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The use of biographical narratives in exemplarist moral education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of biographical narratives in contemporary moral education, with particular reference to the exemplarist moral theory (EMT) of Linda Zagzebski. It distinguishes between classical and modern versions of exemplarist moral education, highlighting the seminal contribution of Augustine's *Confessions*. Itself an autobiography, *Confessions* presents a new way to read a life, highlighting a transition from the conformist pattern of replication inherent in classical education to a central concern with self-identity and the inner life. We argue the educational benefits of a modern Augustinian approach, presenting and responding to four important concerns: (1) the selectivity of authors and educators in choosing which exemplars and life events to present; (2) the rhetorical power of narratives, which can be used as a means of indoctrination; (3) the need for students to be appropriately receptive in order for exemplar narratives to increase moral motivation; (4) the importance of relevance and realism in the exemplar narratives that are used. Along the way, we highlight a significant tension in EMT, relating to the instability of its grounding on the identification of human exemplars and the possibility of selecting individuals who may later come to light as far from exemplary persons.

KEYWORDS

Exemplarism; moral exemplars; biography; narrative; Linda Zagzebski; Augustine

Biographical writing has played an important role in moral education through history and across traditions (Olberding, 2012; Warnick, 2006). Plutarch's second century *Lives of the Greeks and Romans* is perhaps the most famous classical example. Written with the dynamic of imitation in view as the mechanism and the 'improvement of character' (Plutarch, 2011, p. xx) as the goal, it provided a 'repertoire of *exempla*' (Russell, 1966, p. 141) to further the moral formation of leaders (Duff, 2002; Russell, 1966). The influence and popularity of biographical texts continues into the twenty-first century with a proliferation of life writing both for adults and children. What is more, the connection between life writing and imitation, or 'learning by example' (Warnick, 2008), remains in place. This is well illustrated by the top selling biographical publication of modern times, Michelle Obama's (2018) *Becoming*. Obama's memoir sold more than ten million copies in the first four months of its release (Buck, 2019) and was followed in 2019 by the publication of a developmental journal (Obama, 2019). Itself a bestseller, the journal

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interweaves quotes from Obama with reflection questions intended to guide readers on their own 'journey of becoming'. The journal encourages readers to follow their own personal journey of self-development, but its attraction and power lies in widespread admiration for Obama herself.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its popular prominence, there is little recent philosophical work that focuses explicitly on the use of biographical writing in moral education. There is, however, a growing body of related work on exemplarist moral education in which biographical narratives play an important role (Carr, 2019; Croce, 2019; Damon & Colby, 2015; Engelen et al., 2018; Han et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2006; Sanderse, 2012; Vos, 2018; Warnick, 2008; Zagzebski, 2013). This turn to exemplarity in the philosophy of education has been fuelled especially by Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory (EMT) (Zagzebski, 2010, 2013, 2017).

Zagzebski argues for the centrality of exemplarity at the heart of moral life. Rather than starting from moral concepts and identifying illustrative examples, EMT is a foundationalist theory built on direct reference to moral exemplars, who are identified through the basic, excellence-detecting emotion of admiration (Zagzebski, 2017). Traditional moral concepts (good, right, virtue etc.) are defined in relation to exemplars. For example, 'a virtue is a trait we admire in an exemplar' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 21). While admiration can be mistaken, Zagzebski argues that 'basic trust in our emotions is inescapable and rational' (p. 44). The admiration that is of value in identifying exemplars, however, and that we are right to trust, involves the considered reflection of individuals and moral communities over time. What is more, while admiration can arise from personal experience, the 'socially recognized procedure' for picking out exemplars is the 'telling and re-telling of narratives' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 15). Exemplar narratives (biographical and fictional) thus play a central role in the theory, having the ability to provide detailed observation of a person's actions and inner life, often giving an account not only of the end point but the process of their moral development. This focus on narratives is central to EMT and is highlighted by Zagzebski as one of its central advantages, aligning it with moral education across cultures and over time. As she puts it, 'Narratives are the primary vehicle for the moral education of the young, and the primary way humans of any age develop and alter their moral sensibilities. Narratives capture the imagination, and elicit the emotions that motivate action' (Zagzebski, 2013, p. 196).

This article will examine the use of biographical narratives in the education of moral character, particularly as it relates to EMT. It will distinguish two versions of exemplarist moral education before responding to four important concerns: (i) Selectivity: biographical narratives are necessarily selective. However detailed, they present a partial picture and can conceal as well as reveal morally important aspects of a subject's life. What is more, educators must select which biographies they deem important to share, in what ways and what settings. (ii) Indoctrination: the rhetorical power present in the written form and delivery of narratives highlights the fact that the educational use of biographical narratives inevitably serves a particular moral agenda. (iii) Receptivity: the successful use of biographical narratives depends not only on appropriate presentation but also on the receptivity of students. Arrogant students may identify too easily with an exemplar, underestimating the moral gap between them in a way that inhibits motivation for moral development; obsequious students may fail to identify sufficiently with positive qualities as ones they might ever be able to possess and so be de-motivated (Tanesini, 2016). (iv) Relevance: biographical narratives may induce admiration of moral exemplars

but, in accord with recent work in exemplarist moral education, ‘modelling will only be a relevant pedagogical strategy if moral exemplars are somehow related to life in its full extent, including its moral complexities and ambiguities’ (Vos, 2018, p. 18).

