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DOI:

[10.1177/1477878517695679](https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695679)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Kristjánsson, K 2017, 'Emotions targeting moral exemplarity: making sense of the logical geography of admiration, emulation and elevation', *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 20-37.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695679>

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Emotions Targeting Moral Exemplarity:

Making sense of the logical geography of admiration, emulation and elevation

Kristján Kristjánsson

Abstract: Despite renewed interest in moral role modelling and its emotional underpinnings, further conceptual work is needed on the logical geography of the emotions purportedly driving it, in particular admiration, emulation and elevation. In this paper, I explore admiration (as understood by Linda Zagzebski) and Aristotle's emulation in Section 2 and then elevation (as recently characterised by Jonathan Haidt) in Section 3. Although learning from moral exemplarity can, to a large extent, be accounted for on the motivational grounds of admiration and emulation, I argue that we need a concept of elevation (as a kind of moral awe) to account for attraction to transpersonal moral ideals. I explain Aristotle's inability to make sense of people's emotional attachment to moral exemplarity, as distinct from the attachment to moral exemplars. In Section 4, I bring to bear insights from another ancient emotion theorist, Mengzi (Mencius), in order to get Aristotle back on track. Finally, Section 5 offers concluding remarks and a brief educational discussion.

Key words: exemplars/exemplarity; admiration; emulation; elevation; Aristotle; Zagzebski

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1. Introduction: The Problematics of Moral Role-Modelling

Role-modelling, especially of the kind that moral philosophers, moral psychologists and moral educators refer to as learning from moral exemplars or exemplarity, has been achieving renewed prominence of late. In the year 2015 alone, two thought-provoking books came out foregrounding the salience of moral exemplars for moral development: one popular (Brooks, 2015) and the other academic (Damon & Colby, 2015). More generally, exemplar research continues to form a major research agenda in moral psychology (see e.g. Dunlop & Walker, 2013), and the recently identified emotion of (moral) ‘elevation’ has been making headlines within positive psychology (Haidt, 2003; Algoe & Haidt, 2009). However, the most sustained interest in the topic can perhaps be seen among Aristotelian moral philosophers and educationists (Kristjánsson, 2007; 2015; Annas, 2011; Sanderson, 2013), as moral role-modelling constitutes a time-honoured staple of Aristotelian methods for cultivating character.

Recently, philosopher Linda Zagzebski has upped the theoretical stakes considerably by proposing a comprehensive new moral theory of ‘exemplarism’, according to which basic moral concepts are anchored foundationally in exemplars of moral goodness, tracked by the emotion of admiration, analogously to how proper names and the names of natural kinds are grounded according to a (Putnamian/Kripkean) causal theory of reference. Zagzebski goes on to make a distinction between exemplars admired for natural excellences and for acquired excellences (such as moral and intellectual virtues) and argues that the latter are ‘imitably attractive’, meaning that admiration for them (typically) provides motivation to emulate the admired person (Zagzebski, 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2017). Zagzebski has already furthered the debate on the *emotional basis of learning from moral exemplarity* – the topic of the present

paper – and I return to her arguments at various junctures below although I refrain from assessing the whole new moral theory.

Zabzebski has entered a minefield, however, for the whole discursive field of moral role-modelling is beset with practical (esp. educational) and theoretical problems. My present attention is fastened on a set of problems that are, at once, psychological and conceptual. What are the *psychological* (in particular, motivational and emotional) mechanisms driving the purported learning from moral exemplarity, and what sort of *conceptual* cartography (in particular, charting the territory of emotion concepts) is required to make sense of those mechanisms? My aim is to say something relevant about these two interlocking questions in what follows. These questions are particularly acute for neo-Aristotelians, for Aristotle simultaneously gave high priority to role-modelling as a method of character education and said precious little about how it actually does, or should, take place. As Aristotelian character education seems most essentially, in its early stages at least, to be a process of emotional sensitisation, it is incumbent on Aristotelians to give a plausible account (for example, concurring or competing with Zagzebski's) of how emotions motivate role-modelling. However, in default of much advice from Aristotle himself about education for moral emulation, neo-Aristotelians have considerable reconstructive work on their hands.

In this paper, I explore admiration (as understood by Zagzebski) and Aristotle's emulation in Section 2 and then elevation (as recently characterised by Jonathan Haidt) in Section 3. Although my conclusion is that learning from moral exemplarity can, to a large extent, be accounted for on the motivational grounds of admiration and emulation, I argue that we need a concept of elevation (as a kind of moral awe) to account for attraction to transpersonal moral ideals, and that making sense of elevation, on this understanding, may

help ameliorate some remaining problems in the other accounts. I explain Aristotle's inability to make sense of people's emotional attachment to moral exemplarity, as distinct from the attachment to moral exemplars. In Section 4, I bring to bear insights from another ancient emotion theorist, Mengzi (Mencius), in order to get Aristotle back on track. Finally, Section 5 offers concluding remarks and a brief educational discussion.

In sum, the basic aim of this paper is to show that in order to give a full account of emotions targeting moral exemplarity, we need to go beyond both Aristotle and Zagzebski, and that Mengzi may be our best bet for starting to carve out an alternative route.

2. Admiration and Emulation

There are many concepts residing in the area of emotions targeting exemplarity. Amongst the services that philosophers attempt to provide is the refinement of conceptual understandings. Gilbert Ryle's metaphor, about how critical analyses of concepts ideally need to be holistic with respect to the neighbouring conceptual terrain, is instructive here: 'Surveyors do not map single objects like the village church. They put together in one map all the salient features of the area: the church, the railway, the parish boundary, and perhaps the contours. Further, they indicate how this map joins the maps of the neighbouring areas' (2009, p. 211). Drawing on Ryle's advice, this section and the next aim at a critical overview of the conceptual terrain; relying both on previous philosophical and psychological analyses.

