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A Few Things Moral Exemplars Have Shown Me about Character

Lawrence J. Walker

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My program of research with moral exemplars over the last decade or so has yielded a series of findings which are significant for an understanding of character development. This paper reviews a few of the more pertinent findings. Moral exemplars fascinate and inspire us because their behavior is largely outside of our own lived experience. However, the study of exemplars has the potential for considerable advances in our understanding of character, its development, and our collective efforts to promote civil and caring societies.

It is perhaps helpful at the outset to make the case for the study of moral exemplars. First, exemplarity entails real-world behaviors that have obvious validity and significance. Second, the study of exemplarity has the potential to enlarge the moral domain, particularly when it entails a broadband assessment of exemplars' functioning. Because the approach fosters a focus on persons, rather than mere variables, it forces us to consider the breadth of psychological functioning. Third, understanding the character of exemplars helps to inform our ethical ideals by revealing what is humanly attainable and what various forms that might take. Fourth, empirical comparisons between exemplars and ordinary folk essentially serve to amplify effects (since these represent relatively extreme groups), allowing operative processes to be more clearly identified. Fifth, within-person analyses can yield more holistic understandings of the complexities of exemplarity and the balancing of various virtues. And sixth, the study of exemplars is conducive to a process of "reverse engineering" in which we initially identify and analyze the "finished product" and then deconstruct it to gain understandings of the trajectories and causal processes in development.

This paper is organized around seven issues, pivotal to our understanding of character:

1. Do exemplars have distinctive aspects to their personality, evidence of the operation of character dispositions?
2. What are the core aspects of character and is character a causally operative force underlying moral behavior?
3. Does moral exemplarity embody a single character profile or might there be a variety of ideal forms?
4. What are the developmental roots that may foster exemplary character?
5. Is individuals' style of framing life events an important aspect of character?
6. What fundamentally motivates moral exemplars to promote others' well-being when that entails significant cost? Are they able to meaningfully integrate the seemingly oppositional motives of self-promoting agency and other-promoting communion?
7. What are the developmental trajectories of moral motivation—the relationship between agency and communion—across the life span?

To these issues we now turn.

1. Distinctive Character

This paper's remit is to explore the character of moral exemplars, but perhaps the prior assumption—that exemplars actually do have distinctive aspects to their character or personality—needs to be addressed. This is not an uncontested issue. Within both psychology and philosophy, there are those (e.g., Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009; Zimbardo, 2007) who contend that behavior, both nefarious and heroic, is primarily determined by situational rather than personological factors; indeed, character in this situationalist view is either relegated to an inconsequential role or regarded as epiphenomenal.

One way to address this issue is to determine whether a distinctive character for moral exemplars would arise from the data. Dunlop, Walker, and Matsuba (2012), for example, examined whether there is a distinctive personality characteristic of caring exemplars. Participants included recipients of the *Canadian Caring Award*, a national award given to volunteers who have demonstrated extraordinary and long-term commitment in providing care to others or in supporting community service or humanitarian causes. A sample of comparison participants, drawn from the general community and individually matched to the exemplars on demographic variables, was also recruited. All participants completed a broadband assessment of their personality. The most apt analytic strategy is cluster analysis, a statistical technique which groups cases (i.e., participants) into “clusters” based on the pattern of interrelationships among the whole set of variables; so, here, the analysis groups cases on the basis of personality profiles. In this study, the analysis indicated that a two-cluster solution best fit the data.

Strikingly, one of these clusters of participants predominantly comprised caring exemplars and the other cluster predominantly comprised comparison participants. Recall that the cluster analysis was based exclusively on the assessment of personality profiles, with no indication of whether the participant was a caring award recipient or not. Yet the analysis accurately detected a distinctive character exemplifying caring exemplars.

The same analytical strategy was undertaken by Dunlop and Walker (2013), but with a different type of exemplar—recipients of the *Canadian Medal of Bravery*, a civilian award given to those who have shown exceptional bravery in risking their own lives in an attempt to save others. In addition to these brave exemplars, the sample included comparison participants, all of whom responded to a comprehensive assessment of their personality. Again, a cluster analysis of these participants was undertaken based on the variables in the personality dataset and, again, a two-cluster solution was found to be appropriate with one cluster largely comprising brave exemplars and the other, comparison participants. In other words, a distinctive character profile for brave exemplars emerged from the data, seemingly *ex nihilo*.

