On the limitations of moral exemplarism

On the Limitations of Moral Exemplarism: Socio-Cultural Values and Gender

Abstract

In this paper, I highlight and discuss two significant limitations of Zagzebski's (in Exemplarist moral theory, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017) exemplarist moral theory. Although I focus on Zagzebski's theory, I argue that these limitations are not unique to her approach but also feature in previous versions of moral exemplarism.

The first limitation I identify is inspired by MacIntyre's (in After virtue, Duckworth, London, 1981) understanding of the concept of virtue and stems from the realization that the emotion of admiration, through which agents identify exemplars, should not be examined in vacuo. Scholars working on moral exemplarism have failed to note that admiration is substantially influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms and values. I show that 'the admirable' varies across cultures and time; and the employment of one's own emotion of admiration in order to derive the meaning of terms such as virtue and duty would only result in a culture-specific understanding of morality.

The second limitation, inspired by Butler's (in Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity, Routledge, London, 1990) social constructivist understanding of gender, rests on the realization that several features and characteristics of the agent influence their perception of moral excellence. I focus on the issue of gender and highlight that exemplarist theories justify (and perpetuate) a counter-intuitive gender-specific understanding of morality.

Keywords: Exemplarist moral theory, admiration, Zagzebski, MacIntyre, Butler.

1. Introductory Remarks

Initially, exemplarist theories were chiefly developed as a response to the objection that contemporary (see, for example, Louden, 1984, p. 229; Solomon, 1988 pp. 432-433) and ancient (see, for example, Williams, 1985, p. 85; Schneewind, 1990, p. 62) theories of virtue ethics do not provide specific criteria for moral action guidance[1] - and are thus inferior to utilitarian and deontological theories. According to these exemplarist approaches, agents receive guidance for action through the identification and imitation of virtuous agents[2] (Annas, 2004, pp. 68-69; Zagzebski, 2010, pp. 51-52).

Still, Zagzebski (2015, 2017) has recently argued for an exemplarist theory that is not intended as a complementary theory to virtue ethics but is rather a distinct moral theory. Zagzebski builds this theory on the emotion of admiration and proposes deriving the meaning of value terms such as virtue, good end, good motive, admirable life, desirable life and deontic terms such as duty, right action, wrong action from 'the admirable'. She

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[1]And were thus termed exemplarist virtue approaches to moral guidance (e.g. Annas, 2004 and Zagzebski, 2010). For a different line of defense to the objection that virtue ethics do not provide an adequate account of right action see, for example, Hursthouse's (1991, 1999) v-rule approach.
[2]A suggestion inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics. See, for example, *NE*, II, 1103a30-b25.

argues, for example, that "A right act for a person A in some set of circumstances C is what the admirable (more specifically practically wise) person would take to be most favored by the balance of reasons for A in C" (2017, p. 22) and defines virtue as an enduring trait of character - consisting of a motivational and a success component - that is worthy of our admiration (p. 114).

For Zagzebski (2017), emotions can give justifications for propositional moral judgements (p. 145). For instance, she argues that when an agent is feeling disgusted from a specific behavior, then her emotion of disgust gives her reason to judge that the behavior in question is morally wrong[3]. Likewise, the emotion of admiration can be employed by agents to identify behaviors and traits that are admirable, and thus worthy of emulation. According to Zagzebski, admiration leads us to identify and emulate moral exemplars[4]: "If I admire a person and reflectively endorse my admiration, I will rationally judge the person to be admirable in the relevant respect, and if I am right that emotions can be both epistemic and practical reasons, then my judgement that the person is admirable is a reason to emulate the admirable person, arising from my own critical self-reflection" (p. 152)[5]. For Zagzebski, exemplars do not simply reveal the right course of action in a given scenario, but most importantly motivate agents to improve in the moral domain and serve as guides for moral training (p. 130).

However, despite the merits of Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) exemplarist moral theory and its seemingly positive reception by other scholars (especially those working on moral education[6]), my aim in this paper is to highlight and discuss two rather significant limitations[7] that can be found at its core. Zagzebski (2017) notes at the beginning of her book (entitled '*Exemplarist Moral Theory*') that "it is important to keep in mind that our moral practices pre-exist theory. It is an illusion to think that moral theory can be constructed outside of the practices the theory is attempting to systematize and justify" (p. 8). Still, despite her argument, I will show that she has done precisely what she urges against; she has developed a moral theory which disregards the societal contexts within which moral practices take place. Both theoretical limitations highlighted in this paper arise from taking into consideration the influence of socio-cultural moral norms and values on the agents' identification of 'the admirable'.

