lives, guiding our judgments, shaping our characters and providing a content to our understanding of a good and desirable life. As such, I would like to start by offering a story of clear case of heroism.

On a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 2009 an SUV crashed into a tree, flipped over and set on fire. Immediately a considerable amount of bystanders and witnesses started to react to the tragic event by calling the police and firefighters or providing ways to extinguish the fire. Some of them have even done something more. Brothers John and Joel Rechlitz, two off-duty Milwaukee firefighters, were among those witnessing the event. They decided to jump into the burning car in order to help the mother and her two little

¹ "Since narratives are a form of detailed observations of persons, exemplarism gives narrative and important place within the theory analogous to scientific investigation in the theory of natural kinds. Narratives might even reveal necessary features of value by uncovering the deep properties of a good person." in Zagzebski (2010, p.53).

children get out of the vehicle. The brothers suffered severe burns, and risked their own lives in order to save others'. The press reporting the incident gave national coverage to the news and referred to the brothers as heroes who were greatly praised by their families and community. One of them, on one of the interviews granted in the following days, said: "*The child was literally burning in front of me, which was very horrific...it compelled you to act, there was no question on what we were going to do*"². James Harper, the children's father, after watching the video of the people rescuing his family in those harsh circumstances said: "*they've gone far and beyond what they need to*"³.

Cases like this provide a clear example of heroic acts, which are considered to go beyond what is regularly considered a moral duty⁴. The moral philosophical debate has referred to these acts as *supererogatory* acts insofar as they are optional, morally good and they benefit someone other than the agent himself (altruistic outcome). Most of all, agents who perform such acts would not be considered in any way blameworthy if they would have refrained from doing what they did. In the case of the SUV incident no one has blamed those who, differently from the Rechlitz brothers, decided not to try to access the burning vehicle. On the contrary, when acts of this kind are performed, they are usually acknowledged to be extremely praiseworthy and highly admirable. Given the grounding role of moral admiration for the exemplarist moral theory, the concept of supererogation needs to be analyzed in some detail. However, I argue that, when it comes to cases of sanctity and heroism (such as in the Rechlitz brothers example⁵) things become controversial for exemplarism. I hold that, from a moral exemplarist perspective, acts of this kind do not represent the most desirable example to follow. As I will try to show this seems to be true in at least one way in which an agent might decide to follow an exemplar. Even more radically, there seems to be ways in which a moral agent might be doing something morally wrong by taking a hero or a saint as an example to follow.

² This interview has been vastly reported by the local and national press. See: http://www.today.com/id/32006584/ns/today-today_news/t/hero-brothers-pulled-boy-out-burning-suv/#.UxiyGD95Oj8.

³ The video of this interview can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDVR-ABXwd8>.

⁴ Even if the most distinctive examples of supererogation are usually considered instances of heroism and sanctity, this category of acts is not limited to extraordinary deeds.

⁵ Similar issues might arise when we examine cases of Sanctity. Think for example of the supererogatory act provided by Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe. We certainly admire his extreme sacrifice; however, we would not likely be ready to blame (at least from a moral point of view) all those who in the same circumstances had refrained from doing the same.

Let me try to highlight a possible problematic way of following an example. If take we take the heroic deeds of the rescuers of the SUV incident, there are at least two ways in which we can take the two brothers as an example to follow:

1. *Inference*: Given my admiration for the exemplars and their deeds I will generalize a maxim or a counsel that is morally desirable to follow. That is: “*As the Rechlitz brothers did, I ought to be ready to sacrifice myself in order to be altruistic*”.

As long as moral exemplarism is understood in this inferential way, I do not see any problem to take saints and heroes as exemplars. Moral exemplars have always been the source of moral maxims (as generally any Virtue Ethics approach claims) and they do so very effectively. Exemplars and exemplary acts⁶ are favored moral sources and, as Zagzebski rightly underlines, they help us develop our moral dimension. From a philosophical point of view, it is interesting to note that this way of understanding the role of examples generates a series of *imperfect duties*. From the story of the Rechlitz brothers, I learn that I ought to be altruistic and be ready to sacrifice my well-being if necessary. I do not derive, though, specifically when and how to be altruistic. This aspect is left to the agent’s practical judgement and capabilities.