These four concerns will be considered with regards to the use of biographical writing to present exemplars worthy of admiration and emulation as a pedagogical strategy in contemporary character education. It will draw, in particular, on the work of Linda Zagzebski as well as the philosophy of Augustine, whose autobiographical *Confessions* mark a transition from the conformist pattern of ‘continuity through replication’ (Brown, 1983, p. 5) that marked classical education to a central concern with the individual and the inner life that is a prominent feature of modern biographical and auto-biographical work (Hamilton, 2007; Taylor, 1989). To clarify terminology, ‘imitation’ (Aristotle’s *mimesis*) is taken broadly as learning by example, and emulation as ‘a form of imitation in which the emulated person is perceived as a model in some respect’ (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 131). Neither term implies mindless mimicry or any loss of moral agency.

Two versions of exemplarist moral education

The use of exemplars and exemplar narratives for the purpose of character development is an important feature of classical education. Its more recent recovery and appropriation in contemporary character education draws on this longstanding tradition, especially in its recourse to the philosophy of Aristotle (Kristjánsson, 2006). However, there are significant differences between the classical and modern versions of exemplarist moral education.

In the ‘standard model’ of classical pedagogy, as Warnick (2008, pp. 14–15) terms it, excellent acts were identified, typically from narratives found in the seminal works of authors such as Homer, Livy, Plutarch, and Virgil. These were presented to students along with a description of the rewards of praise and glory that followed them. Students were challenged to do likewise and receive like rewards. Following Warnick’s summary:

- (i) ‘An excellent act is presented to the learner’,
 - (ii) ‘a description of the rewards that follow the vision of excellence is described’,
 - (iii) ‘a challenge, in the form of a conclusion is given to replicate the action’.
- (Warnick, 2008, p. 14)

This three-part process was at the core of Classical education, which centred on the imitation of heroic virtue. Indeed, many Classical texts were written with the purpose of moral formation in view. This is illustrated nowhere more clearly than by Plutarch, the Classical biographer *par excellence*, in his famous *Parallel Lives*. Writing between AD 96 and 120, Plutarch paired biographical accounts of Greek and Roman figures covering a span of classical history that stretched from the mythical world of Romulus and Remus to the late Roman Republic. As programmatic statements through the work make clear, Plutarch’s aim in writing was to illumine the moral character of his subjects in order to further the development of virtues (strengths) of character in his readers (Duff, 2002). If such an explicit moral agenda is surprising from a late modern perspective, it is important to recognise that this ‘ethical pedagogic purpose’ (Duff, 2002, p. 14) was

standard in the Classical world. In fact, the Classical literary tradition as a whole was aimed at formation. It ‘existed for the sole purpose of “making [persons] into classics”’ (Brown, 1983, p. 1). The purpose of books was ‘to produce persons’ who would themselves be ‘exemplary beings’ (p. 1).

The turn to Classical moral philosophy in the twentieth-century recovery of virtue ethics has led to renewed interest in the exemplarist pedagogy that it advocated. Zagzebski’s EMT grows out of this tradition as a contemporary argument for the central place of exemplarity in moral life. However, while Zagzebski advocates the educational potential of her theory, she leaves it to others to develop an exemplar-based account of moral education. Michael Croce and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza (2017) have taken up this task, advancing a ‘pluralistic account of exemplar-based character education’ that builds on a disunitarist understanding of the virtues and Miller’s (2013) account of ‘mixed traits’ in order to argue for the educative value of imperfect exemplars along with fully virtuous moral saints. Croce summarizes the model as follows:

- (i) Human flourishing is the main aim of moral education, and the acquisition of the virtues is a necessary condition of flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 14);
- (ii) Emulation of moral exemplars is the main way to achieve these aims;
- (iii) Emulation as a means of education requires the educator: (a) to elicit the children’s admiration via presenting them with genuinely good and imitable models; and (b) to foster the children’s capacity for reflection upon *prima facie* admiration. (Croce, 2019, p. 293)

The first two points are uncontroversial in Aristotelian character education, although the elevation of emulation as *the* main strategy of moral education differs from an Aristotelian approach if it is interpreted as placing emulation over and against such central pedagogical methods as habituation (Sanderson, 2020) or friendship (Kristjánsson, 2020). In our view there is little need to decide between these methods in principle. What is more important is to discern how they can be combined well in practice. We have written elsewhere (Lamb et al., 2021) on the integration of pedagogical methods in character education, including the emulation of virtuous exemplars as one of seven research-based strategies for character development along with ‘habituation through practice, reflection on personal experience, . . . dialogue that increases virtue literacy, awareness of situational variables, moral reminders, and friendships of mutual accountability’. In line with this integrative approach, Engelen et al. (2018) have creatively combined exemplar narratives and behavioural ‘nudges’ as strategies for moral education. The third point in Croce’s summary describes the heart of the pedagogical model of exemplar-based character education built on EMT and reveals an approach that is distinct from the standard model outlined above.

The key point of distinction between standard and EMT models, presented in Table 1, is found in step (ii). The standard model assumes the admirability of the heroic exemplars found in classical texts, moving quickly to the encouragement and challenge to imitate them. EMT more strongly emphasizes the importance of *reflective* admiration. This distinction is rooted in two things: a greater emphasis on a reflexive notion of the moral ‘self’, and the prioritisation of moral saints over heroes in modern compared to Classical culture. The first dynamic has been well documented by Charles Taylor (1989)

Table 1. Comparing classical and modern forms of exemplarist moral education.