This evidence supports the basic assumption of the viability of the notion of character and lends credence to the perspective that character causally contributes to moral action.

2. Causal and Core Aspects of Character

What, then, are the core aspects of character? And is character a causally operative force underlying moral behavior or is it merely a post hoc descriptive accounting? One of the major methodological challenges in studying moral exemplars is that assessment of their psychological functioning is typically only undertaken subsequent to their extraordinary actions and the recognition that such garnered them. Engaging in momentous action and receiving public approbation may well have a significant impact on one’s personality. The concern, then, is that the distinctive character apparently evidenced by moral exemplars may not be a primary cause of their behavior but rather a mere consequence.

The situationalist perspective would argue that situational factors, not personological ones, are the fundamental cause of moral behavior, and that the subsequent operation of self-perception processes (Bem, 1972) prompts a reformulation of aspects of personality to align them with behavior. In this view, character is akin to a *documentary* which retroactively scripts a dispositional account to reflect the observed behavior. The dispositional perspective, in contrast, regards character as akin to an *operator’s manual* which interprets situations and then functionally and causally guides behavior.

Are there data that might shed light on these competing claims regarding the causal power of

character; and if character indeed does have causal power, what are its core aspects? There are relevant data, but before discussing them an explication of levels of personality description is relevant. Although the study of traits has dominated contemporary personality science, personality comprises much more. McAdams (1995, 2009) has advanced a typology that references three broad levels of personality description, a typology that has increasingly been accepted as a heuristic framework for the field (Dunlop, 2015).

The first level entails the familiar *dispositional traits*—broad, nonconditional, and decontextualized dimensions that are implicitly comparative (e.g., extraversion), typically assessed with self-report trait inventories. The second level is that of *characteristic adaptations*—the more contextualized motivational and strategic aspects of personality (e.g., goal motivation), often assessed by having participants generate in some way their personal goals in life. The third level refers to *integrative life narratives*—the construction of a personal identity that provides a sense of coherence, continuity, and meaning in life (e.g., identity), typically assessed by eliciting the telling of a life story, features of which can be analyzed for largely projective aspects of personality.

It should be evident that the behavioral-traits and characteristic-adaptations levels of personality, assessed by relatively transparent self-report measures, are likely more malleable in the wake of extraordinary action and recognition than the deeper and more subtle level of integrative life narratives. Thus, the view that character is merely a post hoc descriptive accounting and not a causal force underlying behavior would predict that differences between moral exemplars and comparison participants would be most apparent in the more surface-level aspects of personality and less apparent at the deeper levels.

Walker and Frimer (2007) reported data that are relevant to this issue. The sample comprised moral exemplars (recipients of either the *Caring Canadian Award* or the *Medal of Bravery*) and individually matched comparison participants. They responded to an assessment of their personality functioning involving multiple measures tapping all three levels of personality description, with a total of 14 personality variables being retained for analysis. Analyses indicated significant differences between the moral exemplar and comparison groups on seven personality variables, all favoring exemplars (who had more adaptive personalities), and all at the deeper life-narrative level of personality description, clearly contrary to the view that personality merely is a descriptive accounting of behavior that has actually been caused by situational factors. Rather, the data better accord with the dispositional perspective that regards moral character as causally operative in action.

The same dataset can be used to address the issue of the core aspects of character. Walker and Frimer (2007) assessed the personality functioning of two quite different types of moral exemplars (brave vs. caring), albeit ones vetted through the same honors system. The brave exemplars had engaged in a single, heroic act where they had risked their own lives to save others. The caring exemplars had engaged in long-term caring action in support of individuals, groups, communities, or humanitarian causes. One might certainly expect that their personality profiles would differ dramatically; but are there any aspects of their personality that they share and which, at the same time, distinguish them from their respective comparison groups? Such commonalities in personality functioning implicate some basic aspects of character.