It seems to me that there is at least another (very different) way of following the same example and that is *strict emulation*. Exemplars are taken to express the sort of behavior that the admirer ought to perform in similar circumstances. Accordingly, a second understanding of exemplarism would be:

2. *Emulation*: Given my admiration for the exemplars and their deeds, I take their example as what the agent ought to do in a similar situation. That is: “*As the Rechlitz brothers did, I ought to get ready to sacrifice myself and jump into a burning car so as to rescue those in danger*.”

As I will point out in the next section, this second possible understanding of how to follow an example appears be particularly problematic for different reasons. And this seems to be particularly true if we hold, as Linda Zagzebski does (2017, p.15), that emulation and admiration are directly related:

Exemplars are those persons, the persons who are most imitable or most deserving of emulation. They are most imitable because they are most admirable.

⁶ It will become clearer at the end why I often refer to deeds rather than just exemplars.

The agents of supererogatory acts are generally highly admirable and praiseworthy, but it is not clear if they are also most imitable. And this is not so because they do not deserve to be emulated, but because what they have accomplished is so extraordinary that it is not easily replicable. Zagzebski's definition of exemplars seems to imply that admiration necessarily entails replicability. Even if, we might agree that morally exceptional agents deserve to be emulated (and most of all admired), we also need to make sure that they can *actually* be emulated. As I will try to show, ordinary agents might lack some talent or capacity that will prevent them to emulate an exemplar despite their high degree of admiration for her. As Melden pointed out, this creates a clear distinction between saints (and generally all outstanding moral agents) and "*ordinary human beings*" (Melden 1984, p.76):

[This is of central importance] to an understanding of what it is that distinguishes the saint from the rest of us, namely, that what it takes to be his distinctive moral status is not simply a matter of what he, unlike others, is morally bound to do, a matter concerning which differences of opinion might arise, but one that pertains to what it takes to be his unique relation to others, a relation that colors the whole character of his life – his thoughts and his feeling about himself and others – in ways that are radically different from those of ordinary human beings.

The peculiarity of the saint, claims Melden, cannot be explained solely on moral grounds and thus is not accessible to all ordinary agents who do not necessarily share the same vision of life. Admiration for saints and heroes does not entail strict emulation, unless we would be ready to face unsuccessful and frustrating outcomes most of the times we try to emulate them (I will go back to this point in the next section). Nevertheless, I do not think that our admiration for exceptional moral agents is misplaced as long we *infer* from their example something valuable for our personal moral dimension and suitable with our own moral possibilities⁷.

However, even if it turns out that some specific acts of supererogation, such as those displayed with sanctity and heroism, are not eligible to be easily imitable, this should not lead to either of these conclusion:

- a) The morally exceptional (the saint or the hero) is a bad example *per se* and represents a counterargument to moral exemplarism⁸;

⁷ On the other hand, it would be implausible to hold that moral agents have moral capacities that cannot be improved and developed over time. Taking examples in order to infer moral guidance is exactly what improves people's moral capacities.

⁸ As I said, the inferential way of understanding exemplarism still leaves ample room to the role of admiration of agents of exceptional supererogatory acts.

- b) The morally exceptional is an undesirable outcome for a moral theory, therefore the concept of supererogation should be rejected⁹.

As I will suggest in the end, I think that both these claims can be denied by implementing the moral exemplarist approach with further specification about how to choose the most desirable examples to follow.

3. MORAL EXEMPLARISM IN QUESTION. THREE POSSIBLE CRITICISMS

In this section I will try to highlight a few possible criticisms to *Moral Exemplarism* when this is intended to be a strict emulation of the given exemplar¹⁰. In particular, these criticisms are: 1) the *Feasibility Problem*; 2) the *Non-motivational Admiration Problem*; 3) the *Distortion of Moral Duty*.

