The Aesthetics of Ethics: Exemplarism, Beauty, and the Psychology of Morality

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1 Introduction

Linda Zagzebski recently defended moral exemplarism, a new moral theory on which key moral terms are defined by direct reference to exemplars.[1] The theory is meant as an alternative to theories like consequentialism and deontology and promises not only to contribute to unity and simplicity in ethical theory, but also to offer an account of, and practicable pathways to moral motivation and education, whilst serving as a bridge between philosophical and empirical investigations of morality. The theory's basic structure is straightforward. A virtuous person is defined as a person like *that*, where *that* points to individuals like Leopold Socha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, etc. A key component of this theory is the function played by the emotions, specifically the emotion of admiration, which, Zagzebski thinks, helps us identify moral exemplars, inspires the emulation of them, and grounds moral motivation. In other words, admiration tracks persons like *that* and drives us to emulate them.

The aim of this article is to show that unless moral exemplarism recognises and incorporates an aesthetic dimension, as did, for instance, eighteenth-century sentimentalists who recognised the categories of moral beauty and ugliness, the theory fails to deliver the goods of a fully-fledged *moral* theory. I will argue that although Zagzebski's moral exemplarism provides a useful framework for understanding and defining moral terms and their role in our moral life, it fails to substantiate that framework in a satisfactory way, which in turn undermines the theory's purported theoretical and practical merits. On the plus side, I suggest, the theory can easily be fixed. Nonetheless, fixing it requires an important shift in the way that we think about ethics in contemporary philosophy towards a picture on which ethics is inseparable from aesthetics in both theory and practice. Ultimately, I want to say, the natural and proper

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[1] Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Henceforth title cited as *EMT*.

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home of exemplarism is the often neglected but historically ubiquitous aesthetically-inflected conceptual repertoire of philosophers like Aristotle and Hume.

I begin by introducing some key tenets of Zagzebski's theory, and proceed to identify a number of problems with it, which, I argue, jointly undermine the theory's tenability in its current form and prevent it from yielding the promised payoffs. I then suggest that the missing ingredient in Zagzebski's account is the notion of beauty—specifically moral beauty—which her move away from the desirable as the fundamental attitude towards the good neglects. I introduce the notion of moral beauty by tracing it to theories like Plato's, Aristotle's, and Hume's, and argue that recruiting the notion of beauty can address the main problems faced by Zagzebski's version of exemplarism. Before concluding, I respond to three objections to my proposal.

2 Exemplarist Moral Theory: What and Wherefore

Exemplarist moral theory is a new moral theory intended to perform the functions of, and thereby serve as an alternative to mainstream moral theories like consequentialism and deontology, but without relying on essentialist definitions. Instead, exemplarists define key moral terms by direct reference to exemplars. So, on exemplarism, a virtuous person is defined as a person like *that*, where *that* points to exemplars including Leopold Socha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, and the like.[2] Other moral terms, such as the good life, etc. are to be analysed similarly. For example, a good life is a life lived by an admirable person or, in a second sense, a life that is desired by an admirable person. A key component of this theory is the function played by the emotions, specifically the emotion of admiration,[3] which, Zagzebski thinks, by tracking persons like *that*, viz., moral exemplars, helps us identify these exemplars, inspires our emulation of them, and grounds moral motivation.

Equipped with the foregoing resources, Zagzebski thinks that exemplarism can provide a comprehensive account of moral concepts that can unify ethical theory, whilst allowing for pluralism and diversity. Moreover, in providing definitions by direct reference, the content of which is empirical, and assigning a fundamental role to an emotion, Zagzebski's theory boasts theoretical and practical advantages over alternative theories. Briefly, it can explain the moral development of both individuals and communities, and provide a link between philosophical theorising and

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[2] Of course, Zagzebski is aware that this kind of definition does not provide the content of the relevant concept, or the deep structure of the thing defined. Instead, in the way that 'stuff like that' does for water, it "[permits] us to identify the reference of moral terms in such a way that we know what to investigate to find out what virtue, right action, and a good life are" (*EMT,* p. 22).

[3] It is worth registering something on which I shall not focus here, but that has been raised in the literature, namely that admiration can mislead (see T.H. Irwin, "Nil Admirari? Uses and Abuses of Admiration", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 89 (2015): 223-248). But on exemplarism not everyone's admiration counts, and the usual caveats about good upbringing etc. apply here as much as they applied in Aristotle's ethics. So the relevant notion here is that of properly functioning, or "reflective admiration" (Zagzebski, *EMT*, pp. 63-65). I take it that, *mutatis mutandis*, similar qualifications pertain to my proposal to incorporate beauty in exemplarism (section 5).

empirical research in areas like psychology and neuroscience, thereby offering both theoretical and practicable insights into moral education, motivation, and everyday moral practice.

In elaborating her account, Zagzebski relies on three crucial claims. First, admiration and desire are the fundamental attitudes toward the good, but admiration is the most basic and relevant to ethics. Second, the objects of admiration are individuals possessing some "human power in a high degree of excellence".[4] Third, there are two kinds of admiration corresponding to two kinds of excellences as their objects, namely natural and acquired excellences. This distinction is supposed to allow us to distinguish between admiration for moral traits, broadly speaking, from admiration for non-moral traits. Once these are all in place, Zagzebski argues that admiration can help us identify exemplars, who in turn serve to define key moral concepts, including good life, right action, and the desirable itself.