	Standard model (Warnick, 2008, p. 14)	EMT-based model
i	'An excellent act is presented to the learner',	A good and imitable model is presented to the learner,
ii	'a description of the rewards that follow the vision of excellence is described',	reflection on admiration is fostered,
iii	'a challenge in the form of a conclusion is given to replicate the action'.	imitation is encouraged.

in *Sources of the Self*. The second is identified by Zagzebski (2017), who argues that, under the influence of Christianity, Western culture came to elevate the Saint, who possesses all of the virtues, over the Hero, who possesses courage but often lacks other virtues. In this cultural tradition, which can be traced to Apostolic and Patristic texts, exemplars are partial and proximate, always pointing beyond themselves. Reflection on human exemplars is essential in order to discern how, both in action and motivation, they reveal ways of life that are in accord with the supreme example of Christ. Self-reflection is also important since exemplars don't simply provide models to be attained but point to a deficit in one's moral attainment that is intended to produce humility and hope in the assistance of divine grace. While the direct influence of Christianity may have waned, the influence of Christian thought on the Western moral framework remains. It is evident in EMT, where the basicity of admiration is analogous to the basicity of adoration and worship that is found in the Christian tradition (see Schindler et al., 2013).

The distinction between standard and EMT educational models works itself out in the way in which biographical narratives are important in each case, both in the selection of texts and in the learner's relation to them. In terms of selection, the standard account relies on a set of 'classic' texts, which focus on the heroic actions of a prescribed set of exemplars. For EMT, however, exemplars and narratives are multiplied. Narratives show 'the varieties of desirable lives' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 171), presenting the good life as 'multiply realizable' (p. 19). As Zagzebski puts it, 'It is important to have many stories of exemplars because they follow so many different paths, and different persons need different role models' (p. 25). The role of narratives relates closely to the importance of reflective admiration in EMT, providing 'a form of detailed observation of persons' (p. 18), and revealing potentially overlooked aspects of an exemplar's inner life (pp. 178–179). The modern model of exemplarist moral education is thus personal and plural, vastly expanding the range of potential literary sources and placing greater responsibility on the individual reader to critically discern moral value. The moral posture of the learner shifts from subservient acceptance of a traditional 'hall of fame' to reflective analysis of biographical narratives that seeks to critically discern both an exemplar's strengths and their failures. The responsibility to construct an exemplary hall of fame is divested to different philosophical and religious traditions, national and local communities, families, teachers and ultimately to the individual moral agent.

A key historical source when it comes to understanding this transition is itself a biographical narrative. Augustine's *Confessions*, written in the early fifth century, is the seminal autobiography in the Western tradition. Focusing on the inner life as centrally important, *Confessions* is a fundamental source of the modern, reflexive conception of the self (Taylor, 1989). What is more, and what makes it a particularly relevant text for our purposes is that a revolution in the reading of exemplar narratives is at the heart of

Augustine's story. Through the text Augustine identifies two fundamental dynamics of exemplarity, recounting a transition from one set of exemplars and corresponding practices of emulation to another. The first dynamic is that of the standard model of Augustine's Classical rhetorical education. He looks back critically: 'When one considers the men proposed to me as models for my imitation, it is no wonder that in this way I was swept along by vanities' (Augustine, 2008, p. 20). Freedom from their influence came through the gift of a second set of examples and a pattern of exemplarity that was rooted in gracious divine action and highlighted the virtue of humility, the idea that human greatness is not built out of personal attainment but grounded on an honest acceptance of the limits of one's humanity (McInerney, 2016). As he writes, following a personal transformation (addressing God, since *Confessions* is written in the form of a prayer): 'The examples given by your servants whom you had transformed ... from death to life, crowded in upon my thoughts. They burnt away and destroyed my heavy sluggishness, preventing me from being dragged down to low things' (Augustine, 2008, p. 156). The heroic exemplars of Classical pedagogy were replaced by a haphazard group that included Augustine's mother, concubine, some close friends and Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. This latter group of luminaries were united not in heroic public attainment but as humble recipients and conduits of altruistic love.

The historical significance of *Confessions*, its explicit concern with problems of exemplarist moral education that relied on a set of Classical texts and pedagogical practices, and its advancement of a new model, make it an important source for contemporary moral education. Augustine's work marks a turning point from a model characterised by external imposition to one that centred on inner transformation. His reflection that the selection of exemplars in his own education was morally limiting takes us to the first of four concerns, introduced above, that we will go on to address.

Selectivity

The selectivity concern when it comes to the use of biographical narratives in exemplarist moral education has two aspects: the selection of biographical narratives by educators in line with their own limited moral assumptions, and the selection of material by authors of biographical narratives, which serves to portray a subject in a certain moral light. Neither aspect of selectivity need be intentional on the part of educator or author, but both exert an important influence with regards to moral development. For example, when it comes to education, if virtue is understood as a 'trait we admire in an exemplar' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 21), teaching courage with singular reference to heroic male exemplars and service with primary reference to female role models will likely stunt the moral development of both girls and boys. A practical solution might be for educators to choose a wide range of biographical texts, attending to their own implicit biases (unconscious attitudes and stereotypes) as they do so. However, it should be acknowledged that this task is not straightforward. It calls for librarians, curriculum designers, teachers and parents who appreciate the moral seriousness of their decisions when it comes to the stories they tell and books they promote, and themselves embody the virtue of practical wisdom.