When we take extremely praiseworthy agents (heroes and saints) as exemplars, the first question that arises to the agent who tries to emulate them is “*will I be able to do the same?*”. This might turn out to be a problematic question because the answer might indeed be a negative one and generate a sense of frustration in the agent. This is a problem for Moral Exemplarism if we consider the “ought implies can” principle. If a theory prescribes some sort of course of action, this course of action is supposed to be within reach. In the case of emulation of extraordinary exemplars, heroic and saintly deeds seems not only to be beyond the call of duty (i.e. supererogatory), but also beyond what is a feasible option for most moral agents. Morally exceptional acts often involve uncommon skills and capacities of the agents who performs them. Therefore, heroism and sanctity represent a moral achievement that is not available to every agent, but rather exclusive to a few. This appears more clearly if we go back to the example of the Rechlitz brothers. What they did was highly admirable, but it is important to underline that they were two off-duty firefighters and thus they had some specific training to do what they did. Similarly, I might be able to highly admire the lifeguard who saves lives by the

⁹ There are many examples and attempts to deny the concept of supererogation. Among them, it might be interesting to see the popular view of Susan Wolf, who wishes that moral saints did not exist (Wolf, 1982).

¹⁰ Again, I do not think that these criticisms would apply as long as we hold an inferential understanding of Moral Exemplarism. In these terms, if what exemplars do is to inspire a set of maxims for action and given that the agent can effectively pick exemplars that deserve actual moral admiration, the following criticisms will not hold.

sea, but what if I cannot swim? Is it possible for me to take her as an exemplar and emulate her deeds? This is why the most admirable is not straightforwardly the most imitable. In sum:

The *Feasibility Problem* claims that not all moral agents have the same capacities and skills, therefore highly admirable exemplars might not be the most imitable.

Morality, having to deal with practice and contingencies has to take into account that performance of certain acts is context-sensitive, and this includes the agent's skills and capacities¹¹. The *feasibility problem* underlines once again the diversity of skills of moral agents and given that we are not taking into consideration ordinary agents and regular actions as our unit of moral measure, we cannot expect these from everyone. If this problem holds to be true, heroes and saints do not represent agents who are likely to be taken as exemplars to strictly emulate. This sort of criticism to exemplarism has been raised in different ways and it seems to be supported by empirical evidence¹². For example, Meira Levinson talks about *life-sized role models*. She writes (Levinson 2012, pp. 153-154):

In place of outsized heroes, I believe that Americans have come to value life-sized role models. "Role models," as the concept was first defined in the 1950s—interestingly, just as conceptions of "hero-worship" seem to have been drawing to a close—and continues to be used today, are people whom we admire and attempt to emulate. Heroes could in theory thus also be role models. But as an empirical psychological matter, at least in contemporary times, heroes do not serve as role models. Instead, role models are almost inevitably "ordinary": people who seem generally similar to ourselves and whose differences from us tend to be along one particular dimension, rather than those who are truly extraordinary, especially across multiple dimensions. It is their very ordinariness that inspires us to act differently and emulate their achievements, not any overarching greatness of character, stature, or even impact.

¹¹ Another recurring counter-argument to strict emulation, similar to the feasibility problem, states that the agent who really wants to show her swimming and altruistic skills by saving a drowning stranger as the lifeguard does, simply never runs into a drowning person. Even if the agent possesses the specific skills (both moral and non-moral ones), there is no possibilities to express them. Arguably, this can be a possible case of moral bad luck.

¹² The Gallup Report, for example, shows that people, especially in a young age, are more likely (over 60%) to pick a relative or close friend to inspire their behavior rather than some famous character (Lyons, 2002).

In these terms, we are likely to pick a role model that is much closer to our own capacities in order to make emulation an achievable task¹³. However, admiration remains a key element of role-models selection. As Zagzebski (2017) has widely discussed without admiration a role model is morally useless.

A second possible criticism of strict emulation is one that is connected to the first one in relevant ways. In brief, this second criticism holds that the motivational power of an exemplar is jeopardized when the agent recognizes that strict emulation is beyond her reach. Once again, this results in the fact that admiration and motivation are not always directly related.