3 Exemplarist Moral Theory: Problems

In this section, I will argue that each of the foregoing claims forming the bedrock of Zagzebski's exemplarism face serious problems, which, I will subsequently suggest, a traditional aesthetically-inflected theory can either eschew or address. Specifically, I submit that the sharp distinction between the desirable and the admirable, and the move away from the desirable as the fundamental attitude towards virtue, coupled with the way in which the account of admiration is developed, make the theory untenable in its current form, preventing it from yielding the promised payoffs.

3.1 The Priority of Admiration over Desire

Zagzebski's first key claim concerns the priority to admiration. She points out that there are two sorts of objects properly called good, which in turn suggest different ways of responding to goodness: the admirable (admiration) and the desirable (desire). Zagzebski chooses to ground her theory on the former, rather than the latter, essentially reversing the picture offered by Aristotle and philosophers of a similar persuasion,[5] whereby we begin by identifying what is most desirable and then proceed to identify its constituents and inquire into how best to realise it.[6]

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[4] Zagzebski, *EMT*, p. 36.

[5] Ibid., p. 31.

[6] The reason that Zagzebski chooses admiration over desire as the anchor for her exemplarist theory is that "we trust the connection between admiration and the admirable more than the connection between desire and the desirable" (ibid., p. 32). This is a crucial assumption that shapes the picture of Zagzebski's theory and is also the source of its main problems. It is also, I think, unfounded.

  Even if it seems plausible that we do in fact trust desire less than admiration, that is most likely because we have come to associate desire with being led astray, something that we might not think of admiration. But if Irwin's discussion of admiration is cogent, that assumption itself might be dangerous, since we are very much prone to admire things that are far from admirable (see Irwin, *op. cit.*). As mentioned in note 3, Zagzebski's solution to this conundrum is to accept the frailty of some emotional responses and to point out that the emotion has to be reflective, i.e., it has to be an educated, considered response (e.g.

This move already creates problems for exemplarism. Suppose that Zagzebski is right about the basicness of both admiration and desire, as well as the priority of admiration. It is now the task of a comprehensive ethical theory to explain both of these concepts. Importantly, we need an account of the ethically good life in the sense of the desirable life. Predictably, Zagzebski defines the desirable in the same way as all other central moral concepts: what is desirable is what is desired by persons like *that*. Similarly, "a *desirable life* is a life desired by … persons like that".[7]

Yet, as Zagzebski herself allows, even her own examples of exemplars are only exemplary in some, though not all, respects. Leopold Socha might not have been an exemplar of aesthetic taste; Gandhi not one of parenting. What reason do we have to think, then, that they are good judges of the desirable, even if we only think of such desirability in terms of that in virtue of which they are admirable? Zagzebski makes an interesting observation here, which ties to some of my later points (see §3.4 below), namely that exemplars show us what desirable lives are by "showing us what they desire".[8] I take this to mean that exemplars like these point towards worthwhile ends. But that is distinct from the claim that the life that they desire is desirable. After all, there are different ways of realising a given end, and some are more hospitable to the realisability of multiple ends than others. In light of this, the fact that sometimes admirable lives seem bereft of what most normal people would consider desirable, not least because of how they pursue one area of activity, or a single end, at the cost of all or nearly all others, should give us pause. To say in effect that, after all, it turns out that this is what is desirable for human beings seems highly counter-intuitive, insofar as it implies that a desirable life turns out to be somewhat arbitrary. But Zagzebski acknowledges such cases, and says that "[i]f an admirable life is not sufficient for a desirable life, that is because the life an admirable person lives is not the same as the one she desires."[9] However, such a move seems question-begging, as it appears to presuppose, rather than show, that admirability provides a compass for desirability. It also seems to make strong assumptions about what exemplars desire without much evidence.

At the same time, as Zagzebski quite rightly points out, there are some lives that "are desirable but not wholly admirable".[10] Her example is of an old woman who lived a full and healthy life, displaying kindness, generosity, and gaining satisfaction. Yet she was also a racist. According to Zagzebski, she had a desirable but less than admirable life. But Zagzebski also goes one step further in claiming that "the fact that her life is less admirable than it would be without her racist attitudes does not make it less desirable",[11] except on her definition of a desirable life, since "the

admirable is desirable".[12] But this downplays the possibility that one might already think of that person's life as less desirable in virtue of its racism. Such a move once again appears to presuppose the priority of admiration rather than support it.

Ultimately, then, it looks like the plausibility of both prioritising the admirable over the desirable and defining the desirable in terms of the admirable, depends on the strength of the link between admiration and morality, or virtue, which I presently turn to examine.