If there is a 'village church' in this area, it must be the concept of *admiration*. Zagzebski has trimmed its ragged edges considerably of late (2015a; 2017). She understands admiration as a positive (pleasant) emotion, with *contempt* as its contrary, which construes the object as good in a distinctive way that is stronger and more basic than construing it as desirable. So,

contrary to what she takes to be the standard view, the desirable is grounded in the admirable. As already noted, she makes a distinction between admiration for natural and acquired excellences (especially virtues) – even hypothesising that they do not only ‘appear’ but also ‘feel’ differently – and she considers the latter ‘imitably attractive’, in the sense that they (typically) give rise to the urge to imitate or emulate the object (2015a). She takes on board certain insights from the recent literature on *elevation* (see the following section) by accepting that admiration for virtue is often associated with the feelings of being uplifted or elevated. This is an important revision, for Zagzebski ultimately wants to collapse elevation into admiration (for virtue) by showing that the two emotions are identical. Her final move is that if agents endorse their emotion of admiration, upon critical reflection, they will use that as a ground for a judgement of admirability – a move which for Zagzebski eventually bridges the gap between emotion theory and moral theory, culminating in her new theory of exemplarism (2017).

There is a slide in Zagzebski’s account between admiration for excellences and admiration for people exhibiting those excellences, for she ultimately characterises admiration as an emotion of feeling in a distinctive way towards *a person* seen as admirable and refers to *that person* (rather than just her quality of excellence) as imitably attractive (2017, chap. 2). Zagzebski has ordinary language on her side here; it makes no clear distinction between admiration for persons and qualities. It would have been helpful if Zagzebski had provided an argument for why this distinction is irrelevant for her particular purposes; yet I will not fault her for that omission as I do not think this particular distinction is crucial to making sense of moral role-modelling along the admiration route. I go on to argue in Section 3, however, that another distinction, between admiration and elevation, is.

Admiration is, for some reason, not one of the emotions analysed in Aristotle's treatise on emotions and their use in rhetoric (2007). He uses considerable space, on the other hand, to dissect the emotion of *emulation* (*zēlos*). This emotion is characterised by

a kind of distress at the apparent presence among others like him by nature, of things honoured and possible for a person to acquire, [with the distress arising] not from the fact that another has them but that the emulator does not (thus emulation is a good thing and characteristic of good people, while envy is bad and characteristic of the bad; for the former [person], through emulation, is making an effort to attain good things for himself, while the latter, through envy, tries to prevent his neighbour from having them) (Aristotle, 2007, p. 146 [1388a29–38]).

Interestingly, later in this same chapter, Aristotle considers contempt (*kataphronēsis*) the opposite of emulation, rather than (as Zagzebski does) of admiration. However, he makes a move with which Zagzebski would concur of claiming that those are emulated whom many admire or whom the emulators admire. Like her, Aristotle sees proper emulation as striving for qualities that are (seen as) 'appropriate attributes of the good' (2007, pp. 146–147 [1388b4–8]). Moreover, he proposes the trait form of emulation – which we could call emulousness – as an age-relative virtue for young people (see Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 7): an integral ingredient in early moral education.

As already noted, Aristotle remains reticent on how emulousness can be cultivated. In a previous work (Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 7), I offered an optimistic take on this problem by suggesting that lightly touching up what Aristotle says about the emotion of emulation (*zēlos*) in his *Rhetoric* (2007), and bringing it into line with his general requirements of *phronesis*-guided education, would suffice to develop a coherent neo-Aristotelian account. Since then I have come to believe that more reconstructive work is needed to update Aristotle – the great cartographer that he was of moral reality – in light of new social scientific evidence and more recent analyses of emotion concepts. Indeed, no contemporary follower of

Aristotle would claim that we ought to retain his account *in situ*. More specifically, I now see three main stumbling blocks to understanding role-modelling through standard Aristotelian routes.

First, *conceptually*, emulation scarcely does all the work required to make sense of the psychological landscape. Emotion concepts that were not at Aristotle's disposal (such as elevation) or of which he did not make explicit use (such as admiration) may be needed to supplement his account. Second, *psychologically*, the emotion of emulation does not suffice to explain the mechanism at work in various kinds of exemplarity-learning experiences, especially those having to do with sudden and dramatic moral conversions. Third, *morally*, standard Aristotelian accounts do not provide sufficient resources to counter two common objections to role-modelling. One concerns the way in which moral learning of this kind stands in danger of degenerating into mere hero-worship and uncritical grovelling at the feet of the presumed exemplars. The other objection concerns the threat of moral inertia, where the moral exemplars are seen as standing so high above the learner that idolising them becomes disempowering and dispiriting rather than uplifting. All those stumbling blocks may be grounded in Aristotle's inability to make sense of people's emotional attachments to moral exemplarity as distinct from the attachment to moral exemplars (see Section 3). Before making that argument, however, some further elaborations on Aristotle's emulation concept are in order.

Although Aristotle does define the affective part of emulation as one of 'distress', we should be cautious in characterising the emotion as a 'negative' on a standard psychological understanding. Emulation (*zēlos*) is (*pace Zagzebski, 2015a, p. 210*) not only painful; it also includes pleasure at the presence of 'the honoured thing'; indeed, if the choice is between not

being able to acquire it for oneself versus being able to acquire it only by removing it from the emulated person, the emulator prefers the first option. Notice here that Aristotle did not share current psychology's simplistic dichotomy of the 'valence' of emotions as either 'positive' or 'negative', but seems to have considered most, if not all, emotions to be of mixed valence. The specific complication about the valence of emulation arises from the need to distinguish emulation both from *begrudging spite* (resenting the emulating person's possession of the honoured thing) and *envy* (resenting the emulating person's possession of the honoured thing *and* wanting to remove it from her to oneself).

