



Paths to flourishing: Ancient models of the exemplary life

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 8th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Friday 3rd – Sunday 5th January 2020.

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PATHS TO FLOURISHING: ANCIENT MODELS OF THE EXEMPLARY LIFE	2
1. Platonic exemplarity	3
2. Socratic saints	7
3. Aristotelian phronetic exemplarity	9
Conclusion: Re-unifying the models	11

Paths to flourishing: Ancient models of the exemplary life

It is increasingly argued by contemporary virtue-ethicists – especially after Zagzebski 2017 (but see also 2006; 2010; 2015) – that exemplary individuals present us with a model of flourishing which enables admirers to undertake an emulative path to moral improvement. This renewed awareness of the role of exemplars in moral life and theory has led to a proliferation of works within educational studies, aimed at reformulating Aristotelian character education in exemplarist terms (cf. Kristjánsson 2006; Sanderse 2013; Sundari 2015; Croce and Vaccarezza 2017; Engelen, Thomas, Archer, Van de Ven 2018; Kidd 2018; Archer 2019; Archer, Thomas, Engelen 2019). However, it is seldom if ever discussed which model of exemplarity such proposals refer to, and, consequently, which theoretical and practical functions the exemplars they point to should play. In particular, more than the *content* of the flourishing life exemplars embody, the question concerns the *ways* the role model’s life should guide their admirers’.

In order to shed light on this all but uncontroversial issue, we argue that it is essential to trace the roots of the notion of exemplarity, so as to uncover its potential usages and implications. Thus, we will present three ancient paths to flourishing via reference to exemplary individuals: (i) the Platonic mimesis of ideal models, (ii) the Stoic legacy focused on imitation of the “Socratic” sage, and (ii) the Aristotelian portrait of the phronimos as a source of inspiration. These three paths, we will contend, show three different routes to flourishing, as they have different implications as for whether, how, and to what extent one should emulate an admired role model. The Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, both in its pagan and Christian versions, conceives of the model as a universal norm to which one should literally – albeit imperfectly – conform (see e.g. Plato, *Timaeus* 28A-50; *Republic* 484CD, 592b; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 8.6; *De Genesi ad litteram liber imperfectus* 16.57). The Stoic sage, embodied by Socrates, is the prime example of a saint, i.e., a particular model whom is literally imitable so as to “become like him” (Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 95.1; *On Tranquillity of Spirit* 5.2; *On Kindness* V 6.1-7). The Aristotelian phronimos, finally, represents a non-generalizable living standard, whose imitation can be only by analogy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI).

While Socratic sanctity and Platonic ideal models call for *conformity* with an embodied universal ideal, the Aristotelian exemplarity of the *phronimos* *inspires* an analogical imitation, i.e., an attempt to deliberate well and “do morally good”, without prescribing any literal emulation or specific course of action. Thus, we will claim that it is the most promising model of exemplarity a virtue-ethical exemplarism should consider accommodating, so to avoid charges of indoctrination, heteronomy, and unfeasibility. However, in conclusion we will briefly turn to the educational field, where a rehabilitation of the other two models is not only possible, but necessary.

1. Platonic exemplarity

The first model of exemplarity is that which for simplicity we may call "Platonic", because it is in Plato that its most typical and fundamental expression is to be found. Platonic exemplarity is centered on the relationship between model and copy, in which the model is conceived as having the characters of universality. The Platonic exemplarism "of the model" is, first of all, a metaphysical and epistemological thesis, and only in a derived sense can it be read in its moral implications. In fact, in the first instance, what is exemplary is the causality that gives form and order to the world, directing it to excellence; an intelligent causality, endowed with a separate existence, which does not create but rather shapes reality.

The Demiurge of the *Timaeus* creates the world by "copying" the Forms and interpreting them so as to impress them into matter (29A); the universe is therefore ordered in view of excellence (*Laws* 903B), in light of a model which has separate and independent existence, and cannot be reduced to the mind of the Demiurge himself (*Timaeus* 28A). The sensible reality is therefore modeled in the likeness of the really existing realities (cf. *Timaeus* 50C).