3.2 Admiration and Its Objects

Following a plausible approach to the emotions, on which they comprise an intentional object (e.g., a wolf), an affective or physiological response (e.g., feeling of being scared, certain changes in heart rate, etc.), and, linked to that response, a motivational dimension (e.g., tendency to flee), Zagzebski construes admiration as "a state consisting of a characteristic feeling of admiring someone or something that appears admirable".[13] More specifically, the intentional objects of admiration are certain people and their traits, and what holds the sort of people that we admire together, and is relevant to admiration, is that they all possess "a human power in a high degree of excellence".[14] Moreover, appearing admirable, according to Zagzebski, involves appearing "imitably attractive", which in turn is a matter of the object's appearing "attractive, not repulsive or evaluatively neutral [and in such a way that it] typically gives rise to the urge to imitate or emulate the object, assuming certain practical conditions are satisfied."[15] The object of admiration, and the characteristic feeling of being imitably attractive provide the key features of admiration and, importantly, are those features that enable it to "determine the scope of the moral for the purposes of the theory".[16]

Before proceeding, it is useful to distinguish between particular and formal objects of emotions like admiration.[17] Particular objects are things at which an emotion can be directed, for instance a person, or an artwork, while the formal object of an emotion is the property that the emotion is responsive to (or that one ascribes to a particular object in having a given emotion). So, for instance, in a given instance of fear, the particular object may be a spider, and the formal object is dangerousness. As stated above, Zagzebski thinks that the objects of admiration are people possessing "a human power in a high degree of excellence".[18] This seems to indicate that people and their traits are particular objects of admiration, and a high degree of

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., p. 34.

[14] Ibid., p. 36.

[15] Ibid., p. 35.

[16] Ibid., p. 102.

[17] See Andrea Scarantino and Roland de Sousa, "Emotion", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/emotion/>, accessed on 30 November 2020.

Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I include this clarificatory distinction.

[18] *EMT*, p. 36.

excellence the formal object. This is supported by Zagzebski's claim that "there is something in us that detects the excellent, and that is the emotion of admiration".[19] This distinction becomes important when assessing how closely admiration tracks morality, which in turn partly depends on Zagzebski's distinction between admiration for natural versus acquired traits. This is because emotions are arguably individuated and partly defined by reference to their formal objects. Furthermore, it is with reference to emotions' formal objects that particular instances of an emotion are evaluated as fitting or unfitting. Hence if Zagzebski is right both about the genuineness of the distinction between natural and acquired excellences, and its correspondence to the distinction between moral and non-moral excellences, then she can plausibly distinguish between corresponding kinds of admiration.

From the above sketch, it should already be obvious that admiration is an appropriate response to much more than can reasonably be admitted within the domain of the moral; a work of art can be admirable, as can a feat of architecture, or gymnastics. But a couple of qualifications should dispel such initial concerns. First, exemplarism is concerned only with admirable traits of people and behaviours (other things can then fall under the category indirectly). Moreover, it does not concern the domain of morality narrowly construed, but, more broadly, that of human excellence. While this is an important qualification, which goes a considerable way towards alleviating worries about the scope of admiration, it still seems to me that admiration, and even excellence, understood without qualification, cover a broader scope than we would want a theory of virtue to cover.

Consider the Oxford English Dictionary entries for the most common current uses of the term admiration. These include "[r]egard for someone or something considered praiseworthy or excellent; esteem, approbation; appreciation"; "a cause of wonder, high regard, or esteem".[20] Likewise, it seems to me, common parlance and intuitions point to at least three categories of formal objects of admiration: (a) psychological or physical excellences or abilities, whether natural (i.e., talents) or acquired, which tend to evoke a feeling of excitement and energisation; (b) impressive, difficult, or extraordinary achievements, which are often met with a feeling of surprise or awe;[21] and (c) the beautiful,[22] which evokes a pleasurable kind of admiration, ranging from warm affection and attraction to a feeling of being moved, which feelings other kinds of admiration need not share.[23] In (a) and (b), admiration is characteristically directed at what makes a great impression or is evaluated as being outstanding, or excellent. Not so—or not just so—in (c).

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[19] Ibid., p. 2.

[20] Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition, 2011. URL = <https://www-oed-com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/2566?redirectedFrom=admiration&>, accessed on 30 November, 2020.

[21] In her insightful discussion of admiration, Sophie-Grace Chappell describes it as the ""Wow!"-response" (see her "No More Heroes Any More?", in Alfred Archer and André Grahle (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Admiration* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), pp. 11-28).

[22] See also Alfred Archer, "Admiration and Motivation", *Emotion Review* 11 (2019): 140-150.

[23] Compare also a terser version given by the OED-based MacOS dictionary application, which defines admiration as "pleasurable contemplation"; "respect and warm approval"; and "something regarded as impressive or worthy of respect". These too seem to correspond to my categorisations above.

The upshot, particularly from (a) and (b) above, seems to be that admiration and excellence, as opposed to virtue in its traditional sense, are appropriate ways for appraising or responding to instances that are far from virtuous—including the Gauguins, Churchills, and Miltonic Satans of this world, for instance.[24] This is because these characters are rare, behave in ways that are difficult to sustain, possess impressive qualities of skill, intelligence, and the like, and are exciting to behold and contemplate, even if they are also disturbing or immoral. In other words, they possess human powers in high degrees of excellence yet seem far from being imitably attractive, at least not uncontroversially so. Thus, they cannot count as exemplary—certainly not as morally exemplary. Likewise, it is plausible that certain character traits like unbending conviction, faith, or great dedication for some activity or cause, are highly admirable; but it is far from clear that these would attract us, or inspire in us any inclination to imitate them.