The remaining of this paper is divided in three main sections. In the section that follows (section 2), I argue that Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory (2015. 2017) does not consider the import and influence of prevailing socio-cultural norms and values on the agents' identification of 'the admirable'. I show, with the use of examples, that 'the

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[3]According to Zagzebski (2017, p. 145), for example, the feeling that "his behavior towards her was disgusting" gives the agent reasons to judge that "his behavior towards her was wrong".

[4]Zagzebski (2017) is employing the theory of direct reference (see Putnam, 1979 and Kripke, 1980) to identify exemplars by direct reference - "people like that" who she describes as "…most imitable or most deserving of emulation. They are most imitable because they are most admirable." (p. 16)

[5]It is important to note, at this initial stage of the paper, that Zagzebski stresses that agents should not trust their emotion of admiration blindly but should be critically reflective of it (see also Zagzebski, 2017, p. 146).

[6]See for example, Croce and Vaccarezza, 2017; Engelen et al, 2018; Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2018; Groce, 2019.

[7]I call them limitations (and will continue to do so throughout the manuscript) because they are theoretical outcomes (possibly acceptable for some scholars) which Zagzebski, and other scholars working on moral exemplarism, would consider as problems for the theory and thus want to resist.

admirable' is greatly influenced[8] by established socio-cultural norms and values and thus leads to a culture-specific understanding of morality (which goes against the claims of objectivity that underly moral exemplarism). Then, in the next section (section 3), I argue that Zagzebski's theory neither gives an account nor takes into consideration that the agents' identification of 'the admirable'- and thus their identification of those persons most deserving of emulation - is also largely affected by several features and characteristics of the agent. Scholars working on moral exemplarism seem to ignore the significance of personal features and characteristics, such as gender and age, to the kind of guidance one gets from exemplarism. More specifically, I focus on the issue of gender and argue that exemplarist theories seem to provide justification for (and perpetuate) a counterintuitive gender-specific understanding of morality[9].

Throughout my discussion (sections 2 and 3), I note that these two highly interwoven theoretical limitations do not only undermine Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory but also previous versions of moral exemplarism (e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004). I entertain possible replies to the two limitations and argue that these limitations are caused by core features of the theory and cannot thus be removed without greatly distorting its essence.

2. Exemplarism and Socio-Cultural Norms and Values

In her exemplarist moral theory, Zagzebski (2015, 2017) somewhat ignores the fact that the agent's identification of 'the admirable' is heavily influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms and values. This realization leads me to argue, in this section, that although the meaning of value terms such as virtue, good end, good motive, admirable life, desirable life and deontic terms such as duty, right action, wrong action could indeed be derived from 'the admirable' (as Zagzebski argues, see for example, 2017, pp. 22-23), one must take into account that 'the admirable' has already been, to a large extent, determined for the agents by the prevailing social norms and values of the community (and is not to be determined by the agent in vacuo - or in spite of such socio-cultural influences - as Zagzebski's theory, and other approaches to moral exemplarism - e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004, suggest). Thus, employing the emotion of admiration to identify the meaning of value and deontic terms leads to a culture-specific understanding of morality - which most scholars working on theories of moral exemplarism would want to resist.

It is quite important to note, at this early stage, that this theoretical limitation does not necessarily stem from a relativistic understanding of morality. One could maintain an objective conception of morality[10] and still argue that humans are social beings whose identification of 'the admirable' is greatly influenced by societal norms and values. In what

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[8]Influenced in the sense that socio-cultural norms and values have a substantial impact on the values and persons one comes to admire.

[9]A theoretical implication which I take for granted that everyone agrees is quite undesirable. I do not believe, for example, that Zagzebski would be willing to accept a gendered-specific understanding of morality.

[10]It might be important to note that in this paper I am arguing neither in favor nor against the claim that morality is objective. Rather, I am arguing that the emotion of admiration is heavily influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms and values.

follows, I give examples[11] (taken from both ancient and contemporary societies) to illustrate my argument and pinpoint the problematic aspect of Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) moral exemplarist theory when one considers the socio-cultural influences on what we consider admirable.