In Walker and Frimer's (2007) analysis, a personality variable was only considered as core to character if, for that particular variable, brave exemplars differed from their comparison group and, similarly, caring exemplars differed from their comparison group. In other words, both of these disparate types needed to evidence the same exemplarity for a variable to be counted. Of the set of personality variables analyzed, five were identified as foundational: both (a) agentic and (b) communal motivation, (c) themes of redemption, and intimation of formative relationships in

early life as evidenced by (d) secure attachments and (e) the presence of “helpers” who scaffolded development.

One of the more intriguing findings was that these disparate types of moral exemplars evidenced strong themes of *both* agency and communion (and not, as might be expected, that brave exemplars were primarily agentic whereas caring exemplars were communal). These fundamental types of motivation are typically conceptualized as being in tension: “getting ahead” versus “getting along” (Hogan, 1982). That both form the basis for exemplary character is a significant finding that will be further examined in §6 and §7 of this paper.

Another core personality variable was the prevalence of redemption sequences in life stories (and the relative absence of contamination sequences). Themes of redemption entail the positive construal of life events in which some benefit is discerned out of negative experiences; the event is redeemed or salvaged in some way. Complementarily, themes of contamination entail the negative construal of life events in which an initial positive situation is irreconcilably contaminated or ruined by an outcome that is viewed as pervasively negative. The suggestion here is that the ability to construe some benefit out of challenge may be an adaptive aspect of character and help to sustain moral action. This foundational aspect of moral character will be further discussed in §5 of this paper.

Finally, two related aspects of early life experiences figured prominently in the characterological foundation of moral exemplarity, reflecting beneficial and formative relationships in childhood. One variable that characterized both brave and caring exemplars was evidence of secure attachments in childhood relationships; the other was the identification of “helpers” who influenced them in an explicitly positive way (and the relative absence of “enemies” who were detrimental to their well-being). The developmental roots of moral character will be addressed in §4.

3. Multiple Types of Exemplary Character

Having demonstrated the viability of the notion of moral character, we can now ask whether exemplary character is embodied by a single form or might there be different varieties. Although moral philosophers typically advance a singular moral ideal, some have more recently advocated for moral pluralism (Blum, 1988; Flanagan, 1991, 2009), positing varieties of moral personality. Certainly, ordinary folk conceptions of moral exemplarity reference a range of psychological profiles (Walker & Hennig, 2004).

Walker and Frimer’s (2007) study included two types of moral exemplars: brave versus caring. The previous section of this paper explored the personality dimensions that formed the common core of their character. We now consider whether they also embody differing personality profiles. These brave and caring exemplars could not be individually matched on demographic variables, of course, but they were found not to differ in terms of distributions of gender and ethnic background or in terms of level of education; however, they did differ in age. Caring exemplars were older, having been recognized for long-term volunteer service; brave exemplars were younger, having been recognized for heroic action in emergency situations. As it turns out, however, age was unrelated to any of the personality variables assessed here, alleviating concerns about this age confound.

When mean-level differences were analyzed, the caring and brave exemplars were found to have differing personality profiles, with the personality of caring exemplars more “transparent;” that is, the caring exemplars outscored the brave exemplars on seven personality variables: dispositional traits of nurturance, relational and generative goal motivation, themes of communion in their life

stories, level of optimism, security of attachments in early life, and sensitization to the needs of others.

Although the caring exemplars seemed to evidence extraordinary character relative to the brave exemplars, it is important to recall that the character of brave exemplars is far from banal. The first section of this paper demonstrated that brave exemplars do have distinctive characters and the second section demonstrated that they differed from comparison participants on five core personality variables.

Perhaps these differing profiles of exemplary character can be understood in terms of the actions for which they were recognized: caring exemplars had engaged in a “moral career” of long-term volunteer service whereas the brave exemplars had engaged in a heroic rescue. A one-off act of heroism likely is, in no small part, instigated by compelling situational factors, as often exist in emergency (or otherwise strong) situations, whereas a “moral career” may be more dependent on the operation of sustained dispositional factors that entail moral motivation and continuity of purpose. It is not particularly remarkable that a long-term pattern of behavior is more readily predicted by moral character than is a single behavior in a context with strong situational cues (Epstein, 1983).

Regardless, it is evident that multiple ideals of exemplary character are extant and embodied.