Zagzebski has a number of responses available to her. First, to the cases of admirable immoral people, Zagzebski might respond by agreeing that these people do possess human powers to a high degree of excellence and so are rightly admired for these, since admiration can respond to particular qualities and need not take a whole person as its object.[25] Be that as it may, one might expect an exemplarist theory to pick out exemplary instances of such qualities, particularly if we plausibly think that many qualities such as courage, intelligence, and skill, are valuable (and count as virtues) only when put to good use. In other words, while the courage of a terrorist may be admirable, it does not constitute an exemplary instance of courage, which would much more plausibly be traced to, say, the retired firefighter who risks her life in order to save a family trapped in a burning building. Second, Zagzebski could maintain that a common feature of admirable things is their excellence, but deny that the courage of the terrorist, or the creativity of the evil person are excellences of the appropriate sort. But if she opted for what looks like an *ad hoc* move, she would have to specify what the appropriate sort is and would most likely still encounter the problem that unless admiration were only responsive to that kind of excellence

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[24] This is one of the lessons to be reaped from debates on admirable immorality, for instance. See Michael Slote, "Admirable Immorality" in his *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 80-92.

[25] That said, there is ongoing debate concerning the scope of what can be an appropriate object of admiration. Some think that many different things, including persons, their traits or acts, and objects from various metaphysical categories can be the objects of admiration (see Alfred Archer, *op. cit.*; Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson, "When Artists Fall: Honoring and Admiring the Immoral", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5 (2019): 246-265; Chappell, *op. cit*). However, others hold that admiration is a globalist attitude that takes persons, indeed whole persons, as its object (see Macalester Bell, "Global Attitudes and the Fittingness Objection", *Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011): 449-472; Antti Kauppinen, "Ideals and Idols: On the Nature and Appropriateness of Agential Admiration", in Archer and Grahle, Eds., *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*, pp. 29-44). While engaging with this debate would take me beyond the purview of the present paper, much of what I say in this section probably places me among the former group, though it may yet cohere with globalism if my claims are suitably qualified and globalism is understood as being sensitive to traits (e.g., as Bell, *op. cit*. construes it). Moreover, I think that my overall argument can be sustained regardless of where one stands *vis-à-vis* this debate, since whether or not admiration does delineate the moral domain can be debated independently of whether its objects are whole persons or local traits and qualities.

(stipulating which claim would beg the question by presupposing that admiration delineates the moral domain, viz., the claim she is seeking to establish), it would fail to accurately track the sort of qualities she has in mind.

However, Zagzebski does make a move that seems intended to avoid these and similar difficulties. To narrow the scope of the relevant emotion, and also because she wants the relevant sort of admiration to ground motivation to emulate its object (something that, as we just saw, is not inspired by all admirable things), she distinguishes between two core kinds of admiration (and formal objects of admiration): *natural* and *acquired* excellences. Of these, it is only the latter that are pertinent to moral theory, and only acquired excellences that are "*imitably attractive*".[26]

But the distinction between natural and acquired excellences brings with it more problems. For not only is the variety of acquired excellence far greater than that of virtues, but the distinction between natural and acquired excellences is at best one that fails to track that between admiration for moral and for non-moral excellences and, at worst, a false distinction. I suspect that neither of these points can be adequately developed without empirical evidence to support them, but the following considerations should suffice to indicate that it is ill-advised to distinguish moral from non-moral admiration by appeal to a distinction between natural and acquired excellences. In the next subsection, I will look at empirically-informed considerations for how moral and non-moral admiration might be distinguished.

Firstly, *pace* Zagzebski, there simply is no reason to think that it is any more within the reach of ordinary humans to aim to live like Mother Teresa, Jesus, Confucius, or to act like Leopold Socha in similar circumstances, than it is to paint like Caravaggio, sing like Maria Callas, or run a sub-two-hour marathon. All of these are examples of individuals with exceptional psychological, creative, or physical profiles, and there is no reason to think that some of these are wholly natural but others acquired, besides a simplistic, if not dualistic view, whereby the mind and the body are separate, and the latter (under which I include skills like painting) is somehow more natural than the former.

Secondly, and related to the first point, it is increasingly clear that much of our character depends quite considerably on personality traits, which, though subject to change, are natural, and it is thought that a considerable part of our character is a matter of how we channel and train such natural dispositions.[27]

Thirdly, in the absence of good evidence, we should be extra cautious in drawing distinctions between the purportedly natural talents of athletes or artists from other traits or talents that are acquired, including the virtues. At least this seems to me to be an important lesson to draw from some feminist thinkers who observed that such distinctions between natural and acquired excellences in the realm of art—implicit in prominent conceptions of talent or genius—have distracted us from real problems or differences between men who developed certain artistic skills and reached artistic greatness, and women who did not. Although women rarely had opportunities or resources to access the relevant training and acquire the skills and talents necessary

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[26] Zagzebski, *EMT*, p. 38 (emphasis added).

[27] See my "Scepticism About Virtue and the Five-Factor Model of Personality", *Utilitas* 29 (2017): 423-452 and references in that article.

to produce great art, or thrive in athletic or scientific endeavours, widespread appeals to genius with reference to the (male) artists who did produce such great art may have operated as a red herring, partly contributing to women's exclusion from the means necessary to develop artistic skills. At the same time, notions like artistic genius or athletic talent may arguably also have fostered an illusion of female natural inferiority in such domains, thereby perpetuating women's exclusion.[28]

In light of these considerations, I think that we should acknowledge that extraordinary achievements in any domain, including charity or heroism, most likely result from a combination of natural talents and inclinations, and education, enculturation, training, and practice. If so, then the distinction between natural and acquired excellences cannot help us to distinguish between non-moral and moral admiration.