The universal model, however, is not only the ontological foundation of visible realities, which are formed on its basis, but also becomes in Plato an exemplary cause of the moral life, in that the human praxis is called to aspire to conform to it, and to imitate it as the copy does with the original. As clearly visible in the *Republic* 484CD, Plato uses - similarly to the image of the Demiurge - that of the painter to express the idea of the good man who looks at the model, form, image or idea of spiritual truth present in his soul and which consequently maintains this gaze in the moment in which he faces the questions of practical life.

The Kallipolis, as recalled by Socrates in *Republic* 592B, is placed in the sky as a model, offered to those who want to see it, in order for them to establish it. The exemplary relation between model and copy, therefore, moves, already in the Platonic text, from a metaphysical-epistemological thesis, to having immediate - albeit indirect - ethical implications.

Although in ethics the model-copy relationship clearly finds its foundation in the Platonic metaphysics of forms, it has been claimed with good reasons that a proper moral exemplarism is born, in the Western tradition, not, as one could easily believe, as a direct consequence of the Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics of forms, but with the passage to Christian Platonism, when ideas are assimilated to the essence of God (Kondoleon 1970, 181).

This transition, whose completion is recognizable in Augustine, merges in an original synthesis the Neoplatonic legacy and the Christian view of the Word of God as the prime exemplar. This gives rise to a divine exemplarism which, as said, will become one of the dominant traditions of Western exemplarism. Augustine is obviously not the first to place the eternal archetypes in the divine mind, a theoretical move already made by Philo of Alexandria and, even more explicitly, by Plotinus. However, in the Augustinian formulation, the Christian inspiration radically changes the previous versions of divine exemplarity: ideas are coherent, immutable, and part of the same divine essence. In particular, the Word of God becomes the exemplary cause of all created realities: since He is the perfect resemblance to the Father, the creatures are in His image because they resemble, in turn, this first likeness. God, therefore, creates in the light of the intelligible form which is his own divine essence; it creates, that is, by imitating itself. And yet, although every creature imitates the Word by virtue of the form it possesses, and therefore shares in the likeness with God himself, creation presents different degrees of similarity.

Although the moral implications of the Neoplatonic and Augustinian divine exemplarism are quite evident, it is in the work of Thomas Aquinas that one can most easily see its full explication, so as to grasp the indications about the specific function of this modality of exemplarity for a moral theory. As it has been argued, though not without controversy, the conceptual scheme on which the entire *Summa Theologiae* is built is that, of clear Neoplatonic derivation, based on the *exitus-reditus* dynamic; a scheme, that is, that organizes and disposes the subject matter following the movement of emanation of all beings from God, and the subsequent return of the creature to God. This is the meaning of the peculiar plan of the work, which discusses, in the First Pars, God as the first principle, in the *Secunda* the return to Him as an end, and, in the *Tertia Pars*, the Christian conditions of the return to Him, through Christ, the Man-God.

Thomas probably draws inspiration for this approach from the Christian Neoplatonists, especially from the Dionysian tradition. The *exitus-reditus* scheme, detached from the emanationist and deterministic framework within which it was originally conceived, is made compatible, within this tradition, with the plan of divine free creation and the history of salvation, which sees as central the encounter between the freedom of the Creator and that of his creature. This dynamic, which Aquinas makes its own, is not only visible in the general structure of the *Summa*, but also within each of its

parts; as Chenu points out, rather than merely representing the expository criterion of the work, it constitutes its "inner movement", which animates and illuminates the treated matter in a new way. That the Neoplatonic logic is much more than a principle of order and pervades the very conception of each object of investigation, is visible in a particularly enlightening way precisely in the *Secunda Pars*, which, as already mentioned, deals with the return to God as an end. It is interesting to see how Thomas illustrates the theme since the Prologue:

Since, as Damascene states, man is said to be made in God's image, in so far as the image implies "an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-movement": now that we have treated of the exemplar, i.e. God, and of those things which came forth from the power of God in accordance with His will; it remains for us to treat of His image, i.e. man, inasmuch as he too is the principle of his actions, as having free-will and control of his actions.

If these passages and their context are well known, perhaps the connection between this structure and the current discussion about moral exemplarity is less explicit. And yet, as we can see, the *Secunda Pars* is the context in which the *reditus* is dealt with is explained by Tommaso with a markedly exemplary accent. That of the return to God as a final cause is an imitative way, and therefore intrinsically imitative can only be the moral life object of *Secunda Pars*, which analyzes modalities and coordinates of this return.