Zagzebski often refers to Putnam-Kripke's *theory of direct reference* for being inspirational for her account of Moral Exemplarism. However, I think that the moral dimension introduces further elements that complicate the transition from one theory to the other. The Theory of Direct Reference tells us that, for example, the successful linguistic usage of the word "gold" does not entail specific knowledge of the chemical structure of gold. Similarly, Zagzebski claims that recognizing a morally good character does not require to have specific knowledge in moral philosophy. Admiring the moral goodness of Rigoberta Menchu Tum is possible even without being acquainted with some moral theory. I think that this point is correct. However, the moral dimension is not only concerned with the knowledge of what is good, but also with the performance of the good. Ethics requires action in addition to belief and this complicates the matter. The problem with strict emulation of extraordinary exemplars is that recognizing them to be good is not enough for me to do the same. Many recognize the moral goodness of Mother Teresa, but very few fly to a foreign country in order to heal those in need of medical treatment. In sum:

The *Non-motivational Admiration Problem* holds that it is possible to recognize and highly admire the good brought about by exceptional moral agents (heroes and saints) and still not being motivated to do the same.

The moral dimension requires the motivation to act upon a certain belief. Admiration is certainly helpful for the recognition of the good and for the formation of our moral beliefs. But, does it also play a motivational role? I think that in the case of emulation of exceptional exemplars (heroes and saints) the answer cannot easily be a positive one. Ordinary agents often rely

¹³ On the importance of achievable exemplars when it comes to character education see the work of Croce and Vaccarezza, who have underlined the importance of exemplars' imitability (Croce-Vaccarezza 2017, pp.9-10).

on moral reasons that favor a certain course of action. When we deal with cases of supererogation, while we recognize their praiseworthiness, we also realize that we could not do the same. This happens for the recognition of *exclusionary reasons* that prevent the agent to do the same¹⁴. A clear example of *exclusionary reason* is the lack of a specific skill that would be necessary to bring about a certain course of action¹⁵. And this will undermine my motivation to replicate the exemplar's deeds despite my admiration for her¹⁶. Admiration does not necessarily entail a motivation to emulate. This is clear in disciplines where we value specific skills that rely on natural talents. A typical example of this is the way we consider excellence in sports. I certainly admire Kevin Durant's value as a basketball player, but this does not mean that I will try to emulate him on a basketball court. This happens because I realize that our skillset is different and, for me, *playing like Kevin Durant* would be an unsatisfactory attempt¹⁷. If I know I am not good enough, then I am not even motivated to try. The *Non-motivational Admiration Problem* holds that the same applies to the moral domain when we admire extraordinary moral agents (heroes and saints).

It is plausible to say that the point at issue is at least twofold. Admiration certainly provides a content to our moral beliefs. Moral Exemplarism, then, is able to provide an answer to the question "*what is good?*". Good is the morally admirable and this is something that extraordinary agents (heroes and saints) certainly express. However, the moral domain requires us to answer a second question that has been traditionally covered by moral philosophers and that is: "*why be moral?*". Moral motivation is strictly connected to the answer to this latter question and I think that the brief analysis of non-motivational admiration of extraordinary moral agents I have outlined here might cast some doubts on the fact that admiration can successfully answer the "why to be moral" question. While this might not be a problem for exemplarist moral theory, it appears to be a problem for strict emulation of moral excellence¹⁸.

¹⁴ "An exclusionary reason is a second order reason to refrain from acting for some reason" (Raz 1990, p.39).

¹⁵ As in the Feasibility Problem above.

¹⁶ There have been made experiments that provide empirical evidence of this point. Attainable moral exemplars are more effective in motivating people than extraordinary exemplars (Han et al. 2017).

¹⁷ Zagzebski acknowledges this point adding that natural talent per se is hardly admirable if it not complemented with hard work, perseverance and determination (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 37).

¹⁸ Zagzebski admits that, while emulation of moral excellence might be out of reach, it can at least push the ordinary agent to become morally better by comparing herself with the exemplar (Zagzebski 2017, p.170). The question to be answered then, shift from "why becoming morally excellent?" to "why aiming at being as good as I can?".