Zagzebski agrees with a strict distinction being drawn between emulation and envy; however, she prefers to see Aristotelian *zēlos* as a 'form of' or 'at least a close relative of' admiration (2015, p. 214). She implicitly exposes Aristotle's mistake to combine within the rubric of *zēlos* both (1) the negative construal of oneself *vis-à-vis* the other person's superiority and (2) the positive construal of the superior person, coupled with the positive striving to overcome that superiority. This odd mixture of construals and motives understandably troubles Zagzebski who stipulates that, in addition to the positive feeling of admiration leading to emulation, there is also a potential negative (painful) emotion that can lead to emulation, but an emotion which Aristotle also, confusedly, wants to call 'emulation' (Zagzebski, 2015a, pp. 210–211). Ideally, Aristotle should have made a distinction between the evaluative and motivational bits of emulation. He could have posited an emotion of admiration, perhaps of mixed valence, leading to emulation, or made a distinction (as suggested by Zagzebski) between admiration, experienced positively, and another emotion (unnamed), evaluating one's relative standing negatively, also potentially leading to emulation.

Elsewhere (2017, chap. 6), Zagzebski quietly tidies up these infelicities in Aristotle by proposing a model according to which the process of role-modelling starts with admiration of an exemplar, which leads to a conception of oneself as lacking the admired qualities but desiring to possess them, which in turn produces emulation – and she suggests that this model can be combined with varieties of Aristotelian psychology. In what follows, I simply follow Zagzebski here, as there is much gained, and little lost, by distinguishing more clearly than Aristotle does between the evaluation of another’s relative excellence and the striving to become more like the other person. Indeed, I consider the assumption ultimately shared by Aristotle and Zagzebski – that the motivation to learn from exemplarity is adequately described as emulation, elicited by an evaluation of another person as admirable or honourable in certain ways – is more important than the subtle differences in their vocabularies. It is this assumption that I contest, however, in Section 3, by proposing *another* possible emotional route to learning from moral exemplarity. More specifically, what I contest is *not* the claim that the tidied-up Aristotle-Zagzebski route is the most common emotional route to learning from exemplarity. Indeed, my belief is, albeit in default of as-yet-conclusive empirical evidence (see below), that it is the most common route. However, what I contest is the assumption that this route provides an *exhaustive* explanation of what goes on in emotion-inspired learning from exemplarity.

It should be mentioned in passing that psychologists have studied one more psychological state that seems relevant to the present discussion: namely, *inspiration*. Where does that fit into the geography of our ‘parish’? In a persuasive analysis of the psychology of inspiration, Thrash and colleagues (2014) argue that inspiration is not a distinct emotion but designates a motivational state that can be part of various emotions. Inspiration incorporates, inter alia,

approach motivation, ‘such that one feels compelled to bring one’s new idea or vision into fruition’ (2014, p. 497). Couched in those terms, Zagzebski’s thesis could be restated such that admiration (for acquired excellences) typically *inspires* people to emulation.

In sum, to round off this conceptual tidying-up work, *admiration* can most serviceably be understood as a pleasant (or perhaps a mixed-valence) emotion whose immediate target is another person and whose intentional object is that person’s excellence, positively evaluated. Typically, this emotion contains the motivational state of inspiration which then leads to emulation. *Emulation* is, in turn, a mixed-valence emotion whose immediate target is another person and whose goal-directed activity is the modelling of that person’s excellence.

While this modestly revisionary analysis is of clarificatory value, it does little to fend off the two moral objections to role-modelling, identified at the end of the previous section. One of them was about how role-modelling can degenerate into mere hero-worship; the other about how acquaintance with the most pronounced moral exemplars can create moral inertia, rather than inspiration, if those are seen as occupying an unreachably high moral ground. Notice that Zagzebski’s empirical thesis (about the admiration-inspires-emulation effect) does not address, let alone parry, those objections. First, her thesis might be wrong (as demonstrated by future psychological experiments). Indeed, one empirical study has already cast doubt on it, indicating that a certain kind of envy, but not admiration, inspires emulation (van de Ven, Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2011). Second, even if the thesis turns out to be right (as indicated by another empirical study, showing admiration for virtue to be ‘profoundly motivating’: Immordino-Yang & Sylvan, 2010), her thesis is about what ‘typically’ happens. However, ‘typically’ leaves considerable room for exceptions. I take it that the objections in question are based on empirical hypotheses about what happens when people come across

true ‘moral superstars’. It could well be the case that on the rare occasions when we encounter the most admirable examples of moral excellence, inertia sets in and the admiration-inspires-emulation link becomes broken. That would be a most unfortunate conclusion for moral education, however, as it would mean that we should – counter-intuitively – try to steer moral learners away from the most admirable exemplars of moral excellence.

Meanwhile, Irwin (2015) has identified another moral problem connected to making admiration the wellspring of exemplar-based moral motivation – a problem that *inter alia* is meant to explain why the ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, did not place great stock in admiration. Irwin considers the problem to lie in the *moral ambiguity* of admiration. While it may be easy to distinguish conceptually, as Zagzebski does, between admiration for natural and acquired (virtuous) excellences, this is not easy in practice, especially not for moral learners. Morally dubious or conflicted characters in the classics, such as Ajax and Medea, are great and remarkable, with respect to natural excellences, ‘and so it is difficult to withhold admiration from them, even if we recognize that they are not the neighbours or fellow citizens we would want’ (Irwin, 2015, p. 231). In other words, admiration is a morally dangerous attitude, and this is precisely what repelled the ancient philosophers. Incidentally, Irwin does not only seem to be making a psychological observation here; he also takes indirect *Euthyphro*-style swipes at Zagzebski’s moral theory by warning against making admiration foundational to correct moral judgement. The order of justification must be the other way round – from the morally correct or virtuous to what is properly admired (Irwin, 2015, pp. 235, 242, 247).