The imitative nature of Thomistic morality appears particularly striking in the classification of the virtues that we find in Article 5 of I-II q. 61. Here Aquinas, taking up a distinction originally made by Macrobius, and implicitly endorsed by a passage from Augustine, distinguishes the virtues in exemplary, proper to a purified, purifying, and political soul. The exemplary virtues are the virtues present in God himself; an apparently paradoxical idea, virtue being a disposition apt to perfect a substratum, something that God obviously does not need. And in fact, in this sense, the definition of each cardinal virtue becomes, we could say, dynamic, static and reflective:

«The exemplar of human virtue must needs pre-exist in God, just as in Him pre-exist the types of all things. Accordingly virtue may be considered as existing originally in God, and thus we speak of "exemplar" virtues: so that in God the Divine Mind itself may be called prudence; while temperance is the turning of God's gaze on Himself, even as in us it is that which conforms the appetite to reason.

God's fortitude is His unchangeableness; His justice is the observance of the Eternal Law in His works»¹.

The affirmation that in God pre-exist virtues to which human beings have to conform, seems more dictated, in an Augustinian spirit, by the need for a model for human moral life: «As Augustine says (*De Moribus Eccl.* vi), "the soul needs to follow something in order to give birth to virtue: this something is God: if we follow Him we shall live aright»².

The second kind of virtue that Thomas considers in this article is that of the so-called political virtues, or the cardinal virtues understood on a purely human level, such as those commonly referred to. To separate the exemplary degree from the purely political one, there are the two intermediate degrees of the purifying or perfecting virtues, which are proper to “those who walk towards the likeness of God”, and those proper to an already purified soul, that is, typical of those who “have already reached the similarity with God”.

In the first case, “prudence, by contemplating the things of God, counts as nothing all things of the world, and directs all the thoughts of the soul to God alone: temperance, so far as nature allows, neglects the needs of the body; fortitude prevents the soul from being afraid of neglecting the body and rising to heavenly things; and justice consists in the soul giving a whole-hearted consent to follow the way thus proposed”³. The virtues proper to an already purified soul, also called “perfect” virtues, are “the virtues attributed to the Blessed, or, in this life, to some who are at the summit of perfection”. In this case, “prudence sees nought else but the things of God; temperance knows no earthly desires; fortitude has no knowledge of passion; and justice, by imitating the Divine Mind, is united thereto by an everlasting covenant”⁴.

The cardinal virtues commonly understood, as it can be seen, are nothing other than, in fact, the lowest level at which it is possible to attain the moral life; but since the latter is not a stasis, but rather a dynamism characterized, precisely, by the tension to the *reditus*, Thomistic virtues should be seen as permeated by an intrinsic vertical aspiration and mimetic nature. It is in order to understand such a dynamism, that Thomas finds fundamental to identify the ideal to which the virtues tend, and to characterize the “exemplary” version of those same cardinal virtues that are found, at a lower degree of realization, in the creature. In light of this model, it is finally possible to see the distance that separates the purely horizontal level of virtues from this supreme realization, and how much the first

¹ ST I-II q. 61, art. 5, co.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

level is insufficient to account for a path of improvement towards that ideal. Here therefore it becomes necessary to introduce two other kinds of virtues, those of purification, proper to man “on the way to similarity”, and those of whom this similarity has already reached, or the blessed and - in this life - of the very few who they reach perfection.

What can be deduced from this rapid historical overview of Platonic exemplarity is certainly that it makes room, within a moral theory, for a universal standard beyond feasibility, the approximation to which it indicates the trajectory of moral life. A standard, therefore, whose imitation implies an attempt - certainly always imperfect - of *conformation*. There is, clearly, a difference of degree, and therefore proportionality to the extent that this conformity is achievable; and yet, the exemplar does not seem to be the object of an interpretation or imitation by analogy. In sum, the exemplar embodies a universal non-interpretable moral standard, to which to conform *ut sic*. In what follows, we will see a second mode of exemplarity: Socrates as an emblem of the embodied moral model: a particular individual but endowed with the same universal characteristics seen above.