2.1 *Ancient Societies and 'the Admirable'*

The first example I discuss, in order to illustrate my argument, is inspired by MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) - as is the entire argument I am making in this section (i.e. Section 2). MacIntyre highlights that in ancient Greece there were different conceptions of virtue across different periods of time and city-states (see also Ferguson, 1958; Hobbs, 2010). He identifies, for example, the heroic societies (in which kinship had a predominant role) - as depicted in Homerian poetry - and argues that the conception of virtue in such societies is quite different from the conceptions of virtue in the 5th century BC Athenian society (in which the *polis* had a predominant role - see also Ferguson, 1958; Hobbs, 2010): "The intervention of Athena and the resolution of the issue between her and Apollo establish a conception of justice which shifts the center of authority in moral questions from the family and the household to the polis… thus the first massive fact that we have to reckon with is the difference that it makes to the conception of the virtues when the primary moral community is no longer the kinship group, but the city-state." (pp. 132-133). For example, according to MacIntyre, in heroic societies honor is what is due to the king while in 5th century BC Athens honor has become what is due to men (p. 200). This is a prominent example of how socio-cultural norms and values have a significant effect on the individual's identification of 'the admirable'. It shows how a shift in the prevailing social norms and values also changes the agents' identification of admirable behaviors and persons. In heroic societies, one is admired for abiding to their duty towards their king while in Athens one is admired for abiding to their duty towards men.

Again, according to MacIntyre (1981), rival conceptions of virtue exist even in the same city-state: "We therefore have to be wary of speaking too easily of 'the Greek view of the virtues' not just because we often say 'Greek' where we should say 'Athenian' but also because there were a number of Athenian views: those of the sophists, of Plato, of Aristotle and of the tragedians, especially Sophocles" (p. 135)[12]. These four rival

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[11]I should note that my choice of examples to follow is not arbitrary: Homeric societies and the 5th century BC Athenian society are the main examples discussed by MacIntyre (in his book *After Virtue*) in order to show that there were different conceptions of virtue in ancient Greece (a view which has inspired my overall discussion and on which I rely for much of my argument). Nazi Germany is one of Zagzebski's (2017) most extensively discussed examples. She is anticipating objections on this example and it thus seems fair to discuss it. Lastly, slavery in ancient societies is an example which Zagzebski discusses (see 2017, p. 113, note 9, where she discusses the abolition of slavery as evidence of social reforms being dependent upon external social conditions) though she seems to avoid discussing its connection to the emotion of admiration. Thus, I am discussing it because I believe its connection to admiration might be worth exploring.

[12]For example, Aristotle draws a distinction between the virtue of sophia (theoretical wisdom) and the virtue of phronesis (practical wisdom) (e.g. *EN*, 1139b15-18 - see also Broadie, in Broadie and Rowe, 2011, p. 47). For Aristotle, being wise in theoretical matters does not entail that one is wise in practical affairs as well (*EN*, 1141b5-10). Contrarily, Plato thinks that the agent who is wise in theoretical matters is necessarily wise in practical ones too. (*Rep.*, VI, 501b; VII, 540a–b).

conceptions of virtue dominated, and determined, the Athenian moral norms and values. Depending on one's upbringing and social status, one would be influenced by a specific understanding of morality. For example, according to the sophists' understanding (which was one of the most well-established ones, and especially influential for the ruling class who were brought up with such conception - see Kerferd, 1981): "…expressions such as 'just', 'virtue' and 'good'…refer to qualities which are conducive to individual success" (p. 139). For instance, in book I of the *Republic*, Thrasymachus who represents the sophist tradition argues that "justice or right is really what is good for someone else, namely the interest of the stronger party or ruler, imposed at the expense of the subject who obeys him" (343c)[13].

The sophist understanding of virtue, being one of the most prevailing views on virtue in classical Athenian society, would greatly influence one's identification of 'the admirable'. For example, a student following the sophists' teachings would not admire, and aspire to be, someone who they perceived as weak; but would rather look up to the strong. They would not admire the life of common men (no matter how objectively virtuous such a person might be) but only the life of those belonging to the ruling class. 'The admirable' is therefore largely influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural context. For example, in this case, it precludes the agent from considering the life of a common man (e.g. peasant or artisan) as admirable (and therefore worthy of emulation).