So far I have mostly confined my attention to philosophical studies of the concepts of admiration and emulation. One reason is that there is not a lot of conceptual work to draw on in this area carried out by social scientists. However, a recent extensive overview of the geography of admiration and adoration, whose main purpose is to make clear distinctions between the two (Schindler et al., 2013), constitutes a notable exception. The authors survey a lot of empirical and conceptual work in social science, and the upshot of their analysis is, as far as admiration is concerned, essentially consistent with Zagzebski's account. Admiration turns out to be an emotion that 'motivates the internalisation and emulation of ideals embodied by an outstanding role model' (2013, p. 85). It constitutes a reaction to another person's specific actions or characteristics. Meanwhile, adoration 'motivates adherence to the teachings and expectations of a meaning maker and benefactor perceived as superhuman and sacred' (2013, p. 85). So, while both emotions belong to the larger parish of 'appreciation emotions', they are separated by different targets and formal objects. Whatever the overall merits of this analysis may be, it helps us get a conceptual handle on the two common moral objections to role-modelling, as we can now rephrase them as variations on the theme that role-modelling stands in danger of degenerating into undue *adoration*. Hampering further psychological work in this area, however, is the lack of established instruments to measure admiration, emulation and adoration (yet see Sarapin et al., 2015 for an attempt at a multidimensional admiration scale; cf. the discussion in Onu, Kessler & Smith, 2016).

3. Elevation as Moral Awe

Jonathan Haidt created considerable buzz in 2003 when he identified and characterised 'elevation' as a specific emotion: one which intellectually minded people, such as Thomas

Jefferson, had described in vivid terms over the centuries – as ‘dilating the breast’ and ‘elevating the sentiments’ (cited in Haidt, 2003) – but which academic emotion theorists had for some reason failed to recognise. Touching a chord with various researchers, elevation has since 2003 developed into an important research topic, especially within positive psychology. While Haidt is onto something important in his identification of elevation, I argue that he has misrepresented it. To make my case, we need to untangle his conceptual account.

Elevation, is according to Haidt, an other-praising emotion elicited by acts of virtue *or* moral beauty, causing warm, open feelings in the chest and motivating people to improve themselves and behave more morally through emulation (2003, pp. 275–276). The word ‘or’ is crucial here, for it seems that Haidt is describing two distinct emotions rather than just one. For convenience of exposition, let me call them elevation₁ and elevation₂. Elevation₁ is an emotion of appreciation of *personal* acts of virtue. It is triggered by acts of charity, gratitude, fidelity or any other strong display of virtue that do not directly benefit the self; it leads to distinctive physical feelings and elicits the above-mentioned motivation of emulation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009, pp. 106–107). Elevation₂ is an emotion of appreciation of the *transpersonal* moral beauty of goodness/virtue. It is connected to awe, self-transcendence and spirituality, even aesthetic appreciation, and could perhaps be named *tugendfreude* (as opposed to *schadenfreude*): joy in virtue (Haidt & Keltner, 2004).

Haidt makes two general claims about *all* elevation to which I take exception. One is that elevation connects to the moral-domain dimension of purity/degradation: a genetically grounded but culture-modified source of individual moral difference. People prone to elevation will then tend to be high on the purity scale – and the contrary of elevation is seen as disgust (Haidt, 2003). This looks like an *ad hoc* move to bring the emotion of elevation

into line with Haidt's controversial general theory of moral foundations or domains. The contrast with disgust also seems to make elevation too visceral. I would argue – as Aristotle did for emulation and Zagzebski for admiration – that the contrary of elevation be better seen as *contempt* than disgust. The second claim is to restrict elevation to experiences of goodness that do not directly benefit the self (Haidt, 2003; Algoe & Haidt, 2009, p. 107). Haidt is motivated to make this move in order to separate elevation from the other-praising emotion of gratitude (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). However, Haidt seems to under-appreciate the possibility of separate emotions co-occurring, even synergistically. There is no reason why feeling gratitude towards a benefactor, at an act of goodness directed at oneself as beneficiary, rules out the possibility that one also experiences elevation₁. If anything, one emotion is likely to amplify the other. Similarly, it seems unreasonable to suppose that elevation₂ cannot co-exist happily with dyadic gratitude (gratitude without a specific benefactor, also known as 'appreciation) or, more specifically, with what Roberts (2014) calls 'cosmic gratitude'.

These can perhaps be seen as side-concerns. The main concern, however, is that Haidt does not seem to be aware that he is combining two distinct emotions, with different targets and objects, under one umbrella. There is a dilemma lurking here. The first horn is that if 'elevation' is to be understood as elevation₁, it seems to be redundant with respect to 'admiration'. As Zagzebski correctly points out, elevation (*qua* what I call elevation₁) is perfectly captured by her notion of 'admiration for moral excellences' (2015a, p. 209). Algoe and Haidt (2009, p. 107) admit that 'admiration' is sometimes used in ordinary English as a name for a response to moral exemplars, but they decide 'for the purposes of [their] studies' to define 'admiration' as a response to non-moral excellence only, but 'elevation' as a response to moral excellence. Again, this decision (uncritically adopted e.g. by Onu, Kessler

& Smith in their 2016 conceptual model) seems to be taken *ad hoc*. There is normally no good reason to correct ordinary language for failure to distinguish between varieties of an emotion simply on grounds of different *specific* targets. If we insisted on such a separation, the emotional vocabulary would proliferate *ad infinitum*. There would have to be a special name for anger at school bullying as distinct from anger at rudeness on the bus, etc.

The issue here is that there does not seem to be any difference between ‘admiration’, as applied in ordinary language and subtly refined by Zagzebski, and ‘elevation’ (*qua* elevation₁), except that ‘elevation’ is being used for a specific nuance of admiration, and perhaps also a nuance characterised by unusually intense feelings, but neither feature constitutes a sufficient reason for a new word, let alone an analysis of a new emotion. Elevation₁ could simply be referred to as ‘moral admiration’, ‘passionate moral admiration’ or something similar, when needed for the sake of clarity. The second horn of the dilemma is that if elevation is understood as elevation₂, much of what Haidt says about the nature of elevation in general does not hold. It is not targeted at persons or individual acts of goodness, but must rather be understood and analysed as a specific kind of awe, as I explain later in this section. In either case, Haidt’s general account of elevation seems to rest on a specious conceptual foundation.