Authorial selection is a related concern. If the value of biographical narratives in moral education is their ability to reveal contours of moral life that would otherwise remain

hidden, an important challenge to their use is the way in which narratives can also conceal aspects of reality. All narratives are told from a certain perspective, presenting an account of a person that is inevitably selective and limited. This selectivity allows for the presentation of moral complexity, but it also enables the opposite—a ‘laundering’ of moral life in order to achieve an idealized commemoration of a subject. Biographical writing has always been marked by a tension between commemoration and critical interpretation (Hamilton, 2007), a tension which has often had a political edge. This tension is at the heart of the work of Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), whose *Lives of the Poets* is a foundational marker in modern biographical writing in English. Johnson famously resisted hagiography in order to present the lives of his subjects with their ‘mistakes, miscarriages, escapes and expedients’ (Johnson, 1750, as cited in Hamilton, 2007, p. 90) such that readers might identify with them. However, this did not leave Johnson’s work free from accusations of bias or embellishment. His *Life of Richard Savage*, for example, presented a psychological account of a close friend that was received by some from the outset as closer to fiction than fact (Seager, 2015). Notwithstanding the modern preference for biographical writing that is authentic in its presentation of vice as well as virtue, the personal or political advantage to be gained from the power of portrayal means that those whose lives are far from exemplary can wrongly be presented as worthy of admiration. What is more, the dynamic of partial presentation can operate unintentionally. If authors are drawn to narrate the lives of those they take as personal exemplars, their admiration may naturally colour their presentation in a way that makes impartial reflection more difficult.

Zagzebski unwittingly illustrates the challenge of selecting appropriate exemplars in her book, identifying as her primary example of a moral saint the founder of the L’Arche communities, Jean Vanier.¹ Following a career as a naval officer and doctorate in moral philosophy, Vanier was inspired by his mentor, Father Thomas Philippe, to adopt a vocation to care for the intellectually disabled. In 1964 he established a community, north of Paris, with the aim of creating a family life where people with and without mental disabilities would live alongside and care for each other. Inspired by Vanier’s example of care and commitment, the movement grew rapidly. In August 2020, it numbers 154 communities in 38 countries around the world (L’Arche, 2020). In Zagzebski’s retelling and other written accounts, Vanier does indeed seem to be a suitable exemplar. However, the revelation of new information utterly upturns that assessment. In the final years of Vanier’s life (he died in 2019) allegations against him of sexual assault, involving the psychological and spiritual abuse of a number of women came to light. Accusations made by six women were validated in an inquiry commissioned and published by L’Arche International (L’Arche, 2020a).

Reading Zagzebski’s biographical narrative of Vanier before these findings were made public triggered admiration for his selfless care, compassion and spiritual leadership. In their light the admiration vanishes, shrouding with questions Vanier’s motivation and the authenticity of his care for others. Also called into question is what Zagzebski describes as one of her ‘guiding principles’ (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 103), namely the certainty of the identity of some exemplars above the certainty of our definition of moral terms:

We are more certain of the identities of certain exemplars than we are of the terms to be defined . . . I think that we are more certain of the admirability of Socha and Vanier than we

are of the definitions of “courage” and “compassion,” and we are much more certain of the admirability of these exemplars than we are of the definitions of ‘virtue,’ ‘right act,’ ‘duty,’ and so on. (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 103)

The revelation of Vanier as a manipulative abuser of multiple women and his clear-eyed dishonesty when questioned seem to throw Zagzebski’s theory into doubt. We have already noted that Zagzebski emphasizes the importance of ongoing reflection on the suitability of admiration in view of the evidence. However, if we cannot have confidence in the identity of such primary exemplars as Vanier, it would seem hard to remain committed to the notion that the admiration of exemplars can be relied on as morally foundational (Watson & Wilson, 2019).

Considering how EMT might be upheld or adapted in light of the Vanier case focuses our attention on the category of the moral saint, which Vanier is called on to illustrate. According to Zagzebski, the category of moral saint is one of three categories of exemplar. The ‘saint’, Zagzebski (2017) argues, arose in Western culture with Christianity and partially displaced the prior ideals of the ‘hero’ and the ‘sage’. As a moral ideal the saint is dominated by the virtue of love, in which all of the virtues are united. Unlike heroes and sages, whose example may be limited, saints are thus supposed to exemplify all of the virtues.

The historical context that Zagzebski identifies is not incidental. She draws on Leo Strauss to argue that each class of exemplar ‘only makes sense within a certain cultural context’ (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 96). For the purpose of responding to the Vanier case, identifying Christianity as the cultural context in which the saint came to the fore opens the door to philosophical and theological resources that might help us. Firstly, in the Catholic Church, of which Vanier was a member, the procedure of declaring someone a saint involves an extended ecclesial process of beatification and canonization, famously documented by Benedict XIV in his *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (1734–8). While the process is certainly not uncontroversial amongst Christian traditions, nor is it free from political interests, it encodes an extended process of collective reflection that can be used to develop the emphasis on reflective admiration in Zagzebski’s account. At the very least, the formality of the beatification process emphasizes the seriousness in declaring someone a saint and suggests that taking Vanier as the primary exemplar of a moral saint was premature even before his history of sexual abuse was uncovered. Educationally there is perhaps a lesson to be learnt about the importance of caution in educators labelling people as obvious moral exemplars, foreclosing the necessity of ongoing reflection when it comes to the validity of admiration students should have for them.