2.2 *Contemporary Societies and 'the Admirable'*

Nowadays our identification of 'the admirable' is also largely influenced and partly determined by the prevailing moral norms and values of society. Zagzebski (2017) herself partly acknowledges as much: She notes that admiration is guided by the practices of a moral-linguistic community which changes its stereotypes about 'the admirable' over time (p. 187). According to her, "The extension of 'good person' is not determined privately, nor is it determined by democratic vote. Some members of the social linguistic network are linguistically privileged" (Ibid.). Still, according to Zagzebski, it is people with power that determine "… both the stereotype and the extension of moral terms" rather than those most qualified for the task (e.g. moral experts such as moral philosophers - p. 188). Zagzebski even proceeds to discuss an explicit way in which admiration can be manipulated: "Narratives can be controlled by the political, religious or educational authorities and the media, and our responses will be affected by the way they tell the narratives" (pp. 68-69). Still, according to Zagzebski, "…we can exercise critical judgement. For one thing, our personal responses are tests of the narrator's point of view. In addition, there is often much more in a narrative than the narrator can consciously or unconsciously distort, and that serves as a partial test of the elements highlighted in the narrative..." (Ibid.). I believe that Zagzebski is rather quick to dismiss the theoretical weakness she has identified and is overly optimistic concerning our critical judgement and our ability to perceive things from an objective standpoint. Adding a clause of 'critical self-reflection' does not remove the socio-cultural influences already embedded in our judgement of what is admirable. If that were the case, and agents were able to approach all narratives from an objective point of view and exercise critical judgement in vacuo, the history of humankind would have been, I believe, quite different.

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[13]I am using Lee's translation of the *Republic* (in Lee and Lane, 2007).

Consider, for example, the case of Nazi Germany. Most of the German population was convinced by the narrative that was created and controlled by the Nazi party (Mühlberger, 2003). Those Germans convinced by the Nazi narrative had the capacity to exercise critical judgement but nevertheless admired Hitler - whose life and actions were portrayed by the Nazi party as the example that everyone should follow (see, e.g. Kershaw, 1989). This is quite a strong indication of how socially prevailing (and in this case, manipulated and imposed) moral norms and values influence an agent's identification of 'the admirable'. If one was to derive in Nazi Germany the meaning of value terms such as virtue, good end, good motive, admirable life, desirable life and deontic terms such as duty, right action, wrong action from 'the admirable', one would get quite different results than they would get in, for example, classical Athens. For instance, they would identify Hitler's life as the admirable and desirable life.

Of course, Zagzebski (2017) anticipates this objection and notes that "I cannot say with certainty that self-reflective Nazis could have figured out that there was something wrong with Hitler by comparing him with other persons they admired, but that is my hypothesis. A Nazi who is conscientious in my sense would reflect upon his admiration for Hitler, compare Hitler with other persons he admires, and compare his reaction to Hitler with the emotions of others he trusts" (p. 48)[14]. Still, again I find Zagzebski's answer quite unsatisfactory and constructed outside of the practices her theory is attempting to systematize and justify. Judging from the history of Nazi Germany, only a small minority of Germans (assumingly the most virtuous ones, and thus not the ones in need to identify exemplars through admiration) was able to be critical of the Nazi propaganda and the prevailing moral norms and values (Schmiechen-Ackermann, 2018). The vast majority of the population (presumably those who were in need of moral exemplars to improve in the moral domain) was greatly influenced by the Nazi narrative - a narrative which shaped their identification of 'the admirable'.

Still, one could argue that the case of Nazi Germany is a somewhat unique and rather extreme case (viz., a case of strong indoctrination and propaganda that were aided by the socioeconomic conditions in Germany at the time: e.g. war debts, Great Depression, losing WWI - see Eley, 2018 and Tooze, 2011); and that in 'normal' circumstances agents are reliably successful at employing their emotion of admiration in order to derive the meaning of terms such as virtue, duty and right action without being influenced (at least significantly) by the moral norms and values of society. But is this really the case? Leaving aside 'extreme' cases, it still seems that 'the admirable' is shaped by prevailing socio-cultural moral norms and values. Consider, for example, another quite commonly used example in moral discussions: the case of slavery in classical Athens. Having slaves was the norm in the ancient Athenian society; it was not considered as something immoral (see, e.g. Cuffel, 1966) but was rather seen as a sign of social status, power and racial superiority (see, e.g. Rihll, 2011). Owning slaves would not preclude one from being admired. Thus, in this case the emotion of admiration leads to the conclusion that it is (at least) morally acceptable to have slaves or that (at least) a small part of the admirable life involves owning slaves. Today, we would definitely disagree with such statements (and with good reason) but the fact still remains that were we to be living in classical Athens, we would most likely admire persons who had slaves (not - necessarily - because they had slaves but also not in

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[14]Note how similar Zagzebski's (2017) reply to this objection is to Blum's (1988, p. 215) argument that moral exemplars are "…appropriate objects of an *all-things-considered* admiration".

spite of it) and if we were to employ our emotion of admiration to derive terms such as right action from it, we would not see slavery as morally wrong[15].