3.3 Admiration and Elevation

Nonetheless, evidence from positive psychology does suggest that we respond differently to extraordinary achievements and to persons who display moral virtues. In fact, such evidence has led positive psychologists to introduce a distinction between admiration for non-moral excellence and "elevation", understood specifically as the emotion that takes "moral beauty" as its formal object (a term which I think is important and telling, on which more below).[29] Among other differences, and in line with my more speculative remarks in section 3.2, while admiration produces a feeling of being energised and is associated with chills, elevation is associated with feelings of warmth, and appears to have a calming effect,[30] presumably as a result of different physiological and biochemical processes. Likewise, admiration and elevation, though both motivational, seem to be associated with different kinds of motivation. Whereas admiration is associated with a motivation to improve oneself generally, elevation is associated with a motivation to emulate the object itself, and to become specifically a morally better person.[31] Moreover, studies have shown that witnessing non-moral excellence does not predict subsequent morally relevant behaviours, whereas stimuli containing moral content—including videos depicting acts of kindness or gratitude—do have a positive effect on subsequent willingness to help.[32]

Now, Zagzebski "[agrees] that we need to distinguish the kind of admiration directed towards inborn excellences like talent or [physical] beauty from the admiration of moral excellences, but [claims] that 'admiration' is a perfectly good word to

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[28] See Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", *ARTnews* (1971) [online at URL = <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>].

[29] Jonathan Haidt, "Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality", in Corey L.M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt (eds.), *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), pp. 275-289.

[30] Sara B. Algoe and Jonathan Haidt, "Witnessing Excellence in Action: The 'Other-Praising' Emotions of Elevation, Gratitude, and Admiration", *Journal of Positive Psychology* 42 (2009): 105-127.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Simone Schnall et al., "Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior", *Psychological Science* 21 (2010): 315-320. I discuss this study briefly below in section 5.

apply to the latter."[33] Thus, she proposes to understand by admiration what Haidt and others mean by elevation. But in treating this as simply a terminological issue, Zagzebski misses the point that positive psychologists want to make, which is that a distinction is needed between our emotional response to excellence in general, and virtue in particular. And given that, as we saw earlier, the distinction between natural and acquired excellences breaks down, Zagzebski's conception of admiration fails to track the difference between virtues like kindness and other kinds of excellences. In other words, if admiration-understood-as-elevation is to be distinguished from admiration *tout court*, which according to the psychological literature on elevation seems to be different in terms of its phenomenology, motivational profile, and formal object, then simply collapsing the two and identifying admiration with the characteristics that psychologists have attributed to elevation is problematic and liable to misguide the entire enterprise. For while 'admiration' may not in fact be a bad word (after all, we use it liberally, though few of us use the term elevation), if we are talking about a qualitatively different feeling in response to a different formal object, we should either specify the kind of admiration at stake, or, like Haidt, find a name for the relevant response that differentiates it from similar but distinct ones.

In summary, the differences between admiration and elevation need to be accounted for and since the distinction between acquired and natural is misleading, we need to say something more about how these differ not just phenomenologically, but also in terms of their formal objects. The psychologists do so by talking of admiration's object being non-moral *excellence* and elevation's object being moral virtue, though just as often they speak of moral *beauty*, as do their sources of inspiration, notably Thomas Jefferson.[34] While they do not make too much of this term, below I suggest that the difference between mere excellence and beauty does seem to go some way towards alleviating the problems Zagzebski's admiration faces. For now, though, I register that Zagzebski's account of admiration fails to delineate the scope of virtue.

3.4 A Diagnosis

The foregoing discussion shows that admiration is at best incomplete, and at worst misleading as an anchor for moral theory. If my critique is cogent, then the problems with Zagzebski's theory spill over to its motivational, educational, and other non-conceptual ambitions. Whether the admirable is not always an object of emulation or motivation; or admiration does in fact ground motivation and emulation of its objects, but is so broad as to include many objects that should not be emulated or motivate us, including examples of moral vice or undesirable behaviours; it would seem that one of two things follow. Either, in the former case, admiration does not even begin to do the work that Zagzebski wants it to do because it does not, at least not under this generic specification, lay sufficient grounds for emulation, motivation,

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[33] Zagzebski, *EMT*, p. 41.

[34] See Haidt, *op. cit*.

and the like. Or, in the latter case, admiration fails to do the work Zagzebski thinks it can do because it does not reliably track moral excellence.