Secondly, Zagzebski’s (2017) claim that saints should possess all of the virtues can be further clarified. In the Catholic Church saints are examples of those who have received grace to enable their enactment of heroic virtue. They are not examples of moral perfection since the only fully virtuous exemplar is the incarnate Christ. The application of ‘saint’ to human exemplars functions proleptically and is extended on the basis of the church’s identification with Christ and in view of an eschatology where the church (the ‘body of Christ’) will one day fully resemble Christ (the ‘head’). What this means for EMT is that, at least when it comes to the saint, the certainty of admiration is not the logical certainty of analytical definition but a kind of faith, supported by the biographical

narrative(s) that is handed down and any confirming experiential and/or other empirical evidence. The foundational faith in the admirability of an exemplar does not displace but grounds reasoned reflection in the Anselmian fashion of faith seeking understanding. This highlights the importance of Zagzebski's emphasis on reflective admiration, which should not be foreclosed, however impressive the biographical account. Zagzebski is alert to the danger of overestimating an exemplar's possession of virtue and argues that exemplary figures, particularly moral heroes, may be limited and weak. She acknowledges the danger that 'abstracting the exemplar's most admirable qualities and acts out of a complete narrative in order to identify the qualities and acts we deem admirable requires that weaknesses be ignored' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 97). What Vanier's case highlights, however, is that no biographical narrative is 'complete'. All are partial and selective.

Zagzebski's defence against the cultural denial of exemplarity that is characteristic of sceptical, post-Christian Western culture, by appealing to a human exemplar, breaks down at this point. While it comes with its own set of difficulties, turning more explicitly to the theological understanding that is implicit in EMT might allow for a better response. The ideal of moral sainthood is drawn from a tradition where it is incarnated only once. A counterargument to the denial of exemplarity (and its self-defeating moral scepticism) would be to affirm the validity of true moral exemplarity as an eschatological ideal that is necessary for moral life, commitment to which is an act of faith. In philosophical terms, this move would modify the reliance of EMT on the emotion of admiration as morally basic, adding an understanding of what it means to be a good person as a conceptual foundation.

If recent revelations of Vanier that discount him as a moral exemplar do not debunk EMT altogether, they necessitate adaptations that call into question the stability of EMT as a freestanding moral theory. What is more, they highlight an important challenge that the use of life writing presents when it comes to moral education: there is often another side of the story. If a scepticism that denies the possibility of exemplary individuals cuts off at the knees the potential of learning from biographical exemplar narratives, the answer is not idealism that clings to exemplars by marginalising the presence of conflicting evidence. The appropriate posture for learning from exemplar narratives, underlined by the Vanier case, is ongoing commitment to reflective admiration—engaging exemplar narratives assuming good faith but with a humble realism that there is more to any life story than a biography reveals, and some of it may be discomfiting. The use of biographies in exemplarist moral education must proceed with trust that always seeks understanding and so reads multiple biographical accounts with consideration of the author's purpose, and open-mindedness to the evidence.

Indoctrination

Allied to the problem of selectivity is a concern over indoctrination that faces all intentional moral education (Hand, 2017). Michael Croce (2019) engages it with specific application to an exemplarist approach. As Croce points out, indoctrination can be variously understood, with a focus on an educator's methods, intentions, particular doctrines that are taught, or learners' educational outcomes. He endorses 'an outcome-based account that charges with indoctrination educators whose teaching strategies foster closed-mindedness in their students' (p. 297). Croce considers the challenge that the

indoctrination concern presents to exemplarist moral education with reference to two developmental stages: an initial stage of moral socialization and a subsequent stage of positive moral inquiry. When it comes to the first stage, he argues that an exemplarist approach allows for moral socialization without indoctrination by means of a certain pedagogical minimalism. As he envisages the exemplarist approach, children would simply be presented with ‘ordinary’ exemplars to admire and emulate in contrast to a regulation-based approach where they would be given lists of rules that need to be kept. Insofar as an educator orients this phase towards a second stage of critical moral inquiry, students are not indoctrinated. Croce argues that an exemplarist approach can foster open-mindedness and critical thinking necessary at this second stage by focusing on reflection and collective discussion concerning exemplars that are introduced.

Croce’s defence against the charge of indoctrination is well judged. However, narrowing our focus to the use of biographical narratives sharpens the challenge. Attention to the literary dynamics of texts and the way texts are delivered and received highlights that every presentation of an exemplar for admiration is an act of persuasion, oriented to some end. The idea that it is pedagogically minimalist to read biographical narratives to children or select books for them to read is open to challenge. What is more, while Zagzebski (2017, p. 47) may be right that reflection over time and with others can counter human bias and correct errors in admiration, the use of biographical narratives can make that process of correction harder due to the employment of persuasive literary techniques. For example, using narrative structure and plot to emphasise attractive aspects of an exemplar’s character and/or minimize negative ones; moderating narrative voice, tense and register to build a relationship with the reader, inviting identification with an exemplar to the degree that the reader feels loyal to them; employing hyperbole to exaggerate the challenges the exemplar overcame or the hurdles they triumphed over; branding the biography as exceptional through peritextual elements (e.g., publisher’s blurb, foreword by a famous person, marketing campaigns, status of publisher). Moreover, variables associated with the delivery of narratives can exert an emotional and motivational impact that can outstrip the narrative’s rational content.