The entire discussion boils down to one's understanding of moral emotions. As already noted, Zagzebski abides by a perceptual theory of emotions. She argues that emotions can be both epistemic and practical reasons for moral judgements. For instance, she notes: "If I admire E and reflectively endorse my state of admiring E, I have a reason to judge 'E is admirable'" (2017, p. 145). Contrarily, my arguments (in both sections 2 and 3) stem from a social understanding of moral emotions: people are social creatures whose emotions are greatly influenced by sociocultural factors (see e.g. Haidt, 2001, 2007). Such an understanding of moral emotions "…deemphasizes the private reasoning done by individuals and emphasizes instead the importance of social and cultural influences" (Haidt, 2001, p. 814). A significant part of my critique of Zagzebski's moral exemplarism theory rests on the fact that she considers emotions, such as admiration, in vacuo and fails to take into consideration that they are greatly influenced by socio-cultural factors.

All in all, I have argued in this section that Zagzebski (2015, 2017) fails to note in her moral exemplarist theory that the agents' identification of 'the admirable' is largely influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural norms and values. Thus, deriving terms such as good life, virtue and duty from 'the admirable' leads to a culture-specific understanding of morality. Notably, it leads to a conception of morality that is not determined by the few truly virtuous agents (or in accordance with their personality and behavior) but by the non-virtuous majority and/or by those controlling the narratives (that determine who should be admired). This theoretical limitation originates from a claim that lies at the center of exemplarist moral theories according to which admiration - if employed in a reflective manner - is not (significantly) influenced by socio-cultural norms. This is a core theory claim (featuring in all moral exemplarist approaches, e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004) which cannot be removed without heavily distorting the theory. Biting the bullet on this limitation leads to a theory which holds that 'the admirable' can be used to determine moral norms and values but nonetheless is quite often unreliable and quite prone to socio-cultural influences - and thus leads to a culture-relative understanding of morality.

One could reply that the charge of cultural relativism is an old objection to virtue ethics. Virtue scholars have argued that cultural relativism is not a unique problem to ethics - other theories share this problem - (see, for example, Solomon, 1988; Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2016) and some have even argued that virtue ethics deal better with cultural relativism than other theories (see, for example, Nussbaum, 1993). Still, my aim in this paper is not to revive the cultural-relativity objection to virtue ethics but rather to highlight that Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) exemplarist moral theory, and previous versions of moral exemplarism (e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004), lead necessarily - because of their reliance

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[15]One could argue that my understanding of the agents' identification of 'the admirable' is very deterministic and does not allow room to account for social change. My view is that social change (e.g. abolition of slavery in USA) is brought about by a change in the prevailing socio-cultural norms and values (due to, for example, historical events such as the American Civil War) which in turn affect the agents' identification of 'the admirable'. Still, note that I am not arguing that morality is fully determined by society. For example, not all Germans in Nazi Germany were in favor of Hitler. Rather, I am arguing that the emotion of admiration is highly vulnerable to socio-cultural influences. The majority of Germans living in Nazi Germany, being influenced by the Nazi narrative, admired Hitler.

on the agents' identification of 'the admirable' - to a culture-relative understanding of morality.

3. Gender Identity and Exemplarism

The second limitation of Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) exemplarist moral theory - a limitation which again can also be found in previous versions of moral exemplarism (e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004) - is closely interlinked with the one discussed in the previous section (section 2). Both limitations stem from the realization that the theory disregards the societal contexts (in which moral practices take place) that largely influence our identification of 'the admirable'. This second limitation rests on the observation that Zagzebski fails to consider that an agent's identification of 'the admirable' is largely influenced by several of the agent's features and characteristics (which, in turn, have already been shaped by societal norms and practices). Such features and characteristics include gender, age, race and social status. In this paper, I focus on how consideration of gender differences undermines moral exemplarism. Again, it is worthwhile noting beforehand that this limitation does not stem from a relativistic conception of morality. One could hold an objective understanding of morality but nonetheless agree with the theoretical limitation identified in this section. In what follows, I discuss examples that highlight the import of gender for exemplarist theories. The examples are taken from both ancient societies (subsection 3.1) and contemporary ones (subsection 3.2).