4. Developmental Roots of Character

Obviously, formative relationships in childhood may very well be indicative of the developmental roots of exemplary character (Dunn, 2014; Thompson, 2009; Walker & Frimer, 2011), particularly secure relationships and influential mentors. McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) first articulated the notion of an early advantage in life that can contribute to a life narrative in which one recalls a positive and benevolent childhood and in which one constructs a personal ideology centered on prosocial commitments, personal goals that expand one’s circle of care for others. McAdams et al. identified a cluster of themes indicative of early life advantage, including secure attachments in significant relationships, the presence of helpers who in some way scaffold development (and the relative absence of enemies), and sensitization to the needs of others.

In Walker and Frimer’s (2007) analysis of early advantage in the lives of moral exemplars (in contrast to comparison participants) it is important to note that there was no explicit questioning in that regard and, indeed, these notions arose unprompted in the interview, mitigating concerns about demand characteristics. The first variable was the quality of attachments, which was assessed for six significant relationships. The second variable coded was the frequency of explicitly identified helpers versus enemies. And the third variable rated the extent to which participants reported being exposed to the needs of others in early life.

It cannot be determined from Walker and Frimer’s (2007) data whether these recollections of childhood represent actual experiences or rather construals made in the framing of present understandings; regardless, there are clear indications of early advantage. Irrespective of their factual veracity, such intimations do reflect important components of moral character. In contrast to comparison participants, both brave and caring exemplars were rated as evidencing more secure attachments in early-life relationships; the frequency of helpers in their life stories was almost three times greater; and the caring exemplars’ life stories evidenced greater exposure and sensitization to the needs of others.

The developmental roots for exemplary character suggest a positively valenced childhood

characterized by secure, nurturing, and scaffolding relationships. Such a context for development may prompt an early realization that one is in some way advantaged and that realization may serve to foster an identity that encompasses a sense of efficacy, prosocial motivation, and a pervasive commitment to moral concerns.

5. Redemption

At the foundational core of exemplary character, Walker and Frimer's (2007) data revealed not only aspects of early-life advantage but also the personality variable of redemption. In McAdams's (2006) conceptualization, redemption is considered to be the construal of critical life events such that a demonstrably negative situation is salvaged or redeemed in some way that reveals a positive benefit. In a contrasting manner, contamination refers to the construal of an initially positive state such that it is irreconcilably tainted or contaminated by a perceived negative outcome.

Walker and Frimer (2007) found that the life stories of moral exemplars had 66% more redemption and 51% less contamination than the narratives of comparison participants. The finding references the significance of the ability and often conscious choice to construct some positive benefit from critical personal experiences. The dispositional tendency for reframing, either of emergencies in which people's lives were gravely endangered or of situations in which people suffered disadvantage or adversity, was an important feature of the character of moral exemplars. Note that it was not the case that these exemplars were minimizing or delusional about the challenges they encountered, rather they had a propensity to "spin" these challenges redemptively and optimistically to feature some positive benefit. This adaptive form of psychological functioning helps to both instigate and sustain moral action in difficult situations.

Another personality variable, related to redemption, that was assessed in Walker and Frimer's (2007) study of moral exemplars was the overall affective tone of the life narrative; that is, the degree of optimism versus pessimism expressed. There is considerable evidence that dispositional optimism is associated with adaptive coping and better psychological adjustment (Peterson, 2000). In Walker and Frimer's analysis, caring exemplars evidenced a generally more optimistic affective tone to their life stories than brave exemplars whose narratives tended to be more neutral or mixed in affectivity. Pervasive optimism in the context of caring service may be somewhat surprising given that these volunteers often labored in situations that entailed destitution, disenfranchisement, and despair. This implies the working of an agentic personality that transduces the negativity of trying circumstances into behaviors that exude hope and affirmation.

A serendipitous finding from Walker and Frimer's (2007) study was that a disproportionate number of the caring exemplars had experienced the death of one or more of their children (more than their comparison group and more than the brave exemplars). The death of a child is an out-of-time, out-of-sequence traumatic life event with which most people typically have great difficulty coping, even over the long term; often falling into despair, anger, and self-absorption (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These extraordinary people seemed to have coped with this personal tragedy by discerning some meaning or benefit from it and deliberately fostering a positive attitude toward their life circumstances.

