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supporting innovative, interdisciplinary moral self research

Moral Exemplarism

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MORAL EXEMPLARISM

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In an essay on the place of classics in education, Alfred North Whitehead wrote, “Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness” since “the sense of greatness is the groundwork of morals.” These words have been repeated many times, but rarely by moral philosophers. I take these words to heart and have been working on a moral theory I call “Exemplarist Moral Theory,” or just “Exemplarism,” which is a theory based on direct reference to exemplars of goodness, identified through the emotion of admiration. The idea is that a supremely good person is a person who is most admirable, and we identify the admirable through our emotion of admiration. Admiration is developed, refined, and altered through experience, including the experience of others whom we trust, and the cumulative experience of admiration in past ages and in past cultures is transmitted to us through stories of exemplars. The set of exemplars forms the basis for a theoretical map that I am proposing, a map in which I define “virtue,” “good motive,” “good life,” “duty,” and other moral terms by directly referring to exemplars. An advantage of this theory is that it is practically useful. That is because admiration for exemplars is a motivating force for moral education and self-improvement.

I am using “direct reference” in a sense that became famous in the 1970s, particularly in the form in which it was used by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam to define natural kind terms, or terms for naturally occurring substances or species, like “water,” “gold,” and “tiger.” Briefly, the idea is that “water” is defined as “stuff like *that*,” “tiger” refers to “creatures like *that*,” and so on. Direct reference revolutionized semantics because it meant that we succeed in thinking about and talking about objects in the natural world without needing a descriptive meaning in our heads. People could talk about water, ask questions about water, and make assertions about water long before they knew that what makes water *water* is that it is H₂O. “Water” does not mean and never did mean “colorless, odorless liquid that flows in the streams and falls from the sky” because we

realize upon reflection that something other than the substance water could have fallen from the sky, and could have been the liquid we drink, and so on. This theory was also revolutionary because of the way it linked empirical science with semantics, and it led to a great deal of work on the social construction of language. The upshot was that we are not connected to the outside world through a description in our heads. We are (or can be) connected to it directly. What we are talking about when we say “tiger” or “water” or “gold” is determined by observation of something we can pick out directly. We do not need a descriptive meaning.

Exemplarism is the theory in which I have developed this idea for moral terms. The basic idea is that exemplars are persons *like that*, and we point directly to exemplars of goodness like Confucius, Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Holocaust rescuers, Jean Vanier, or many ordinary people who are known only to a small circle of acquaintances—perhaps a neighbor or your grandmother. We find out what makes them admirable by observation, just as we find out what makes water the substance that it is by observation. The observation of admirable persons is obviously much more complex than the observation of water since the psychological structure of an admirable person is much more complex than the physical structure of water, and individual exemplars differ from each other much more than individual samples of water. Also, we cannot just put admirable persons under a microscope (although neuroimaging of exemplars is currently being done). Rather, we observe them through narratives and more recently, through controlled empirical studies. My proposal is that we find out the motivational structure of exemplars by observation, and that permits us to define basic moral terms like “good trait of character,” “good life,” “good motive,” “right act,” and so on by features of exemplars or features of their judgments. We do not need a descriptive meaning for terms like “good person,” “good life,” “good trait of character,” “right act,” and the other moral terms, any more than we need a descriptive meaning for natural kind terms. We observe exemplars through narratives, personal experience, and more recently, empirical studies. Those observations determine the meaning of moral terms.

I propose three basic categories of exemplars: the hero, the saint, and the sage. There are many stories about exemplars in these categories, although some of them are dominant at certain stages of history or in cer-

tain cultures. I think we are in danger of losing some of these categories of exemplars, but fortunately, there is recent empirical research on all of them. I know of research on Holocaust rescuers, whom I interpret as modern heroes. There is also research on many saintly persons, including L'Arche caregivers, who sometimes devote many years of their lives to living in a community with persons who are mentally and sometimes physically disabled. There are also recent empirical studies on wisdom, although not much of it focuses on particular wise persons, the approach I advocate. However, there is a multitude of narratives on the great wise persons of the past, such as Jesus, the Buddha, and Confucius, as well as contemporary moral leaders, as in Jonathan Lear's recent book, *Radical Hope*, which interprets Chief Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Nation, as an exemplar of virtue.

On the practical side of work on exemplars, there is a lot of new research on emulation of admired persons. A new program on "Moral Beacons," based at Wake Forest University, is directed by William Fleeson, and funded by the Templeton Religion Trust. The projects to be funded by this program include multi-disciplinary work on the philosophy, theology, and psychology of the morally exceptional.

My exemplarist virtue theory is intended to be a philosophical framework for studies in many fields. It has a simple theoretical structure that I intend to be philosophically comprehensive. It is designed in a way that gives a place for empirical work and narratives in the structure of the theory. It is intended to permit different versions for different communities, including Faith communities, but it is also intended to facilitate cross-cultural discourse through investigation of the overlapping sets of admirable persons in different cultures. It is also constructed with the purpose of inserting the motive to be moral into the theoretical structure. I believe that admiration is one of the most significant of the human emotions. The cognitive side of the emotion has the potential to generate a conceptual framework. The affective side of the emotion moves us to emulate the admirable and become better persons.

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