A third possible criticism to the role of morally exceptional agents in a moral exemplarist theory deals with the way this affects our moral obligations. My claim is that taking heroes and saints as exemplars will generate in the ordinary agent a distorted idea of her duties. The reason for this is that sometimes morally exceptional agents take their deeds to be alleged moral obligations. Namely, they happen to react to what they have done with *moral modesty*, expressing a commitment to act that sounds like a duty, but, in reality, it is not¹⁹. It is common to hear heroes and saints comment their deeds saying “*It was my duty to do so*” or “*I ought to do it*”. While reasons that inspired acts of heroism and sanctity appear to these peculiar agents as strongly requiring reasons for action²⁰, it is not true that these reasons stand with the same requiring force to every agent. From a moral point of view, supererogatory acts of this magnitude are considered to be exclusive to a few moral agents. If we, then, take these agents to be the unit of moral measure for the ordinary agent, it would generate a distortion of what one’s own duties are. Specifically:

The *Distortion of Moral Duty problem* holds that taking the moral exceptional as an exemplar to follow, risks to provide to the ordinary moral agent an unrealistic (too demanding) idea of moral obligations.

It seems to be undesirable for an ordinary moral agent to consider the post-performance attitudes of exceptional moral agents (i.e. “*It was my duty to it!*”) as standard to be taken as an inspiration. Specifically, this attitude will lead to a distorted idea of moral duty. In this way, moral obligations would generally appear to be very demanding, up to a point where they would be hardly feasible for most agents. This conception of moral duty would originate a very demanding theory if we take the morally exceptional to be the example to follow. Taking excellence as the moral unit of measure produces *maximizing duties*, duties that aim at the best possible outcome of the good (moral excellence). If that is the case, very few people would stand the requirements of morality. This appears to be the case if we take Zagzebski’s definition of duty (Zagzebski 2017, p. 196)²¹:

¹⁹ I am here talking about universalizable duties, that is available to all moral agents. I leave aside the issue about the existence of possible personal or special obligations by extraordinary agents.

²⁰ This is so for different reasons according the different agents. A saint, for example, grounds strongly requiring reasons of this sort on her peculiar spiritual life.

²¹ In Chapter 1, she offers a slightly different definition of duty that happens to be even more problematic (Zagzebski 2017, p.21): “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

“A *duty* in some set of circumstances C is an act that persons with *phrónesis* (persons like that) would judge to be the only option in C. It is an act such that if they did not do it, they would feel guilty, and they would blame others if others did not do it.”

This definition of duty has the disadvantage to make the exceptional the standard to which ordinary agents *must* conform (provided that the exceptional is considered *phrónimos*). This will result in a considerable growth of moral demandingness for the agent and I argue that this is an undesirable result for a moral theory. Moreover, this is a perspective that does not apply exclusively to exemplarism as strict emulation, but also to exemplarism understood *inferentially*. Generally, ethical theories that are grounded on virtue do not offer a clear conception of duty²². However, if we try to do so by taking Virtue or the virtuous agent as the required standard, we end up with a maximizing conception of the Good that leaves no space to the moral flaws of the ordinary agent. Heroes and saints are moral agents that can take demanding reasons for action as if they were regular reasons (and this explains their post-performance attitude). Such ability is, ultimately, why they happen to be particularly praiseworthy and admirable. However, it is not desirable that their uncommon capacity would entirely define the set of obligations for every other moral agent.

All three criticisms that I have raised in this section are a consequence of understanding Exemplarism as a theory that requires a strict emulation of exemplars²³. Such a theory would be available to a very limited number of moral agents who would be able to express a peculiar moral skillset that would easily address all these theoretical problems. As acts of heroism and sanctity are usually considered to be exclusive to a handful of agents, a theory that takes them as the standard to which conform our agency seems to be similarly exclusive as well as hardly useful for ordinary moral agents.

she would blame others if they do not do it.” Being the saint, the hero and the sage the primary exemplars that Zagzebski takes into consideration, it is not hard to imagine how demanding would be a theory of duty so structured.

²² It is not surprising that Kantian or Consequentialist systems have theories of duties that are much more detailed than those we find in Virtue Ethics. “Duty” after all was neither a key term for Aristotelian Ethics. However, in the contemporary debate there have been Virtue-based ethical theories that have provided a conception of the right action. See, for example, Swanton (2004)

²³ With the exception of the third problem, that I think applies to all exemplarist theories that have a conception of duty similar to Zagzebski’s.