A case-study analysis of one of these caring award recipients who had suffered the death of her adult child (Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2015) intimated that the construction of a redemptive narrative—one in which the tragic death is framed as contributing to prosocial behavior—and incorporating it into one's life story is essential to sustaining this behavior pattern following a traumatic experience. It does so because it imparts moral action with a sense of meaning and

purpose.

6. Integration of Agency and Communion

The pivotal issue with which we are grappling centers on the source and nature of moral motivation. What fundamentally motivates moral exemplars to pursue others' well-being when that action seemingly entails considerable cost to themselves?

The final pair of personality variables found to characterize the foundational core of exemplary character in Walker and Frimer's (2007) study is agency and communion, and it is their relationship that we explore in this section. Agency and communion are basic themes in motivation (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1988) where they are frequently conceptualized as dualistic and competing (Hogan, 1982); one motive being expressed at the "expense" of the other. This is well-illustrated in Schwartz et al.'s (2012) values circumplex where these motives are placed in opposing quadrants and are explicitly conceptualized as mutually interfering.

The strong themes of both agency and communion among moral exemplars could, of course, simply mean that they are strongly motivated in general; they did evidence 68% more agency and 82% more communion than comparison participants. So the critical question becomes: Is the relationship between agency and communion among moral exemplars merely a byproduct of the higher levels of each motive or is there evidence of an interactive effect that reflects some synergy between them?

Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, and Riches (2011) examined this question with the same dataset, but with more precise definitions of agency and communion. Agency was defined as self-promoting motives of power and achievement and communion was defined as other-promoting motives of benevolence and universalism. They examined the relationship between these motives in terms of their meaningful co-occurrence within individuals' thought structures. Given this approach, Frimer et al. found that the moral exemplars, indeed, did evidence greater integration of agentic and communal motivation than did comparison participants whose extent of integration did not differ from what would be expected by chance. This was the first compelling evidence of the adaptive integration of what are oft considered competing motives.

However, an ambiguity remained. Frimer et al. (2011) had assessed the co-occurrence of agency and communion within individuals' thoughts on a topic, but did not determine the direction of the relationship between these two motives. These motives could co-occur in the form of agency promoting communion (e.g., "I'm trying to use my resources and skills to help the disadvantaged") or in the form of communion promoting agency (e.g., "I tried to help that drowning man so that people would think of me as a hero"). These two forms of integration should rightly garner quite different moral approbation. In considering the relationship between these motives, Rokeach (1973) helpfully distinguished between instrumental and terminal values, with an instrumental value being a means to something else and a terminal value being an end in itself.

A clarification of the instrumental-terminal relationship between agency and communion was undertaken by Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, and Dunlop (2012). They took a different tack to identifying moral exemplars. Their target subjects were highly influential people of the past century (leaders, revolutionaries, heroes, and icons), as identified by *Time* magazine, who have had enormous impact, and are of both positive and negative renown. These influential figures were rated by a large sample of social scientists on several dimensions of moral character. The top-ranking of these figures were classified as exemplars of moral character (e.g., Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Mother Teresa) and the bottom-ranking comprised a comparison group of similarly influential people but ones considered deficient in moral character (e.g., Kim Jong Il, Adolf

Hitler, Vladimir Putin).

Then, the motivational functioning of these historical figures was assessed by content analyses of archival materials such as their interviews and speeches. These materials were coded for motives of agency (power, achievement) and communion (benevolence, universalism), and then the relationship between motives were assessed by determining which were instrumental to each terminal value voiced.

The analyses were revelatory: The comparison figures unmistakably embodied unbridled agency, what Bakan (1966) labeled “the villain” (p. 14), with considerably more agency than communion at both the instrumental and terminal levels (i.e., agency in service to more agency). The moral exemplars also displayed abundant agency at the instrumental level; they are, of course, hugely impactful figures. However, at the terminal level, they displayed overwhelming levels of communion. These moral exemplars were using their considerable agency in the promotion of communal causes; they had integrated their agentic motivation hierarchically into communal ends. In their functioning, agency imparts life to communion and communion imbues agency with a greater purpose. So it seems that, in moral maturity, personal impact, achievement, and fulfillment are actualized in an integrated manner of motivation through promoting others’ welfare.