2. Socratic saints

Platonic exemplarity, as I have just argued, establishes a universal imitative ideal. Especially in its emblematic Christian formulation, it indicates as a moral model God himself, of whom man is image and likeness, and who is therefore called to imitate, conforming not only to his laws and norms, but more deeply to his ideas and virtues. It is, therefore, an individual or singular model, but still with a universal character. A different case is that of a form of exemplarity - perhaps the most widespread in the common sense - which points to the imitation of a singular individual. In this case, which I will call "Socratic" because has probably Socrates as the first example in the western world, imitation consists in an adaptation to the life of a particular person, which would be reductive to call purely wise, and who is more properly a saint - moral or religious - in all respects. If the universal model requires conformation, the individual saint, exemplifying an exceptionally exemplary life, can be imitated only by *uniformity*, in the most proper sense of the aspiration to become "one" with him.

As said, Socrates has probably been the first saint of the West. His deeds, as is well known, have been an object of admiration but also of exhortation since Plato and Xenophon in their respective apologies, but later, and much more widely and pervasively, in the entire Stoic tradition. Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, just to mention the most famous, constantly indicate Socrates as a model to imitate and as a living exhortation to adopt a philosophical form of life centered on an incessant self-examination.

This life, however radical, should be imitated to the letter, accepting its paradoxes: that only what is noble is good and worthy of being pursued; that virtue is sufficient for happiness; that only the wise

is free and rich. More than norms, therefore, the adequate object of imitation that leads to a fully virtuous life is the particular life form of the exemplary individual Socrates.

Naturally, the most extraordinary expression of the model of the Socratic saint is linked to the advent of Christianity, which is therefore decisive both for the Platonic form of exemplarity and for this second form, which are often inextricably intertwined (with the risk of generating some contradiction). According to the Gospels, Jesus Christ himself pointed to himself, as in turn "one" with the Father, as a model to imitate without interpretation and without fear of encountering paradoxical consequences. It is Jesus who presents himself as the only way to the attainment of perfection and salvation: "I am the true and living way: no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

The use of Socratic exemplarity in the Gospels is not limited to the figure of Jesus alone; it is he himself who elaborates for his disciples parables that contain narratives of exemplary figures of "Socratic" saints, who represent imaginatively He or the Father, in the form of the Good Shepherd, of the benevolent Father of the Prodigal Son, but also of the ideal disciple who travels the path of "being like the Father": this is the case, for example, of the widow who gives everything she owns by throwing two coins into the treasure of the Temple, thus showing true radicality, unlike the many rich who, while throwing many coins, do nothing but donate "part of their superfluous".

It is not even possible to sketch the history of the idea of Christian holiness as a radical imitation of the man-Christ (and, transitively, of the saint who imitates him); I therefore choose to evoke three emblematic and particularly influential moments here, well aware of the risk of a certain arbitrariness. The first is the Pauline teaching, which sets the total identity with Christ as the normative ideal of the Christian life: "I have been put to death on the cross with Christ; still I am living; no longer I, but Christ is living in me"⁵.

Secondly, we find the figure of one of the saints who most profoundly shaped the Christian imaginary and morality: Francis of Assisi. Francis is the icon *par excellence* of the *alter Christus*, who follows the Master to the letter depriving himself of all his possessions and indicating to the Church the return to the purity of the evangelical ideal. Finally, it is not possible to neglect the extraordinary importance of the *Imitatio Christi*, one of the most widespread Christian texts after the Bible, whose study formed generations of simple Christians, but also of saints and mystics, up to giants of modern spirituality like Thérèse de Lisieux.

The saint as understood in this meaning that we have called for the sake of brevity "Socratic", which finds in Christianity a paradigmatic crystallization, is someone who respects radical moral

⁵ Gal. 2, 19-20.

injunctions, without balancing them with contingent needs and without moderating them with prudential considerations. His radical nature, therefore, can only be imitated literally, although attempts in this sense are realistically destined to failure and can only optimistically aspire to an approach of proportionality. While an analogical imitation aims, as we shall see, at replicating a typology of behavior, or even a deliberative style or a general but indeterminate conception of the good, achievable in a plurality of manifestations, literal imitation - common to Platonic and Socratic exemplarity - tends to realize the same type of action at the same degree as the model, even if in fact it can come to stand only on a lower grade.