3.1 Gender Identity and 'the Admirable' in Ancient Greece

This second limitation I identify in Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) moral exemplarist theory is based on, and inspired by, Butler's (1990) arguments according to which gender is a social construction. Butler argues that categories of gender are not biologically determined but social constructs - viz., constructed through language and social practices (discourse). Gender categories do not have any inherent 'reality'; they are in their entirety the product of social processes. According to Butler (1990), agents are taught and expected to act in accordance to their socially constructed gender category[16]. Resistance to gender constructs is quite difficult (although not impossible, especially at a micro level - e.g. gender parody through the art of 'drag') because such categories are strongly embedded and taken for granted in our culture[17]. For instance, it is quite unthinkable to think of a person as 'agender' (i.e. as not having a gender).

Butler's identification of gender as a social construct has quite significant implications for moral exemplarism. In this section of the paper, I argue that the gender identity of the agent - viz. one's sense of their own gender (which may or may not correlate with the

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[16]See also, Bussey and Bandura (2004) who argue that there are three social learning processes through which children come to acquire their gender identity: (i) directly being taught about it, (ii) enactive experience and (iii) observational learning. Still, unlike Butler (1990), they follow a socialization approach to gender, i.e. they understand gender as pre-existing categories that are inherently real.

[17]See Nussbaum (2012) for a criticism of Butler's (1990) views. More specifically, Nussbaum is especially critical of Butler's position that there is little room for resistance to the socially constructed gender categories - see Nussbaum, 2012, p. 200.

gender one was ascribed at birth) - largely influences the moral understanding the agent would develop through the emotion of admiration. This is a feature of exemplarism that Zagzebski (2015, 2017) and other scholars (Blum 1988; Annas, 2004) supporting this moral approach have failed to take note of. The prevailing socio-cultural norms and social constructs impose different moral expectations on different gender categories. Agents are expected and taught to behave (in all matters, including moral) in accordance to their gender category[18]. Thus, employing the emotion of admiration to derive value and deontic terms results in a counter-intuitive, gender-specific understanding of morality.

It is often quite easier to examine such an issue in societies of the past rather than in contemporary societies, as it allows for a somewhat more objective analysis of the matter in question. For instance, in Homeric poetry, women exemplars (i.e. women considered worthy of admiration) are depicted as having a different kind of moral focus than men (i.e. men considered worthy of admiration). In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses (i.e. the moral male exemplar) is depicted as the smart and brave Greek hero while Penelope (i.e. the female moral exemplar) is depicted as instantiating the virtue of patience and loyalty to one's husband (see e.g. Pantelia, 1993)[19]. The normal order of life is women taking care of the household while men take care of 'men business' (see Snyder, 1981, p. 193; Pamelia, 1993, 497; see also *Od*. 1.356-58, 21.350-52 and *Il*. 6.490-92). Thus, in ancient Greece, agents deploying their emotion of admiration to derive the meaning of deontic and value terms develop a gender-specific understanding of morality. They receive different moral guidance (and moral training), depending on their gender, from fictional exemplars such as Ulysses and Penelope. Men aspire to be like male Greek heroes, such as Ulysses, and women are raised to look up to the ideal of women such as Penelope[20].

Nevertheless, one could note that in ancient Greek societies women were (quite often) not seen as equal to men[21]. For example, the prevailing societal norms were that women should not be the recipients of formal education[22]. Also, discussing morality, and philosophy in general, was a task only for men. For example, Platonic dialogues, with the notable exception of Diotima[23] (*Symposium*), are dominated by male interlocutors. Thus, one could argue that the gender-specific understanding of morality that is derived from the emotion of admiration is not a theoretical limitation but rather a problematic aspect of

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[18]See, also, Bourdieu, 2002.

[19]For example, Pantelia (1993, p. 497) notes that "Penelope's weaving of a shroud for Odysseus' father reflects her commitment to her husband's family and symbolizes her loyalty to the patrilinear order which she is determined to protect".

[20]This section of the paper should not be read as implying that an individual should identify themselves as either male or female. Rather, I am examining how these two socially constructed categories of gender affect the agents' identification of 'the admirable' and I am thus limiting my discussion to this (wrong) binary understanding of gender.

[21]See, for example, Aristotle's comment in the *Politics*: "The male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (1254b13–14) - I am using Rackham's translation of the *Politics* (in Rackham, 1932). For more on this topic see Frede, 2018.

[22]Plato was an exception. He thought, contra-Aristotle, that women should be formally educated (see, e.g., *Rep*., V, 456c13-d1). Still, Plato did not have a much better opinion for women than Aristotle did: "…and it is natural for women to take part in all occupations as well as men, though in all women will be the weaker partners" (455d10-15).