The identification of elevation has spawned considerable empirical research. Algoe and Haidt (2009) have conducted studies showing subtle differences between experiences and motivational correlates of elevation, gratitude and admiration (with admiration understood in their own restrictive way). Siegel, Thomson and Navarro (2014) also reveal how elevation typically results in different behavioural responses from gratitude. Schnall, Roper and Fessler’s (2010) experiments showed that feelings of elevation, but not of mere amusement

or happiness, predict altruistic and helping behaviour. Landis and colleagues' (2009) study suggests that elevation has significant incremental validity in predicting (self-reports of) prosocial behaviour over and above the Big-Five Model. All these findings are interesting, but as elevation is usually, in these experiments, triggered by visual materials, it is not clear whether the participants are fastening on the personal or transpersonal nature of the moral goodness on display. In other words, we do not know whether the found effects are due to the experience of elevation₁ (namely moral admiration) or elevation₂ (namely moral awe).

I submit that Zagzebski's conceptual account of admiration, discussed in Section 2, tells us most of what we need to know conceptually about elevation₁, and she proposes various credible empirical theses which could explain at least some of the psychological findings above. I do want to argue also, however, that both Zagzebski (on admiration) and Aristotle (on emulation) ignore another possible route to learning from moral exemplarity and that there is, indeed, space for the concept of elevation (*qua* elevation₂) to capture that route.

To illustrate my case, let me begin with an anecdotal example from my own life. During a gap year as a 20-year old, I unwisely took up a job as a high-school teacher. Having to teach seriously disruptive students without being prepared to do so through either experience or training, this one-year of work stretched my mental and physical resources towards the breaking point. I was basically at my wits' end. My father watched my gradual mental deterioration from close by but without being able to do anything substantial to remedy the situation. Probably out of a sense of despair, more than anything else, he bought me an expensive watch. When he passed it on to me, without a word, I immediately sensed what had happened. I felt an overpowering sense of elevation – not so much in the form of moral admiration at my father's gesture or a desire to want to emulate him as a moral exemplar

(although those emotions featured also), but rather by way of intense appreciation that such depth of goodness could exist in the world. At the philosophical risk of ‘having one thought too many’, my most profound emotion was thus directed at the ideal of moral goodness rather than at my father as a person. Moreover, I felt motivated to strive for such goodness myself because of the attractiveness of the relevant ideal rather than its attractiveness through the mediation of my father.

Although I consider Haidt’s analysis of elevation to be undercut by various infelicities, he does, in my view, have a point that there is a route towards moral motivation via the exemplarity of sheer moral beauty. Drawing on Plato’s triad of the true, good and beautiful, I would hypothesise that (moral) *elevation* (in the elevation₂ sense to which I confine myself henceforth) is one of the three main members of the emotional family of *awe*, the others being intellectual elevation, in the face of overpowering truth, and aesthetic ecstasy, when confronted with great works of art. Confining the use of ‘elevation’ to elevation₂ makes sense of the dramatic feelings that Haidt associates (wrongly) with all elevation, as such feelings are well known characteristics of awe. The *object* of elevation, on this account, is captured by the cognition that the subject is experiencing an instantiation of a truly great moral ideal that is mystifying or even ineffable in transcending more mundane, everyday human experiences. This experience will be perceived to have increased existential awareness and connected the subject to a greater whole. Most importantly, perhaps, the target of elevation is not another person but a transpersonal ideal (see further in Kristjánsson, 2016a).

Zagzebski complains that Aristotle and Aristotelians neglect admiration (2015a, pp. 206–207). We saw earlier how Irwin (2015) explains this apparent neglect. In any case, as I pointed out in the previous section, this lacuna may not be essential from a motivational point

of view as Aristotle did give a detailed account of the emotion of emulation, inspired by the appreciation of ‘honoured things’ (although he considered the valence of the appreciative part mixed or painful rather than pleasant). Much more significant, psychologically and morally, is the absence of awe in general and elevation in particular from Aristotle’s account of the emotions. When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes in the *Rhetoric* (2007), those fall broadly into three categories with respect to their targets: emotions directed at *oneself* (like pride), at *other people* (like emulation) or at *external events* (like fear). Notably missing from this list are emotions directed at transpersonal (non-self-or-selves-directed) ideals or idealisations, such as beauty, truth and goodness. There is thus no awe – either inspired by a heightened sense of beauty in art/nature, the immensity of the universe or the goodness of an ideal of self-sacrifice.

This is, by no means, a novel observation (see further in Kristjánsson, 2016b). Aristotelian scholars such as Broadie have long acknowledged that some sides of human nature are ‘largely unexplored’ by Aristotle, sides such that, in addition to being rational, we are also ‘spiritual beings, responsive to beauty, imaginatively creative’ (1991, p. 36), without awareness of which any account of human nature becomes deflated and incomplete. Latter-day theorists have identified the parts missed by Aristotle in human beings’ deep-seated orientation or urge – sometimes referred to as ‘a transcendent urge’ – towards extraordinary, idealised experiences (see various references in Kristjánsson, 2016b). The good news, however, is that Aristotle’s uncompromising naturalism – the view that all moral theorising must be answerable to empirical evidence – allows us to update Aristotelianism in light of new findings. If it is really true that the fullness of a life well lived cannot be achieved without experiences of elevation, then the Aristotelian naturalistic theory requires that

flourishing be partly constituted by the presence of the relevant emotional trait – and that moral education be designed such as to cultivate this trait (see Section 5).