3. Aristotelian phronetic exemplarity

The third traditional model of exemplarity we want to discuss is the Aristotelian. Within our recognition, the figure of the Stagirite occupies a peculiar position. More specifically, we argue that there are two ways to read Aristotle as one of the great sources of philosophical exemplarism: (i) as a promoter of a “reformed” Platonic exemplarism; (ii) as the “inventor” of the figure of phronimos. In what follows we will argue that, although both models of exemplariness are potentially recognizable in the thought of Stagirite, the specific original Aristotelian solution to the theme of the relationship between a model and its particular realization lies in the centrality of the phronimos as a particular embodied norm source of inspiration.

The first Aristotelian approach to exemplarity requires to interpret the ethical thought of the Stagirite platonically and theologically, along the lines of, for example, John Dudley’s reading (see Dudley 1999). What Dudley claims, in the wake of other so-called “dominant” interpretations of the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia (cf. Kraut, 1989, 1993), is that the supreme norm and the ultimate foundation of Aristotelian ethics is God, the Unmoved Mover of the *Metaphysics*, and that man’s perfect life has to be deduced from that of the God, each of the attributes of which constitutes a paradigm for the characteristics of perfect human life. The latter, therefore, turns out to be a life entirely devoted to contemplation. It lies well beyond the scope of our present work to adjudicate between dominant and inclusive readings of Aristotelian eudaimonia; something which would nonetheless be essential to assess whether the existence of a “Platonic” Aristotelian exemplarity is defensible at all. Rather, we prefer to leave that dispute unsettled and to focus on a second form of exemplarity which is unquestionably recognizable in the Aristotelian thought, and which we take to be the most original one. We are talking about the foundation of a philosophical exemplarism centered on the emblematic figure of the phronimos, he who displays practical wisdom. Like Book VI of the

Nicomachean Ethics suggests, the possibility of acquiring the virtues and, consequently, of refining the capacity for practical judgment - which is always and only a judgment of the particular case – depends on the identification and imitation of the *phronimos*, rather than the possession of a series of principles, theories, or rules of a general nature. The criterion of virtue and morality is the identification of the right mean by right reason (*orthos logos*), whose full realization is the attainment of practical truth (VI, 5, 1140b 4-6). And this is precisely what the *phronimos* is capable of.

By virtue of what abilities can the *phronimos* identify what the right means requires? The *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to exclude that it is primarily a matter of possessing a universal science or general principles, to be applied to the particular case (see VI, 7, 1141b 15-16); rather, the *phronimos* is he who deliberates and chooses on the basis of his knowledge of particular cases, and derives this knowledge from an sensory-intellectual capacity to know "the extreme", that is the last term of the deliberation. The *phronimos*, therefore, more than possessing a scientific knowledge of norms and principles of a general nature, is endowed with a moral sensitivity that puts him in a position to choose, case by case, according to right reason, or to grasp the right mean. As Aristotle explains, "there is a mark to which the man who has the rule looks, and heightens or relaxes his activity accordingly, and there is a standard which determines the mean states which we say are intermediate between excess and defect" (VI, 1138b 22-24). What can the mark and standard be, if not the possession of rules or principles, or the contemplative life of the *Metaphysics*' God? In our reading, they can only be represented by the possession of a conception of good life, although in the form of a sketch (see I, 1, 1094, b20-25); but this conception would not in itself be sufficient to guide action towards its truth if the *phronetic* agent did not possess a capacity for moral perception given to him by practical wisdom and the possession of virtues, which enable her to see the moral good (see III.5, 1114a30-1114b1).

The only criteria to which *phronimos* can appeal are its own wisdom and virtue: criteria which amount to nothing more than formal indications such as: "deliberate well, aim at beauty"; or, "be temperate; be fair; be brave", and so on, without specifying what counts, case by case, as a temperate, just and courageous act for a particular agent. Therefore, the features of the *phronimos*, which make him an exemplar, seem to be the following:

- (i) He embodies a sketch of the good life, which aims at beauty;
- (ii) He makes possible an enumeration of the virtues that substantiate it;
- (iii) He embodies the capacity for good deliberation and the achievement of practical truth and the right mean.