[23]Diotima is presumably entitled to an opinion - despite being a woman - because of her social status as a high priestess.

societies which perceive men as the pre-eminent moral agents. Nonetheless, I believe that this does not refute the objection I am putting forward. Agents would develop, through the emotion of admiration, a gender-specific understanding of morality in contemporary societies too. In the next subsection, I proceed to discuss examples to illustrate this claim.

3.2 *Gender Identity and 'the admirable' in Contemporary Societies*

In contemporary societies, similarly, several core characteristics and features of the agent (such as gender identity) largely affect the guidance and moral training they would receive through moral exemplars (as identified through the emotion of admiration). Consider, for example, the large number of Hollywood action movies (especially those in the 70's, 80's and 90's) which tell the stories of heroes extracting revenge. In their vast majority, such movies promoted white heterosexual male norms (see e.g., Mizejewski, 2004; King, 2008)[24,25]. The heroes extracting revenge are usually men who are depicted as having the (physical and mental) power and courage to extract revenge and defeat evil. The leading evil characters are again, in their vast majority, men - presumably because only men are powerful enough to be evil. In such movies, women usually play a secondary role and are portrayed (depending on their age) as either the object of passion or as a source of motherly warmth (see e.g. Gauntlett, 2008, p. 37; Bussey and Bandura, 2004, p. 109).

Such fictional characters that are still admired for their character and behavior - and thus largely influence our understanding of morality, especially of those of a young age[26] (see Milkie, 1994) - project that male-identified individuals should portray characteristics of courage and revenge while female-identified individuals should project an image of passion and/or warmth. Thus, depending on the gender category of the person seeking moral guidance and training, they would get different results. The male-identified individual will think highly of moral actions that aim at promoting values such as honor - and a behavior that is more suitable for their masculine identity, e.g. seeking revenge and/or being courageous - while the female-identified individual will think that it is more appropriate for their gender to behave in a manner that promotes values such as sensuality, compassion and warmth[27]. In other words, male-identified individuals are more likely to admire and associate themselves with male exemplars (and the values they are instantiating) while female-identified individuals are more likely to admire and associate themselves with female exemplars (and the values instantiated by them) (see e.g. Bussey and Bandura, 1984, 2004; Carducci, 2009, p. 493). Thus, moral exemplarism contributes

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[24]For example, Mizejewski (2004) notes that "the testosterone-heavy 1970s American box office was no place for the woman investigator" (p. 118).

[25]King (2008) notes, for example, that "women are featured as cop action heroes in 24 Hollywood films (dating from 1973's Cleopatra Jones), compared to 267 that star only men" (p. 238).

[26]The significance of narratives for moral learning has long been noted. See, for example *Republic*, III, 377c: "Shall we therefore readily allow our children to listen to any stories made up by anyone, and to form opinions that are for the most part the opposite of those we think they should have when they grow up? ...Then it seems that our first business is to supervise the production of stories, and choose only those we think suitable, and reject the rest".

[27]This difference is also reflected in movie preferences (which are again largely influenced by the social constructs of gender). Male-identified individuals prefer action movies over romantic ones while female-identified individuals prefer romantic movies over action ones (Greenwood, 2010).

to the consolidation of a gender-specific understanding of morality because it relies on the identification of 'the admirable' which is substantially influenced by the social construct of gender.

Still, as it has already been pointed out, exemplars need not be only fictional. Male-identified individuals are brought up to admire the personality traits of male athletes and businessmen whereas female-identified individuals are taught to admire the personality traits of female pop stars and models[28,29] (see Bussey and Bandura, 2004, p. 108; Carducci 2009, p. 493). Moreover, not only virtues, but one's perception of value terms (such as good life and admirable life) is largely affected by gender identity. Being beautiful, for example, seems to be a much more important constituent of a good life for female-identified individuals than for their male counterparts (and this again is influenced by society's views on female beauty - see e.g. Meyers, 2011; Anderson, 2019).

Besides gender, there are also other characteristics and features of an agent that considerably influence their identification of 'the admirable'. For example, age is another such characteristic (see for example Richard and Krüger, 2006; see also Lockwood, Chaster and Wong, 2005 on how age affects one's responses to positive and negative role models). Different age groups admire different persons and different behaviors (since society heavily influences how one should act in accordance to the age group they belong). Nowadays, a young male-identified teenager is more likely to admire the traits of an athlete (and to identify them as an exemplar) than the traits of "a woman…who is impeccably groomed and keeps her house always ready for company, while caring for her husband with Alzheimer's" (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 36). I should note that while Zagzebski discusses this example (amongst other examples of agents she admires) she fails to consider that such a woman is more likely to be the object of admiration of a middle-aged person rather than of a teenager. She completely disregards the import of the agent's features and characteristics, and the impact of socio-cultural norms on what is expected by specific categories of people, on the agent's identification of 'the admirable'[30].