My account of elevation suggests a route beyond Aristotle and Zagzebski: the route of steering our minds towards transpersonal moral ideals. I am not saying that this is always the best route – indeed, the routes suggested by Aristotle and Zagzebski are probably both more common, as I conceded earlier, and in many cases more practical – but I do suggest that it constitutes an *alternative route* to moral motivation, worthy of consideration and cultivation in character education. To prevent misunderstanding, in so far as my suggestion here is psychological rather than normative, I propose it (just like Zagzebski does with hers) as an *empirical hypothesis*. I can envisage a number of psychological experiments that could separate out whether it is the exemplar or the ideal of exemplarity that motivates moral learning: namely, admiration/emulation or elevation. Indeed, one feature of Zagzebski's approach that is 'imitably attractive' is her willingness to enter a literature from which many philosophers are inclined to bail out, namely that of emotion research in social science, and her presentation of some of her main claims as empirical theses, to be corroborated by social science, rather than as 'conceptual truths'.

Notice two things about the account I have suggested. First, it may indicate a way to bypass both moral admiration and emulation (in the synthesised Aristotle-Zagzebski sense) through direct inspiration by abstract ideals. A simpler interpretation would be that, in my account, elevation just replaces admiration. So instead of being positively attracted to (the qualities of) a moral exemplar through admiration, which then inspires emulation via the negative construal of your inferiority, you become attracted to an abstract ideal which inspires emulation through the realisation of how badly you match up to it. However, there is

something odd about the idea of emulating an abstract ideal, and the oddity is – I submit – not only linguistic. Consider here the enigma of sudden epiphanic moral conversions or ‘Damascus experiences’. A shared assumption of the otherwise radically opposed Aristotelian and Kantian theories of moral development is that the process of learning from moral exemplars (in Aristotle) or mastering moral reasoning skills (in Kohlberg) is a slow and laborious one. However, that assumption seems to fly in the face of actual, if rare, eureka moments when people see the moral light, so to speak, in a flash and mend their ways accordingly. A more Platonic understanding of elevation may offer an explanation here, according to which you can grasp and embrace an ideal epiphanically and spontaneously, without the mediation of Aristotelian emulation. I acknowledge, however, that accounting for such experiences requires an alternative developmental and educational story to the one provided in standard Aristotelian accounts of character education – and one that cannot be provided within the confines of the present paper.

Notice, second, that the elevation route I have sketched here towards learning from moral exemplarity may avert some of the problems attached to role-modelling. There is no danger of it being reduced to fawning hero-worship, for there is no person (and hence no hero) to worship. Also there is no danger of feeling that someone is better than one could imagine oneself being, as there is no person to whom to compare oneself. However, someone could point out that although those particular problems have been averted, they have been replaced with analogous – and perhaps even more debilitating – ones, marring our relationship with abstract ideals. Thus there may be a ‘mere ideal-worship’ objection that is the analogue of the ‘mere hero-worship’ objection and *vis-à-vis* which my account is no better off than Zagzebski’s. A similar point applies with respect to the ‘moral inertia’ objection. Again, one

can readily imagine that when contemplating an ideal of beauty, truth or goodness, a person might be motivationally constrained or inert on account of thinking that she could never exemplify such a high standard. In fact, my account may seem to be worse off than Zagzebski's on this point. Exemplars, at least, are *personal*. One might think, then, that for any given person, the perceived gap between herself and an exemplar would be somewhat less than the perceived gap between herself and a *transpersonal* ideal.

As Zagzebski herself would be the first to acknowledge, those are empirical hypotheses that only admit of a social scientific resolution. In default of any known research into the comparative effects of personal exemplars versus abstract ideals, I can only offer the following two quick considerations. First, one of the main reasons why hero worship is seen as a danger for role modelling is that the learner becomes tempted to emulate the hero as a whole, warts and all, rather than just the admirable qualities. So, for example, 'Beliebers' (Justin Bieber fans) become induced to emulate his antics rather than just admiring him for his music. At least in the case of 'ideal worship', this worry will not arise. Second, regarding moral inertia, it is true that someone can easily feel overwhelmed by a moral ideal, no less than a moral exemplar, and find it beyond practical reach. Yet it is an old platitude of sports psychology that learners are less likely to feel disempowered if they focus on a difficult goal, rather than on the star performers who have already mastered the goal, and I hypothesise that the same could apply here regarding idealised persons versus ideals. However, at the moment, I have nothing but intuition and anecdotal evidence to rely upon.

One problem that the elevation route does *not* solve, however, is the one identified by Irwin in the case of admiration: the danger that elevation, no less than admiration, can mislead our moral sentiments (Irwin, 2015, p. 241). It could even be reasonably argued, with

references to stark examples from recent world history, that the attraction to abstract ideals constitutes a more potentially misleading source of motivation than attraction to individual exemplars. I am not sure how *any* theory of moral motivation and moral learning can avert this problem. This is precisely why Aristotle focuses on the development of the meta-virtue of *phronesis* as an arbitrator, to the adjudication of which all moral learning needs in the end to be subjected. Stripped of *phronesis*, neither admiration/emulation nor elevation have an inbuilt mechanism directing them unproblematically towards overall moral value.

I want to end this section by anticipating one possible Zagzebski-inspired objection. The objection would be that the distinction between learning from exemplarity and from exemplars is specious because one can only access the former through the medium of the latter (namely, exemplarity displayed by exemplars). Now, it may well be that experiences of moral exemplarity are parasitic, causally and biographically, upon experiences of moral exemplars – although the following section will cast a doubt on that. However, even if that is the case, Zagzebski's thesis is stronger: it is about moral concepts being *grounded foundationally* in the emotion of admiration that has moral exemplars as its target. But if my argument can be sustained, another emotion, namely elevation, can home in on moral exemplarity directly, by targeting an ideal, not a person.