In this connection, Gulliford et al. (2021) examine a hitherto unexplored aspect of the effectiveness of exemplar narratives; namely their mode of delivery. Whether an exemplar narrative is communicated by the written or spoken word, by a professed expert or a novice, or by an adult or a child, affects its perceived credibility, its seeming authenticity and its power to shift attitudes and motivate behaviour. Dual process models of communication, such as Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) ‘Elaboration Likelihood Model’ and Chaiken’s (1980) ‘Heuristic Systematic Model’ are pertinent here insofar as they show that people process persuasive messages in two main ways. Central/systematic processing entails careful and deliberative processing of a message, while peripheral/heuristic processing entails the use of simplifying decision rules or ‘heuristics’ to quickly assess the message. When people process message content heuristically (peripherally), they do not attend to the central features of the message communication itself and rely on peripheral cues, such as the speaker’s tone of voice, gender, speed of speech, perceived attractiveness and accent. While this knowledge is consciously deployed to persuasive effect in advertising campaigns, it is not difficult to see how these ‘variables of delivery’ could enhance or derail the effectiveness of exemplar narratives.

The philosophy of exemplarity embedded within Augustine's *Confessions* illustrates the challenge presented by factors of narrative persuasion and helps us to find a way forward. In the first book of *Confessions*, Augustine emerges as a strong critic of the exemplarist pedagogy that was a central feature of the classical education that he received and excelled in. As he looks back on the narratives of Homer and Virgil that were central texts in his schooling, he argues that the heroic model of imitation that they were called on to support did not strengthen free moral conduct but served to ensnare him in immorality since depraved activities attributed to the gods gave a divine stamp of approval to those that imitated them (Augustine, 2008). What is more, a morally deleterious pattern of imitation was imbued with power by a pedagogy that centred on forced memorisation and public recital of narratives with high praise the reward for those who excelled and 'shame and blows' for those who did not (p. 19). The reinforcement of public praise marked out as examples to be followed those whose primary concern was their excellence in a system of education that prized rhetorical skill above all: 'if they described their lusts in a rich vocabulary of well constructed prose with a copious and ornate style, they received praise and congratulated themselves' (p. 20). Looking back, Augustine's assessment is that the imitation of exemplars embedded in his classical education served to obstruct the path of life and liberty that he would later come to follow. Two aspects he highlights as particularly problematic are the reinforcement by teachers and peers and the rhetorical power of texts themselves. Both of these, Augustine argues, undermined his authentic moral development.

A persistent theme in Augustine's critique of the classical culture of imitation is its dishonesty. Literature and rhetorical speech were employed to construct ideal exemplars by talking up their attainments and overlooking their failures. Excelling in his education, Augustine was trained to use words to make examples of others, lauding those in power in order to gain their patronage, laundering reputations as a public relations consultant might do today. His retrospective assessment is candid: he had devoted his life to become a 'seller of words' (p. 163). His tenure as Imperial Rhetor in Milan, he condemned as a 'chair of lies' (p. 157).

Augustine's criticism of rhetoric is something of a puzzle to scholars, who generally interpret it in one of two ways: a strong theological opposition between rhetoric and truth or a break with a specific sophist tradition of rhetorical practice that got carried away with form at the expense of content. Tell (2010) moves this puzzle forward, identifying in *Confessions* the specific category of talkative 'profession'—the opposite of humble 'confession'—as Augustine's target. What is more, he recognises that it is important to situate Augustine's opposition to rhetoric within his fundamental refutation of human pride. What Augustine rejects is the 'profession' of human wisdom that multiplies words in an effort to talk human beings up until they are godlike in standing. This process is inevitably and anxiously verbose. Resting on public reputation, greatness must be celebrated with flaws airbrushed in a process of moral construction. Eloquent human words are multiplied but the quiet divine wisdom that is revealed in the substance of a person's character is left behind. As Augustine (2008) prepared his words in praise of the Emperor, the hollow shell of constructed exemplarity is contrasted with the personal example of his friend, Alypius: 'I was attached to him because of the solid virtue of his character' (p. 98).

If rhetorical power is an inherent feature of narrative communication (2021 Coates et al., 2021), an important lesson for the use of biographical narratives in exemplarist moral education is that the rhetorical force of the text must align with the content of the exemplar's character. Educators need to take responsibility for the rhetorical force of texts, the dynamics of delivery, and extra-textual 'nudges' (Engelen et al., 2018), such as the labelling of rooms or school 'houses' after historic exemplars. As Zagzebski (2017) puts it, the fact that narratives 'are never pure observations from which we select the acts, motives, and traits we admire . . . means that we need to handle narratives with a healthy critical eye' (p. 67). Educators should consider how narratives they intend to introduce employ rhetorical techniques to spotlight certain aspects of a life, celebrating or questioning the subject's actions and/or motivations and presenting a moral vision. What is more, setting a text brings students into contact with the narrative in ways that may be more or less powerful in arousing moral emotion and motivation. Texts may be set in part or in whole, for a week or a term, with exuberance or apology. They may be assigned as private reading, set for memorisation, or taken up in class discussion, public narration, or dramatic enactment. Reflection may be more or less structured with the introduction of specific questions. These pedagogical decisions do not simply influence intellectual comprehension but should be taken with due consideration of their implications for moral development.