7. Developmental Trajectories

Research reviewed in the previous section indicated that moral exemplars have integrated the typically oppositional motives of agency and communion, by appropriating agentic means in service to communal goals. We now turn to the question of how this moral motivation develops across the life span. This, of course, represents an investigative process of reverse engineering where, in the first step, we identified the “finished product” (moral exemplars) and assessed aspects of their character that might explain their action. The next step is to examine the developmental trajectories that lead to this end-point integration of agentic and communal motivation. And, of course, subsequent steps, left to future research, would be to determine the psychological mechanisms that influence these differing developmental trajectories, as well as to implement appropriate interventions in that regard.

To examine developmental trajectories of agentic and communal motivation across the life span, Walker and Frimer (2015) conducted a cross-sectional study with a community-based sample comprising four age groups that may mark developmental transitions: childhood (8-12 years), adolescence (14-18 years), emerging adulthood (20-28 years), and mid-adulthood (35-45 years). Participants responded to a semi-structured interview intended to assess their value motivation in various aspects of everyday living and to explore the instrumental–terminal structure of their thinking (by probing how their current endeavors might be instrumental to their terminal goals).

Walker and Frimer (2015) found that, in all age groups from childhood to mid-adulthood, motivation at the instrumental level was primarily agentic, which is as expected given the instrumentality of goal-directed behavior. Motivation at the terminal level was also primarily agentic in the younger age groups, but the effect diminished by mid-adulthood, albeit far from being completely extinguished. Terminal agency decreased with age whereas terminal communion increased with age. The significance of communion as a terminal motive increased markedly from childhood to mid-adulthood, and the critical pattern of motivational integration—instrumental agency advancing terminal communion—similarly became more prominent. At the terminal level in mid-adulthood, goals tended to be about equally split between agency and communion.

Integrating Walker and Frimer's (2015) findings with those of Frimer et al. (2012) yields some pertinent observations. First, the children in Walker and Frimer's study and the nonmoral comparison figures in Frimer et al.'s study were strikingly similar in their motivational profiles, displaying unmitigated agency, and suggesting that these influential figures who were lacking in moral character were developmentally delayed. Second, the midlife adults in Walker and Frimer's study evidenced a balanced mixture of agentic and communal motivation at the terminal level, suggesting they had not yet attained the pattern of instrumental agency for terminal communion exemplified by the moral exemplars of historical renown. These findings imply that the fundamental objective in fostering moral exemplarity is to displace agential desires with communal concerns as the terminal value.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter my intent was to explore the moral character of exemplars, but we first had to deal with the validity of the premise that there actually is something to discuss in that regard. Support for this prior assumption was readily amassed with distinctive moral character being readily apparent in the data. Furthermore, the research evidence was consistent with the notion that aspects of character do causally operate in enacting moral behavior and do not merely represent a post hoc descriptive accounting.

Exemplary character was not typified by a single personality profile; rather different varieties were evidenced, supporting the notion of multiple ideals of moral excellence. These different varieties of character implicated the interplay of contextual and dispositional factors. In strong situations with obvious contextual pressures, moral action may be readily triggered by certain situational cues for people who are predisposed to act. However, the instigation and maintenance of a "moral career" is more likely dependent upon the continual functioning of personality dispositions.

Despite the evidence for a variety of personality profiles associated with different types of moral character, it was possible to identify some core personality variables that were shared by these disparate types but which, at the same time, distinguished them from ordinary folk. These variables include ones pointing to the developmental roots of character in secure relationships and influential mentors—a beneficial childhood that cultivates an enduring sense of being advantaged. Also core to moral exemplarity is a redemptive disposition that tends to construe some positive benefit out of transformative life events and, presumably, fosters prosocial action in the face of challenge. And, finally, foundational to exemplary character is the tendency to meaningfully integrate the typically opposing motives of agency and communion: Agency gives communal values motivational oomph and communion guides agency with a higher moral purpose. The research evidence suggests that the objective for development is to displace self-promoting agentic goals, as a terminal value, with other-promoting communal ones.

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