4. Complementing Aristotle with Mengzi (Mencius)

We are so used to virtue ethicists promoting character-education theories based on learning from moral exemplars (although rarely, perhaps, in such a foundational sense as in Zagzebski's moral theory) that we can hardly think of an alternative, without falling back on Platonic rationalism. My recourse to Plato on the good, true and beautiful above must not be

understood, however, as a plea for a Platonic theory of moral learning. Apart from the metaphysical queerness of the ‘forms’ to which we are supposed to be attracted, the attraction in question is not an emotional attraction in Plato; hence, the very feature of virtue ethics that draws many people towards it, namely its capacity to make sense of the moral and educational salience of our emotional lives, is lost. Yet I also suggested above that Aristotle got a chunk of his psychology of human emotions wrong. In a previous publication on how to tidy up Aristotle’s emulation (Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 7), I explored the possibility of drawing upon insights from Chinese philosophy, more precisely from the teachings of Mozi. I now think I chose too soft an example. Mozi was a quasi-utilitarian, and utilitarians tend to be fairly relaxed, in any case, about embracing transpersonal moral ideals, such as Mozi’s ‘universal love’. We would benefit more from complementing Aristotle with insights from fellow virtue ethicists. In Chinese philosophy, there are obvious candidates for that role, namely Confucius and his disciples, in particular Mengzi who foregrounded the emotional side of morality more than his master.

In recent moves that slacken the Aristotelian monopoly on virtue ethical theory, it is becoming fashionable to juxtapose Aristotelianism and Confucianism and, while pointing out the remarkable similarities between their virtue systems, to suggest that each can learn from the other as a ‘mirror’ (Yu, 2007, p. 4). In particular, it has been suggested that Confucian ‘aestheticism’ may provide resources for Aristotelian ‘theoreticism’, both in making sense of our relationship with nature and our attachment to transpersonal ideals (Sim, 2007, pp. 2–3, 131, 211). Yet Confucius’s own conception of the ultimate moral exemplar, the *jūnzǐ*, and how we acquire moral wisdom by admiring and emulating him, does not seem to offer a significant addition to Aristotle’s conception of the *phronimos* and our *zēlos* directed towards

him (Yu, 2007). For present purposes, I have therefore been persuaded (by Kim, 2008, and Philip Ivanhoe, personal correspondence) that Mengzi (c. 372–289 BC) makes for a more interesting critical ‘second-self’ friend to Aristotle.

Mengzi is most famous perhaps for his theory of the innate goodness of human beings, traditionally contrasted with Xunzi’s view of the inherent badness of human nature. This innate goodness, which then simply needs to be drawn out and polished, is grounded in the moral ‘sprouts’ (incipient virtue traits) of benevolence (an inadequate translation of *rén*), righteousness (*yì*), propriety (*lǐ*) and wisdom (*zhì*), Mengzi also argued that each of the sprouts had a root/germ in a specific emotion (2009, pp. 21, 72 [2A: 6.4–6.5, 6A: 6.7]) and that the main role of moral education was to nourish those emotion-cum-virtue (‘heart-mind’) seedlings, without pulling on them too hard and thereby uprooting them (2009, p. 17 [2A: 2.16]).

Debates rage about Mengzi’s general emotion theory (see e.g. Wong, 1991; Chan, 2006; Kim, 2008), an engagement with which would take us too far afield. What matters for present purposes is to explore the emotional germ of *jìng* which is (emotionally, foundationally) to *lǐ* what compassion is to *rén*; in other words, *jìng* forms a heart-mind dyad with *lǐ*. Now, *jìng* cannot be given a standard translation across the board. Depending on the context, it can mean ‘respect’, ‘deference’, ‘reverence’, ‘admiration’ or ‘awe’. In many of these contexts, *jìng* is simply directed at admirable individuals (elders, sages) and/or the exemplary rites and rituals to which they adhere. In other contexts, however, *jìng* arguably comes close to capturing the essence of elevation (i.e. elevation₂) as developed in the previous section, by recognising/appreciating the worth of transpersonal ideals, and doing so in an intense (awe-struck) way. Mengzi talks about how ideals such as order and righteousness ‘delight our

hearts like meat delights our mouths’ (2009, p. 73 [6A: 7.8]). In Aristotle’s emulation, by contrast, the ‘wow factor’ of an intense sensibility response is missing. Chan argues that, in Mengzi, worth or merit as such (including the worth of virtue), as an exalted, transcendent ideal, is the ultimate ground for *jìng*, rather than any worthy individuals (2006, pp. 234–235; cf. Kim, 2008, p. 188, although Kim [personal correspondence] does think that Mengzi also allowed for awe directed at exceptional individuals). Through *jìng*, one befriends, so to speak, ‘the Virtue of another person’ rather than the person herself (Mengzi, 2009, p. 64 [5B: 3.1]).

This attraction to the transpersonal emerges most conspicuously in references to *jìng* towards Heaven and the Way (Philip Ivanhoe, personal correspondence; cf. Mengzi, 2009, p. 79 [7A: 1]). Heaven (*Tiān*) is an impersonal force ordering the universe, responsible for fate and the Way, and a transcendent anchorage of morality. The Way (*Dào*), in turns, refers to the right way to live and guide our lives. Notice that both concepts have a place in Confucianism in the absence of any explicit theology, and they are understood there in a somewhat mundane sense, quite similar to the sense that many contemporary Westerners ascribe to a putative principle of deservingness in the world where people generally get their due in the end, without the need for any god(s) meting it out (see Kristjánsson, 2006, chap. 4.2, on the ‘belief in a just world’). Transpersonal ideals such as worth or desert can thus be seen as sources of moral value, at which one may stand in awe, without the need for any particular person, human or divine, at whom to direct admiration. Intense elevation, in the face of such ideals, may help to explain the phenomenon of epiphanic moral conversions which, as already noted, remains an enigma for Aristotle-inspired theories of moral education. Indeed, clear similarities can be found here between Mengzi’s view and that of the

humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow, whose research into ‘peak experiences’ (1964) gave impetus to the fringe movement of ‘transpersonal psychology’.