Receptivity

So far, our consideration of the use of biographical narratives in an exemplar-based approach to moral education has focused on considerations related to biographical narratives and their delivery. But what makes learners themselves receptive to virtuous exemplars whom they encounter in such texts? If variables of delivery are important, what about variables of receptivity?

Augustine illustrates the challenge here and suggests a potential way forward. He opens *Confessions* with a contrast between two divergent patterns of imitation. The first centres on formal presentation and social status and is driven by an appeal to personal ambition. The second sees beyond external appearance, focusing instead on moral qualities of truth, hope and kindness. This latter path is exemplified in the persistent devotion of Monica, Augustine's uneducated mother; in the faithfulness of Augustine's unnamed concubine; and in the humane kindness of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (Augustine, 2008). The examples of his Classical education, by contrast, were heroic models of human attainment, whose mastery gained adulation, and whose skilful command of words allowed their moral vacuity to be concealed by rhetorical flair. This status-driven quest was the path that Augustine followed. He sought to leave his mother behind, he dismissed his concubine, and he found no value in the roughly presented exemplar narratives that he read in his Latin translation of the Christian scriptures. By contrast, his life story epitomized success on the terms of the Classical exemplars presented in his education. Looking back he writes that 'in my boyhood it was set before me as my moral duty in life to obey those who admonished me with the purpose that I should succeed in this world, and should excel in the arts of using my tongue to gain access to human honours and deceitful riches' (p. 11). Yet he also acknowledges that this was a path that he willingly, if unhappily, embraced.

In a paper cautioning against the efficacy of exposure to exemplars as an effective strategy for the cultivation of intellectual virtues, Alessandra Tanesini (2016) points out that the effectiveness of a message depends on the receptivity of the audience as well as the strength of the arguments. She argues that ‘exposure to exemplars . . . inspires and encourages self-improvement only in those who already have fairly virtuous attitudes’ (p. 525). Tanesini’s contention is supported by the empirical work of psychologist, Karl Aquino, who highlights the importance of ‘moral identity centrality’ in relation to how receptive individuals are to morally salient information. Aquino et al. (2011) reported that people higher in moral identity centrality (MIC) reported experiencing more intense elevation emotions, had more positive views about humanity and were more desirous of becoming a better person after reading about an act of uncommon goodness than those lower in moral identity centrality. Furthermore, relative to individuals with lower MIC, people higher in MIC were more likely to recall acts of moral goodness and experience moral elevation in response to such events more strongly. Simply put, messages with morally relevant content are more likely to take root in individuals for whom morality is a highly valued dimension of their identity.

The challenge inherent in this dynamic is at the heart of Augustine’s experience. In spite of existential unhappiness, he continued to pursue a path of egoistical success and was unable to learn from the models or narratives of humble exemplarity before him. An important insight that Augustine’s personal narrative reveals is that the models that are elevated—and the way they are imitated—are joined together. There is a reciprocal dynamic between the lives that we read, the way that we read them, and the way that our own lives are shaped as a result. The key to moral formation, as Augustine presents it, is a way of learning by example that is characterized at each point by the virtue of humility. Tanesini (2016) focuses on intellectual modesty (a component of intellectual humility in her view) but her argument is similar. She makes the point that arrogant students are predisposed to see similarities between their own attainment of virtue and that of an admirable exemplar. Obsequious students, on the other hand, are predisposed to compare themselves negatively to exemplars. In the first case presentation of an exemplar is likely to increase arrogance. In the second, it is likely to cement a demoralising self-assessment. Tanesini’s (2016) proposal is that educators should employ targeted strategies to overcome disordered self-esteem. In particular she advocates self-affirmation techniques that ‘affirm . . . self-worth so that it is less in need of protection against threats’ (p. 526), reducing the defensiveness of the arrogant and boosting the self-esteem of the self-abased.

Our proposed Augustinian model offers a different approach, involving gratitude and friendship. In *Confessions*, Augustine (2008) diagnoses his lack of receptivity to exemplars as rooted in proud self-sufficiency. He took care of himself and developed abilities to get on in life as a protective ‘armoury’ (p. 22). His defensive ego was overcome as he learnt to recognise the givenness of the good he enjoyed, even of his own qualities. And it was the lived example of a moral community of friends that opened him to a better way to read narratives of exemplary lives. Rather than boosting the fragile and defensive ego with self-affirmation, a strategy that is only as good as the fluctuating power of one’s self-talk, Augustine learnt a deeper self-acceptance. He found his worth not as something to be grasped but as something already given, rooted in the dignity of human nature, the fundamental goodness of the world, and the love that was expressed in relations between

friends. In this context, exemplars could be encountered less as comparisons that reveal deficiency to companions that hold out hope. This relational core at the heart of the moral life points to the practical importance of integrating the use of exemplar narratives in moral education with other strategies for character development, most particularly ‘friendships of mutual accountability’ (Lamb et al., 2021). Not only do friends provide a resource outside of the self to challenge patterns of thinking and behaviour, they also exhibit the selfless love that can break the need for self-justification that inhibits moral growth.

Relevance

The counter side of student receptivity is the relevance of a particular life story to a student’s experience. It is all very well for students to be receptive but if the exemplars presented to them are unrelated to their life situation and experience it will be difficult for them learn. The challenge here, at least when it comes to early education, is that biographies written for children tend strongly towards what Hamilton (2007) describes as the commemorative rather than critical pole of biographical writing. Moral complexity is often removed in order to present a straightforward narrative that foregrounds the magnitude of the subject’s achievement. If this is understandable on the part of authors and educators, it is also counterproductive for moral formation.