4. A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF SUPEREROGATION IN EXEMPLARISM

Given the remarks on exemplarism I provided, I want here to suggest, briefly, a possible account of supererogation for exemplarist theories. As I said above, Virtue Ethics accounts are not usually concerned with the concept of duty and this consequently undermined the theoretical need of the concept of supererogation²⁴. This is because these theories are generally involved with the development of moral character rather than providing explicit action guidance. Exemplarism, however, appears to be a moral account that, while moving from the admiration for moral characters, tries to specify the content and the role of deontic terms²⁵.

As I recalled elsewhere (Grigoletto, 2017) the concept of supererogation has a primary theoretical need: the acknowledgement of the twofold structure of the normative dimension. If we do not identify a clear level of required moral achievements (moral duties), it is hard to justify, from a theoretical point of view, a class of moral achievements that is good and beyond what is required by ordinary moral agents. Moreover, it is important to avoid a maximizing understanding of duties (as Classic Utilitarianism does²⁶, for example) in order to allow a class of morally good acts that are not obligatory. In sum, a twofold structure of the normative domain and a non-maximizing understanding of the Good allow for the theoretical space needed by the concept of supererogation.

I would like to take advantage of the two different ways of understanding exemplarism that I have sketched above in order to propose an account of supererogation for exemplarist moral theories. An exemplar can be taken *inferentially* if we would derive from her deeds a maxim that will provide us moral guidance. In addition, I claimed that we might want to follow an exemplar for strict *emulation*. If she does x, then I ought to do x. In all those cases where we take an exemplar to be a morally exceptional agent (a hero or a saint) this second understanding of exemplarism becomes a quite demanding possibility. In order to explain supererogation within exemplarism I would like to propose that we take these two ways of following an example as the two levels of moral achievements that make the concept theoretically possible. Following an extraordinary exemplar *inferentially* will represent our ordinary moral achievement, whereas attempting the uphill road of strict *emulation* of

²⁴ On the possibility of supererogation in Virtue Ethics, see Heyd (2015) and Swanton (2004).

²⁵ Chapter 7 of Zagzebski 2017 explicitly does that.

²⁶ As I said in the previous section, Zagzebski's understanding of duties shares the same risk.

an extraordinary exemplar would be supererogatory. If we go back to the story of the Rechlitz brothers and we try take them as exemplars we could conclude:

Ordinary moral achievement (Inference): As the Rechlitz brothers did, I ought to be ready to sacrifice myself in order to be altruistic.

Supererogatory achievement (Strict emulation): As the Rechlitz brothers did, I ought to get ready to sacrifice myself and jump into a burning car so as to rescue those in danger.

I think that these two levels of moral achievement represent a possible account of supererogation within the moral exemplarist perspective. It is important to underline how this account of supererogation is plausible only insofar as we take an extraordinary moral agent as an exemplar. If we take ordinary agents as exemplars I think that there is no way that would make strict emulation supererogatory. In other terms, if we lower the level of ordinary moral achievement too much, it would be hard to consider a slight overachievement as morally excellent.

As a secondary outcome, the justification of the concept of supererogation in exemplarist moral theory introduces at least two advantages:

1. Supererogation highlights once again the two different ways of following an exemplar. This will help ordinary agents to understand how to deal with the different exemplars they admire. Some of them would require us to strictly emulate them and others will help us inferring maxims that provide moral guidance. In the case of extraordinary moral exemplars, the concept of supererogation and the *inferential* way of following an exemplar would prevent us from the three problems I have pointed out in the previous section;

2. The different ways of following an exemplar highlight how different exemplars could be helpful for moral guidance. Exemplarism, then, is not limited to the extraordinary ones. Exemplars do not necessarily need to be those who have gone beyond ordinary moral achievement. Non-supererogatory moral achievements have an essential function in our everyday lives and have an important role for our social structure.