Here is a quick diagnosis of what has gone wrong in Zagzebski's account. Traditionally understood, the virtues, at least those that are central and paradigmatic, or, in Gaut's terminology "fully-fledged",[35] are not only examples of excellence, but dispositions to think, feel, and act for the sake of certain ends that are worthwhile or good.[36] Hence also the important internal component of virtues, namely that they must be motivated intrinsically. The virtuous acts for the sake of virtue or for that of relevant ends.[37] Thus, kindness, honesty, etc. are standardly considered fully-fledged virtues but some cases of courage, prudence, etc. might not be.[38]

Now, we desire ends, not, or not just, means towards or constitutive of these ends; at least not independently of the ends themselves. In other words, ends are the objects of desire. We admire many things that we do not desire, because admiration takes primarily means as its object—hence it is commonly directed at feats of skill, endurance, intellectual prowess, etc. These, of course, could be invested in both desirable ends, or undesirable ones. In making admiration primary, and explicitly construing it as targeting excellence, Zagzebski construes the core, if not the entirety, of her account squarely in the domain of means or components of the good, rather than the good itself, which unifies the desirable and the admirable, the worthwhile and the excellent.[39] The end is what makes an admirable object appear *imitably attractive*,[40] and when that happens the imitably attractive object does not simply appear admirable, but beautiful—beauty, at least on a plausible account, being a unity of excellent means and pleasing or desirable ends, that is, of the admirable and the desirable. This insight, which I think is also captured in positive psychologists' distinction between admiration and elevation, has a precedent in what I shall

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[35] Berys Gaut recently distinguished between three senses of virtue, corresponding to three kinds of excellence, of which fully-fledged virtue consists in dispositional excellences that are intrinsically motivated, as opposed to both mere dispositional excellences and excellences in general. See his "Mixed Motivations: Creativity as a Virtue", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 75 (2014): 183-202.

[36] Robert M. Adams neatly captures this thought in his construal of virtue as "excellence in being *for the good*". See his *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), *passim*.

[37] Of course, sometimes this may require that they act for the sake of a person, etc.

[38] Some draw a distinction between moral, intellectual, and performative virtues, which seems to also reflect something similar, where the first two seem to be virtues in the full-blown sense, while the latter are virtues in the weaker sense, viz., they are mere excellent traits though not necessarily tailored towards the good.

[39] This is somewhat strange since Zagzebski herself has in previous work incorporated the notion of an end in her account of virtue, stating that it is "a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, including a characteristic motivation to produce a certain *desired end* and reliable success in bringing about that end" (*Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 137. But her exemplarist theory does not reflect the intuition captured in her earlier definition of virtue. Contrast Adams' construal in note 36.

[40] See Diana Onu et al., "Admiration: A Conceptual Review", *Emotion Review* 8 (2016): 218-230, who point out that whether or not admiration does motivate imitation and emulation has not been tested adequately, and is likely to turn out to be dependent not only on feasibility of attaining the target qualities but on the desirability thereof.

call 'aesthetic moral theories' to highlight the fact that they recognised a category of moral beauty.

Let me briefly elaborate on this, by way of introducing the ideas that will preoccupy us in the remainder of this paper. Under aesthetic moral theories I include Plato's and Aristotle's ethics and many theories that have been influenced by Aristotle, including Hume's and Smith's virtue theories. This is because, as already noted, these theories all incorporated the notion of moral beauty, captured in Greek by the term '*kalon*' and in English by the eponymous phrase. Importantly, on these theories virtue and goodness were intrinsically linked to beauty, most straightforwardly by being beautiful. The magnetism of a virtuous person or action was then explained by such beauty. Key in such theories is a backdrop of interests or values, which are desirable. In Aristotle, this is clear in the role that *eudaimonia* plays in his account. And, although less clear, a similar role is played by the notion of ends in Hume who points out that "were [an] end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means".[41] In other words, where there is not an end that is desirable, excellence alone in one's possession of a human power (assuming that power does not itself specify an end, like, say, honesty or kindness) does not arouse the "sentiment of approbation",[42] which on Hume's account is the mark of virtue and beauty. This intrinsic link or unity between means and ends (or, if you prefer, form and content) is characteristic of the beautiful on many traditional accounts.[43] By contrast to such accounts—albeit, ironically, inspired by them—in separating desirability from admirability when it comes to virtue and according priority to the latter, Zagzebski, like many modern philosophers, severs the aesthetic component from moral theory, focusing on what may be called merely structural aspects of virtue, viz., the possession of "a human power in a high degree of excellence".[44] But this leaves out what use that power is put to, which concerns desirability rather than (mere) admirability. It is this feature of the account, I think, that creates the problems identified above.

4 Traditional Aesthetic Moral Theories

Although the theory of direct reference was unavailable to them, Zagzebski's exemplarism is in some ways comparable with ideas that we find in Aristotle, who suggests we emulate the wise person, or the British sentimentalists who understood virtue as what arouses certain pleasing emotions. But there is also a fundamental difference between exemplarism and these other theories, which concerns the emotion identified, or at least the quality to which the relevant emotion is responsive, i.e.,

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[41] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 286.

[42] Ibid., p. 289.

[43] See, for instance, G.W.H. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, T.M. Knox (trans.) (Oxford: OUP, 1998). Cf. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 20017), esp. chapter III.

[44] *EMT*, p. 36.

its formal object, once we scratch beneath the surface of talk of "virtue" or "excellence".[45] While it is difficult to identify precisely the emotion in question in theories like Aristotle's or Hume's, the quality predicated of the virtuous on these theories, and under the guise of which virtue appears to those who are adequately well brought up, is beauty. Whether there is a specific emotion that responds to beauty, like love, elevation, or a subspecies of admiration, is an open question.[46] But what is clear is that while all beauty is a form of excellence, not all excellence is beautiful.