The idea of practical wisdom described makes it plausible to think of the wise not as the perfect moral agent, but as a morally good ordinary agent devoted to increasing his own moral sensitivity. This has the fundamental merit of making wisdom a possible result, and consequently restoring credibility to the figure of the wise as a truly observable ideal, verifiable and even admirable and imitable. But, what is the meaning of the testimony offered by the practically wise, if it is not a purely theoretical instruction? The practically wise is certainly not a guide to action in the detail of particular variations but (i) helps enumerate the virtues, once one reaches the level of interaction with him that allows us to identify their presence; (ii) embodies a model of sensitivity and effective deliberation aimed at doing good morally. Therefore, he is action-guiding in the formal way of an inspiration to "deliberate well", look better, take into account the needs of the various virtues, and not, instead, in the sense of to be able to deduce the particular action from his acts.

Conclusion: Re-unifying the models

In this paper, we have distinguished three forms of exemplarism and corresponding models of exemplarity. However, in conclusion we want to argue both that at a theoretical level the three models can be reconciled, and that at an educational one they should be. Finally, we want to suggest a line of answer to the question of how we can make sense of such reconciliation.

Theoretically speaking, a synthesis of the three models is well represented by the exemplarist theory offered by the moral works of Thomas Aquinas, in which the different traditions seem somehow to converge. We have already noted how the very structure of the *Summa Theologiae*, as well as the profoundly neoplatonic-Christian structure of its dynamics, put Aquinas in the wake of the Platonic imitative model of "conformation exemplarism". And yet, in the complex synthetic operation performed by Aquinas it is also possible to see the intertwining of particular practical judgment (analogical inspiration) and aspiration to universality. This can be especially seen in the intersection between two different classifications of virtues in the Thomistic dictate; the first, is the classification discussed above which distinguishes the virtues into exemplary, proper to a purified, purifying, and political soul. A second classification is offered in the *Quaestio de virtutibus cardinalibus*, where Aquinas distinguishes between imperfect virtues, perfect in a relative sense (i.e., unified by prudence) and perfect in an absolute sense (i.e., unified by charity). This second distinction is conceived as an answer to the vexed question about the unity or coexistence of the virtues in the same subject. Like in Aristotle, the imperfect virtues, or natural dispositions, are not necessarily linked to one another, since they do not flow from the directive rationality of prudence, but from mere temperament; perfect

virtues, on the other hand, decline in two possible versions, depending on whether they are meant in an absolute or relative sense. There is a level of unification of the virtues made possible by prudence (the Aristotelian *phronesis*), which already represents an objectively good type of life in itself, albeit on a purely human level, since it is directed by right reason; however, beyond it, there is a higher degree of unity, rooted in charity, which directs existence to the good in an absolute sense (i.e., to God), and therefore unites all the virtues in light of this new, superior, end⁶.

The fullness of morality, which also allows for an integral human flourishing, cannot therefore be reduced to the sole exercise of phronetic judgments but requires incessant evolution. This evolution has to do with the passage from a purely earthly level to the supernatural one of life in grace, whose rule is charity which infuses wisdom as a gift; it is in this way that the virtues are perfect in an absolute sense, or, we could say, "proper to a purified soul", and realize that *reditus* which consists in the actual likeness with the Creator. Phronetic judgement and aspiration to a universal good are thus equally necessary for the attainment not only of moral perfection, but – what counts more – of perfect *beatitudo*.

If we go back now to Aristotle and give a closer look to the Nicomachean Ethics, we can see that although the ordinary form of exemplarity is the phronetic one, which elicits inspiration, exceeding the limits of humanity in the direction of a divine form of excellence represents the vertex humans can reach, and which they must aspire to and try to imitate at least through desire. Or, this is at least the lesson that can be taken when analyzing the Aristotelian notion of heroic virtue, which introduces a vertical dimension in Aristotelian exemplarism. At the beginning of NE VII, Aristotle mentions a supreme degree of moral excellence, which equates human beings to gods. This supreme or superhuman degree of moral excellence is mentioned in the context of a more general discussion of the various degrees of virtue and vice (NE VII.1, 1145 a15-25). Heroic virtue is displayed by “exceedingly good” men, whereas its contrary state, brutishness, which is equally rare, is typical of those who “exceed other human beings in badness” (NE VII.1, 1145 a33). These somewhat extreme states lie at the two ends of a continuum whose intermediate steps are represented not only by virtue and vice (which Aristotle discusses at length, e.g., in books II and III [5-12, 1115 a4 1119 b18]), but also by two other intermediates: self-control (or continence) and lack of self-control (or incontinence).