Obviously, Confucian scholars carved up the emotional landscape quite differently from either Aristotle or us moderns, and the fact that a concept such as *jìng* has no straightforward counterpart in either Aristotle or modernity should perhaps make us more humble about the possibility of philosophers fashioning a universally reasonable and applicable emotional vocabulary. Nevertheless, I have attempted in this section to illuminate my case for elevation from Section 3 by showing how it can make full sense, in a virtue ethical system, to be inspired by transpersonal ideals of moral exemplarity.

5. Concluding Remarks

The scorecard, on balance, looks like this. I have argued that, in their different ways, both Aristotle and Zagzebski get their psychology of role-modelling right – minor squabbles aside – and that by synthesising their accounts of admiration and emulation, we can strike the keynotes in explaining the process of emotional attachment to exemplarity. However, at the same time, I have suggested that both authors may have missed an important, if perhaps less frequently taken, alternative route to moral learning from exemplarity – an awe-inspired route that bypasses the attachment to moral exemplars and is, rather, about direct attachment to transpersonal moral ideals. I have explained why Aristotle may have missed this route; it connects to a general lacuna in his understanding of human nature. Furthermore, I have suggested a role for an amended version of Haidt’s emotion of elevation (*qua* emulation₂) to account for awe-inspired role-modelling, and I have illuminated my case by drawing on a

close contemporary of Aristotle in China – and a virtue ethicist to boot – Mengzi, to explain how elevation can fit into a virtue ethical system.

If this argument holds water, Aristotelians will need to acknowledge that a medial (‘golden-mean’) trait form of elevation, no less than a medial form of emulousness, constitutes (part of) a virtuous moral disposition for moral learners. This means learning to be properly attracted to the right sort of moral ideals at the right times, in the right proportions, steering clear of both excessive romanticism about ideals and debilitating cynicism or philistinism (Kristjánsson, 2016a). From the standpoint of character education, it will then presumably be incumbent on teachers to expose students to examples of moral ideals, from great works of literature, the arts, religious and secular texts, etc., hoping that by feeding on such a diet, they will grow the relevant virtuous emotional disposition (Kristjánsson, 2016b). For example, being exposed to and induced to reflect upon Caspar David Friedrich’s great 1818 painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, may be more conducive to the cultivation of awe-like elevation in students than reading about the lives of particular exemplars attracted to and exemplifying moral elevation.

Here, however, we encounter a problem that is not confined to the learning of proper emulation or elevation but is rather endemic to all Aristotelian (and indeed all virtue-ethical-cum-character-based) moral education. Very little specific advice tends to be given about how best to cultivate emotional dispositions. To be sure, we can divine from Aristotle’s discussion of early-years habituation that emotional development is essentially triggered in the very young through emotional contagion, and he does make some cryptic remarks in his *Politics* about how (older) learners can use music to balance their emotions and move from

mere continence to virtue. But beyond that, Aristotle is short on specifics and we know for example little about the details of *phronesis*-guided emotion education.

Confucian scholars suggest that Aristotelians can learn salient lessons from Mengzi here again, as the latter is famous for his account of emotional learning *qua* emotional extension (*tuī*). On this account, the trick is to help the learner settle on an understanding of why an emotion is on target in a paradigmatic situation and then to learn to extend this understanding gradually to non-paradigmatic cases – hoping that the feeling accompanies the cognition in extending the boundaries of the whole emotion. This account is illustrated through a number of stories, the most famous one being about a ruler feeling compassion for an ox but, irrationally or self-deceivingly, not able to extend this compassion to the plight of his subjects (Mengzi, 2009, pp. 5–8 [1A: 7]). Unfortunately, Mengzi scholars disagree radically about the correct interpretation of ‘extension’: whether it essentially a logical extension (of extending understanding), an emotive extension (of extending sensitivity) or both at the same time (see Kim, 2008, chap. 6, for a thorough review; cf. Wong, 1991). In any case, the extension evidently needs reflection on relevant moral similarities and differences (Mengzi, 2009, pp. 72, 75 [6A: 6.7, 15.2]) – which takes us into Aristotelian *phronesis* territory (cf. Yu, 2007, pp. 150–152) – but I fail to see Mengzi providing enlightenment here in areas where Aristotle leaves us in the dark.

More specifically, I agree with Kim that if one reads Mengzi closely, there is very little advice on emotional cultivation in him that goes beyond a rather narrow Aristotelian habituation picture of enculturation and socialisation (Kim, 2008, chap. 6.3). We learn to extend the boundaries of our emotions by emulating and reflecting upon moral exemplars who do. Disappointingly, however, even this reflection seems to be reliant on the

indoctrination of basic assumptions, picked up from authoritative sages as role models. If one comes to Mengzi's account of emotional cultivation hoping for an extension and educative application of his ideas about elevation (as a form of *jìng*), focused on transpersonal ideals, one's hopes will be dashed. Mengzi falls back on a standard, Aristotle-like, account of learning from moral exemplars, and we are none the wiser about the precise methods to be used in the home or the classroom to facilitate such learning in a non-indoctrinatory way.

This last comment is, however, less a complaint about Mengzi or Aristotle than it speaks to the need of virtue ethicists getting their hands dirty and complementing their psycho-moral accounts of learning from moral exemplarity with some more specific practical advice about how the emotions targeting such exemplarity can be cultivated in a reflective, *phronesis*-sensitive, way. After all, as Aristotle drily remarks, the purpose of moral inquiry 'is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us' (1985, p. 35 [1103b27–29]).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Christian Miller, Linda Zagzebski and three reviewers for the present journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft. I am indebted to Professor Yen-Hsin Chen for alerting me to some of the relevant sources on Mengzi. Philip Ivanhoe's and Myeong-seok Kim's kind email responses helped me understand Mengzi better. This paper was written under the aegis of the *Virtue, Happiness, and Meaning of Life* Project (University of Chicago).

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