If biographical narratives are morally simplistic, or exemplars are selected on the basis of superhuman heroism, recent research suggests that they are less likely to have a positive moral effect. In fact, Pieter Vos (2018) argues, ‘modelling will only be a relevant pedagogical strategy if moral exemplars are somehow related to life in its full extent, including its moral complexities and ambiguities’ (p. 18). Vos draws on two streams of recent empirical work that indicate the importance of attainability and relevance of moral exemplars and ‘indicate the necessity of presenting exemplars in the fullness of their lives’ (p. 19). The first is by Han et al. (2017), which found peer exemplars more likely to increase motivation for emulation than public figures. The second is by Monin et al. (2008), which found presenting extraordinary yet distant exemplars led to resentment and envy rather than imitation. This research suggests that for narratives to induce imitation of exemplars, they must connect with ordinary experience.

The importance of ordinary experience speaks against a return to the manufactured morality of approved lives in the standard model of exemplarist education. Vos (2018) highlights an important transition from Classical to modern approaches, drawing on Charles Taylor’s (1989) argument that an ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ (p. 209) is central to the modern conception of the self. There is a clear distinction, Vos argues, between classical exemplars as ‘perfect examples of general truths’ and modern moral exemplars who are ‘real persons who embody virtues (and vices) and live out particular values in the midst of the moral complexity of their lives’ (p. 21).

Again, the inner focus of Augustine’s *Confessions* is at the root of this transition (Taylor, 1989). Alert to the hypocrisy of using rhetoric to launder the lives of prominent figures in order to present them as moral exemplars, Augustine narrates the experience of authentic moral formation as one of learning to follow partial and imperfect exemplars along a path of moral repair. Central to Augustine’s experience in this regard is his

decade-long commitment to Manichaeism, which he came to criticize as vacuous in its pursuit of artificial purity.

The Manichees were a gnostic sect built on a rejection of Christian orthodoxy in favour of a dualistic system that turned away from the corruption of physical reality, following a path to enlightenment by way of an elaborate system of dietary and sexual regulations within a strictly ordered hierarchy. Their gnostic commitment made it impossible for them to admit the far from perfect historical models held out in the morally complex biographical narratives of Moses (a murderer) and David (an adulterer) (Chadwick, 2008, xiv). Unable to live with imperfect exemplars, they developed an elaborate system to circumvent what they perceived as the earthbound humility of orthodox Christianity. Their pseudo-intellectualism is exposed when Augustine finally meets Faustus, the leader of the sect, and is left disappointed by his lack of wisdom: 'Fine style does not make something true, nor has a man a wise soul because he has a handsome face and well-chosen eloquence. They who had promised that he would be so good were not good judges. He seemed to them prudent and wise because he charmed them by the way he talked' (Augustine, 2008, p. 78).

If Augustine's encounter with Faustus was disappointing on one level, he narrates it as a turning point on his journey to read his own life, and the lives of others in a way that opened up a path to genuine moral growth. As he gradually abandoned his pursuit for human perfection as a hubristic façade, Augustine found relevant exemplars all around him. He started to see beneath the outward appearance of worldly success to ordinary models of virtue, whose progress was more important than their perfection. It is with this new vision that he describes his encounter with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, seeing beyond his fame to the grounded reality of his character: 'I began to like him, at first not as a teacher of the Church . . . but as a human being who was kind to me' (Augustine, 2008, p. 88). Augustine's turn to the ordinary thus reframes the notion of exemplary relevance away from the fame and glory of the standard model to examples of character in ordinary life. Here, where virtue is partial and exemplars are fellow travellers on the way, relevance is not only a matter of objective moral worth but about subjective connection with a person's own moral development.

Returning to the issue of relevance, there are important implications for the choice and presentation of biographical works. The importance of ordinary and morally complex exemplars does not undermine the value of biographies for moral education, but it does highlight that educators should beware falling into a reversion of the standard model of exemplarity through the use of idealised life stories. While fictional works may have an inherent advantage over biographies when it comes to the illumination of moral complexity in exemplary lives, biographical works can equally be taken up within a pedagogical approach to exemplarist moral education that focuses on the ordinary, partial and progressive path of character development rather than attainment of greatness exhibited by perfect role models in remote and artificially perfected acts.

Conclusion

The intentional use of biographical narratives in modern moral education is not unproblematic but the fundamental challenge of indoctrination that weighs against all forms of moral education (Croce, 2019) can be parsed and answered when it comes to the use of

biographies in an exemplarist pedagogical approach as it can more broadly. The Augustinian turn in exemplarist moral education, from a Classical model of imposition from above to a focus on the inner life of the individual and the power of exemplars to inspire transformation is central to this defence and to the ongoing promise of exemplarist education today. Distinguishing clearly between classical and modern models, foregrounds the importance of a discriminating kind of emulation that highlights personal reflection and responsibility. For educators, it demands critical reflection in selecting and sharing biographical texts, and the introduction of critical reflection as an important practice to be fostered among students as they are taught how to read a life.

Note

1. The Vanier case is treated at length since it highlights the fundamental challenge of selectivity in EMT and indeed calls the theory as Zagzebski presents it into question. While we argue that EMT should not be dismissed on account of the Vanier case and the serious problems it highlights, our proposed adaptation moderates the notion that EMT can function as a self-contained moral theory.

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