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[28]Of course, I am not implying that athletes and businessmen need to be male in order to be worthy of our admiration as I am also not implying that popstars and models need to be female in order to be admirable. What I am suggesting rather is that we have been brought up in a society where we have been taught that boys should admire male athletes and businessmen whereas girls should admire female popstars and models. In other words, our identification of 'the admirable' is not objective but has been substantially influenced by social learning and expectations.

[29]The main support for my arguments comes from Bussey and Bandura's (1984, 2004) theory of social learning. Significantly, their work '*Social cognitive theory of gender development and functioning*' (2004) is a summary of approximately 400 studies on the impact of socio-cultural factors on gender development and modeling in children and youngsters. These studies go beyond the question of whether the agents' admiration is reflective or not. They attempt to capture what happens in 'real practice' and show that in actual practice socio-cultural influences have a great impact on our identification, and subsequent emulation, of 'the admirable'.

[30]Zagzebski (2017, Chapter 1) also discusses exemplars such as Leopold Socha, Jean Vanier and Confucius. It should be noted that these three examples do not undermine my argument. It still remains the case that the vast majority of young male-identified individuals are (due to socio-cultural influences) brought up to admire the personality traits of male athletes and businessmen whereas female-identified individuals are brought up to admire the personality traits of female pop stars and models.

One could argue that Zagzebski (2015, 2017) and other scholars working on moral exemplarism (e.g. Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004) have on purpose omitted to discuss the import of the agent's features and characteristics (such as age and gender) on the agent's identification of 'the admirable' as it would complicate their theoretical approach without offering anything noteworthy. I agree that taking into consideration such features and characteristics complicates matters but also reveals an important limitation of exemplarist approaches; namely that employing 'the admirable' to derive deontic and value terms leads to a departmentalized understanding of morality according to the socially constructed categories one belongs. It leads, for example, to a counter-intuitive gender-specific understanding of morality. This forces me to question the efficacy of the theory of moral exemplarism[31].

4. Concluding Remarks

Irrespectively of whether one understands moral exemplarism as a distinct theory (Zagzebski, 2015; 2017) or as an approach that complements virtue ethics (Blum, 1988; Annas, 2004), the core theoretical principle remains the same: the emotion of admiration enables agents to identify and imitate virtuous persons. Still, as I have argued, moral exemplarism has two significant limitations that render it somewhat problematic as an approach. The first core limitation of exemplarism is that it fails to take into consideration the socio-cultural influences that largely affect, and partly determine, our identification of 'the admirable' and examines it instead in vacuo. I have argued that employing the emotion of admiration to derive deontic and value terms leads to a cultural-relativistic conception of morality. The second core limitation of the theory is that it fails to take into account the plethora of characteristics and features of an agent - such as gender identity and age - that also largely influence the agent's identification of 'the admirable'. This has led me to argue that relying on the emotion of admiration for moral guidance and training leads to a segregated (e.g. gender-specific, age-specific, etc.) understanding of morality.

Nonetheless, not all is in vain - there is still a positive takeaway message. Taking into consideration the sociocultural factors that influence admiration can give us insights and helps us truly understand how moral admiration and imitation operate. Understanding admiration for what it is (i.e. greatly influenced by sociocultural factors) can be of significant practical and theoretical merit. Such an understanding can inform and have significant import for exemplar-based accounts of moral education[32]. It can also lead to the development of moral theories which build on 'the admirable' without being constructed outside of the practices such theories are attempting to systematize and justify.

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[31]Still, this should not be taken to imply that there is nothing of value to be found in Zagzebski's exemplarist theory. For example, according to her theory, the emotion of admiration evokes in agents the desire to become a better person (see, e.g., Zagzebski, 2017, p. 152). This is one of the stronger features of Zagzebski's account. My aim is not to dispute this point but rather to show that Zagzebski has not taken into consideration the socio-cultural influences on the agents' identification of 'the admirable'.

[32]For one, it would make educators aware of the socio-cultural influences on admiration and lead them to develop educational methods that safeguard against a segregated understanding of morality.

Words: 7981

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