5. CONCLUSION: THE ADMIRATION OF EXTRAORDINARY DEEDS

The aim of the criticisms I have pointed out is not to deny the plausibility of Moral Exemplarism. My main concern is to prevent the theory from becoming too demanding in all those cases where extraordinary moral agents are taken to be inspirational for ordinary agents. I think there are different ways to avoid

this undesirable theoretical outcome. A task of primary importance, then, is to recognize that following a moral exemplar is not only a matter of how to apply its strategy efficiently (deep reflection on the object of one's own admiration), but it is also about choosing wisely which examples we ought to follow. As we have seen above, exceptional agents (heroes and saints) and their supererogatory deeds are unlikely to be taken as standards to emulate on a regular basis. In these terms, the exemplarist approach would not force the maximization of the good taking the morally best as the ultimate goal (as a Utilitarian approach might suggest). As I suggested, picking an effective exemplar to follow will require paying attention to the following features: a) moral attainments that are achievable to the given moral agent; b) the capacity to easily motivate to action; c) the inspiration of a sense of duty that would not become too demanding. Zagzebski underlines how moral theories need to be easily accessible to ordinary agents by not requiring too much moral expertise. Accordingly, I do not think that the introduction of these features would complicate the matter for ordinary use. As matter of fact, I believe that laying emphasis on the role of ordinary exemplars rather than extraordinary ones helps the exemplarist process and makes it more accessible and immediate²⁷.

I believe that another helpful strategy to make exemplarism more effective would be to focus on specific moral features rather than agents. This is the case of exemplary acts and exemplary character traits. Saint Augustine wrote in his *Letters*²⁸ that when we consider punishment we need to do so “*cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*” (with love for humans and hate for sins). This line is now popular with the translation “hate the sin and not the sinner”²⁹. Similarly, I suggest focusing on the admiration of specific valuable deeds rather than agents. This move comes with a few advantages. First, this will broaden our possibilities to find inspiring and admirable elements in our everyday lives. It is generally easier to find exemplary acts or character traits rather than exemplary agents³⁰. Second, this will help us overcome those problematic cases where an exemplar is generally admirable, but some of her

²⁷ One might claim that this is a mediocre perspective, one that does not aim at an actual moral improvement of people's life and of the society. However, I think that the key aspect relies on the conception we have of the term “ordinary”. On the one hand, one might intend ordinary as “common” and this would not entail much improvement. On the other ordinary might be understood specifically from a moral perspective. In these terms, we may suggest that not even the morally ordinary is very much widespread in our communities.

²⁸ Saint Augustine, *Letters*, no. 211(11).

²⁹ This adapted version appeared in Gandhi's autobiography (Gandhi, 1993).

³⁰ Fully exemplary agents are very few. It is true that we might focus on the emblematic examples of those who are widely considered saints, heroes and sages, but this would also mean to greatly limit the number of exemplars suitable for moral guidance.

features would make us like her less³¹. If exemplars need to be as flawless as possible in order to be rightly considered admirable, then, it is unlikely to admire those who are closely related to us, since we know also know their flaws³². I really admire my grandmother's care for the family and her cooking abilities. I also know that my grandmother cheats when playing cards at the seniors' center. Do I think she is morally exemplary? Not fully so. Do I think that her love for the family and her cooking abilities are morally remarkable? Yes I do. Focusing on specific morally admirable features will make possible to explain why we admire non-ideal exemplars (like my grandmother). If we focus only on heroes, saints and sages, we would not be able to make sense of many of the things we find admirable. Then, exemplarism will be grounded, on my admiration of Jack's pruning abilities rather than making the gardener an exemplar. Focusing on specific moral elements (such as acts or specific character traits) will allow us to gain moral guidance from exemplars who do not express moral excellence in every aspect.

What I have tried to highlight in these few pages is something that I wish exemplarist theorists will make clearer: extraordinary agents would serve as exemplars insofar as we infer from them the key elements of moral guidance. Moral excellence (exemplified by the deeds of heroes and saints) is morally good, and praiseworthy. Heroes and saints rightly deserve our deepest moral admiration. As such, they represent a helpful category of agents that can inspire the development of our moral lives. Nevertheless, we need to underline that strict emulation of them is rather exclusive to handful of moral agents. Consider the most admirable the easiest to emulate would be a mistake. And worse, given how costly and hardly achievable these deeds are, for most of us strict emulation would mean to follow a wrong example.

³¹ In these regards, the case of Mother Teresa is an interesting one as some of her critics point out possible controversial practices that she endorsed.

³² Zagzebski pointed out that exemplars we get from narratives have certain advantages over real life exemplars (Zagzebski 2017, p.66). I would add that another advantage is that what we know of them is limited to what the author wants us to know. In this way, we would never find out some of their flaws that would influence and limit our admiration for them.

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