That beauty was at work in the theories in question is rarely acknowledged today, but it is a commonplace that the term *kalon*, which frequently occurs in the works of Plato and Aristotle, captures a sense of goodness which has a distinctively aesthetic flavour, rendering the good and the beautiful inseparable, thereby enabling us to recognise the good through specific emotions or feelings (love in Plato, pleasure in Aristotle).[47] Furthermore, this is echoed by the modern notion of moral beauty, traceable to eighteenth-century sentimentalists like Hume, according to whom, virtue is simply what gives pleasure either because of its usefulness to the possessor and/or others or its being fit to please the possessor and/or others.

So while Zagzebski's empirically- and practically-oriented theory in many ways builds upon and contributes to such virtue-theoretical projects, there is an important difference: the concepts of the *kalon* and of moral beauty point to an aesthetic dimension, implying that there is beauty in virtue, so that virtue will be experienced as beautiful and, presumably, arouse the same (or equivalent) responses to appropriately sensitive observers as other kinds of beauty do, including pleasure and desire. By contrast, Zagzebski's notion of admiration seems, at least *prima facie*, to lack this distinctively aesthetic dimension.[48] Since I think that it can help exemplarism, let me say a little more about the notion of moral beauty in order to indicate why.

4.1 The Concept of Moral Beauty

Until recently, a long tradition in Western ethical thought held that moral virtue is beautiful and moral vice is ugly.[49] That is, the traits themselves are, at least partly, instances of beauty and ugliness, and their possessors by extension respectively beautiful and ugly. Although philosophers today may find this idea counterintuitive

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[45] This suggests two ways in which moral beauty can be introduced into exemplarism. Either by way of identifying an emotion, like elevation, which is responsive to inner beauty (and possibly other kinds of beauty too); or by specifying that the formal object of morally-relevant admiration is the beautiful, whilst qualifying that the relevant beauty here is of character or traits thereof. I will not choose here between these options and my discussion is couched in terms that treat these as equivalent.

[46] I am currently working on this and related questions, but have not settled on an answer yet.

[47] See, e.g., Aryeh Kosman, "Beauty and the Good: Situating the *Kalon*", *Classical Philology* 105 (2010): 341-357. See the other articles in this issue for more on the *kalon*.

[48] Though Zagzebski does use the phrase "moral beauty" at least once (*EMT*, p. 60), it is not clear whether this is meant literally, and it does not feature in her account itself.

[49] I believe that this is also true of non-Western thinking, though regrettably I do not have the expertise to elaborate on other traditions.

or even downright confused,[50] as far as we know it was understood literally, and implied that the virtues and the virtuous can be appreciated for their beauty, being deeply pleasing and attractive in contemplation and other modes of apprehension. This view has recently been defended by a handful of philosophers,[51] though it is still mostly resisted in aesthetics and virtually ignored in ethics. I think that this is due to current trends in philosophical thought, but since Zagzebski's framework offers an opportunity to showcase some of its plausibility and workings, I ask readers here to consider the idea seriously and charitably. For our purposes, here is how I will understand the view in question:[52]

> Moral Beauty View (MBV) = If a trait is a moral virtue, then it is a beautiful character trait; and if a trait is a moral vice, then it is an ugly character trait.

This is easily expanded to apply to individuals, for instance, as follows:

> MBV for Persons = If a person is morally virtuous, then she or he is beautiful; and if a person is morally vicious, then she or he is ugly.

It is worth distinguishing this view from a related, but weaker one, which also makes use of the phrase "moral beauty", and of which it has also been argued recently that it should complement Zagzebski's exemplarist theory. The view I am referring to concerns not the beauty of virtue as such, and our attraction to it—which includes attraction to the inner life and dispositions themselves, as well as the outwardly manifested behaviours and attitudes that express these—but of the expression of "a virtuous or excellent character … through … voice, body and

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[50] I single out philosophers here because I think that scepticism on this matter is the default attitude in philosophy, but also to underline the fact that laypeople still experience beauty in morality and acknowledge it when questioned (see my "The Empirical Case for Moral Beauty", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2019): 642-656 and Ryan P. Doran, "Moral Beauty, Inside and Out", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2020), preprint), which in turn highlights the moral-psychological plausibility of the moral beauty view (see below, §5).

A referee for this journal suggested to me that scepticism about moral beauty may be accounted for by the so-called moralistic fallacy (see Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61:1 (2000), pp. 65-90). If that is so, then it seems to me like this response to the moral beauty view is misguided. For, as I understand it, committing the moralistic fallacy involves, say, refusing to allow that a person is (physically) beautiful or attractive because they are morally bad. However, on the moral beauty view there is a distinct kind of beauty that is possessed by moral virtues and by persons insofar as they are morally virtuous. In this respect, it is a conceptual or metaphysical claim about the relationship between beauty and morality. Someone who is persuaded by D'Arms and Jacobson's account of the moralistic fallacy may still resist the view, but not, it seems to me, on the grounds that it commits said fallacy. I discuss some issues related to the moralistic fallacy particularly as it relates to humour in my "The Moralism in Immoralism: A Critique of Immoralism in Aesthetics", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59 (2019): 13-33.