What these passages from NE VII, combined with the discussion of vices and virtues throughout the Nicomachean Ethics, clearly show, is not simply the photographic representation of various possible moral conditions, but more precisely a hierarchy between states of character, from absolute moral brutishness, up to a heroic degree of virtue, which assimilates its possessor to the divine. This

⁶ Cf. *Quaestio de virtutibus cardinalibus*, art. 2, co.

hierarchy suggests the presence, within Aristotelian ethics, of an ascending dynamic comparable to the path of perfection through various degrees of virtue which will then be recognizable in Christian philosophy of Neoplatonic inspiration, although one built on a non-theological foundation

These examples are meant to show possible directions to accommodate a multi-faceted exemplarism within a virtue theory. But we think that when abandoning the field of virtue theory and entering the educational domain, this accommodation ceases to be a theoretical option and becomes somehow necessary for two main reasons. First, because if we give a closer look at the real-life interaction with exemplars, it appears that the three models are ways in which exemplary individuals are admired and imitated, rather than categories under which they can or should be subsumed. It is perfectly possible, i.e., that an exemplar is admired and imitated as a Platonic model by someone, literally imitated by someone else, and is a source of inspiration for a third person. A quite telling example of this dynamics is what Jesus represents for different sorts of believers, with some of them striving to become like Him out of a fondness of His particular way of living and gestures, while others see Him as representing a higher good to be attained, and still others consider His deeds as sources of inspiration to be adapted and interpreted in light of a radically different cultural context.

Secondly, and precisely for this reason, the three models, although logically distinguishable, can and must to some extent be all included within a multi-step educational process which moves “from Socrates, via Plato, to Aristotle”. We claim, that is, that at the beginning of an educational path novices cannot but see models as concrete individuals, albeit imperfect, worth identifying with, and whose gestures have to be literally imitated to receive specific action guidance. At a subsequent step, as long as the understanding of value increases, it is likely that novices start seeing models as embodying an ideal of goodness, which guides action by providing a universal standard to conform to. It is at a mature stage, we argue, that models can – and should – serve as a source of inspiration, as the educational process gives way to adult and autonomous agency. It would be unrealistic, and would put on novices an unbearable burden, to require them to interpret an exemplar analogically at an earlier stage. It is only at this final step that inspiration by analogy, i.e., phronetic Aristotelian inspiration, can take place.

But what do these rival models of the ideal of human flourishing have in common? On which grounds can they be reasonably reconciled, simultaneously endorsed at a theoretical level, and for what reason are they expressed in real-life interactions by one and the same concrete exemplary individual so as to elicit admiration? A good starting point to answer this fascinating question is an investigation on the proper object of admiration, i.e., the admirable, since what all the three kinds of exemplary models share in is the capacity for eliciting admiration. In social psychologist Jonathan

Haidt's words (Haidt 2003), moral admiration or elevation, as a cognate emotion to awe, which is elicited by exposure to certain kinds of beauty and perfection, has moral beauty as its characteristic elicitor. But how can we conceive of this – far from uncontroversial – idea of moral beauty? We cannot but offer here a preliminary intuition, which we borrow from Aquinas again. In his account of beauty, Aquinas associates the latter with the expression of form. In particular, the three characters of beauty related to form are due proportion (*proportio sive consonantia*), i.e., cohesion and unity, integrity (*integritas*), i.e., presence of all that is necessary for harmony, luminosity that derives from form (*claritas*). What we want to suggest in conclusion is that an in-depth analysis, as well as a phenomenology of experiencing beauty as form, i.e., as related to the perception of a certain degree of harmony and proportion in human acts, should be undertaken to make sense of why and how different kinds of exemplary models elicit admiration, are equally legitimate examples of human flourishing and have the power of attracting their admirer's attention to morality.

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