[51] See Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Doran, "Moral Beauty, Inside and Out"; and Paris, "The Empirical Case for Moral Beauty"; "On Form, and the Possibility of Moral Beauty", *Metaphilosophy* 49 (2018): 711-729.

[52] This follows Berys Gaut's construal in *Art, Emotion and Ethics* and works by myself cited above.

demeanour".[53] I take no issue with this view, which is consistent with my own, but I think that it does not fully capture the importance of beauty for moral theory, insofar as it narrows the focus of appreciation to literally perceptible features, whereas virtue can be a feature of imperceptibilia, including of thoughts and motives as well as, importantly for moral education, of fictional characters and their thoughts and behaviours. Moreover, such dependence on appearance precludes some striking examples of moral beauty, not only because "virtue in rags is still virtue",[54] but also because it cannot account for the moral beauty of someone whose deformity or disability might prevent the relevant "ritualised bodily comportment".[55] I will therefore reserve the labels "inner" and "moral" beauty for my own view, and suggest that the alternative, weaker claim, be renamed *perceptible* moral beauty.

4.2 On the Concept of Beauty in Aesthetic Moral Theories

Before proceeding to discuss how the moral beauty view may help exemplarism, perhaps a word is in order on how beauty should (or might) be understood here, for one may think that there is nothing distinctively aesthetic about the notion of moral beauty. Now, philosophy has a notorious track record for defining beauty, let alone the aesthetic. Nonetheless, inspired by Parsons and Carlson's account of "functional beauty"[56] on which something can be beautiful if it looks fit for its function, I have recently defended an account of beauty which can accommodate imperceptible objects like mathematical proofs, literary works and, relevant for our purposes, moral beauty. On my construal:

> If an object, *O*, is (1) *well-formed for its function(s)*, and (2) *pleases most competent judges in so far as it is experienced (in perception or contemplation) as* (1), then *O* is (functionally) beautiful.[57]

If, as is plausible, virtues are complex psychological disposition made up of cognitive, affective, and motivational components, as well as beliefs, rules, principles, etc. all of which are internalized. If, moreover, as seems to be the case, these are supposed to realise certain ends (namely the humanly good and varieties thereof) and are well-formed for doing so. And if, as is also plausible, the moral virtues please us in contemplation (assuming that we are good moral judges), particularly once we grasp them for what they are (viz., such complex psychological dispositions that

[53] Ian James Kidd, "Admiration, Attraction, and the Aesthetics of Exemplarity", *Journal of Moral Education* 48 (2019): 369-380, at 374.

[54] David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 584.

[55] Kidd, "Admiration, Attraction, and the Aesthetics of Exemplarity", p. 376.

[56] Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[57] Panos Paris, "Functional Beauty, Pleasure, and Experience", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2020): 516-530.

are well-formed to realise the humanly good). Then it follows on the foregoing construal of functional beauty that the moral virtues are beautiful.[58]

It is worth noting the role played by ends here, which are said to be the humanly good and are presumably linked to the pleasure which is the second condition in the account. This can be seen from the fact that, in the dialectic that led to the account of functional beauty articulated above, the second condition is introduced in response to counterexamples to the original account of functional beauty developed by Parsons and Carlson, to the effect that some objects meet their condition of looking fit for function but do not please or might even displease, thereby effectively being not-beautiful. The analogy with Zagzebski's account is instructive. For, as with Zagzebski's account of the admirable as excellent, on Parsons and Carlson's account of beauty, wellformedness alone, which is equivalent to fitness or artifactual excellence, was construed as sufficient for beauty, leading to highly counterintuitive implications, such as that a good torture instrument, toilet, or pornographic film is beautiful. By contrast, on my account, the addition of pleasure as a necessary condition preserves beauty's link to desire in the account, which link between the beautiful and the desirable is a staple of most philosophical accounts (arguably the notable exception here being Kant's[59]) as well as lay thinking. Although I do not specify the way that desire enters my account of beauty, it plausibly comes into play in either or both of two ways. It may be that the humanly good ends in question are desirable, and pleasant to contemplate, especially when excellently pursued (when those pursuing them are "well-formed to realise" them). Or, perhaps the beautiful is desirable insofar as it is pleasurable to experience. In any case, pleasure is necessary for beauty, and pleasure is connected to desire.

The above is an example of what I take to be a plausible, *bona fide* account of beauty, which can accommodate the notion of moral beauty and it seems likely that something of the sort was on the minds of philosophers like Aristotle and Hume.[60] Furthermore, despite disagreement in the literature on many questions about beauty, there are also some claims about beauty that seem near platitudes and that are relevant to beauty's relevance *vis-à-vis* exemplarism. Besides evoking pleasure, which is usually taken to be a platitude about beauty,[61] beauty is said to ground attractiveness and to be the object of feelings or emotions like intense liking, desire, love, etc.;[62] beauty prompts copies of itself;[63] the beautiful object is said to be valued for its own sake, not (merely) for its usefulness or the pleasure it evokes.[64] Conversely, we shun

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[58] Ibid., p. 525. In this context, a good moral judge is someone who is psychologically normal and has been well brought up.

[59] But see Paul Guyer, "Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aesthetics", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1978): 449-460.

[60] See Parsons and Carlson, *Functional Beauty*, pp. 1-30.

[61] Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

[62] Besides Plato's famous account in the *Symposium*, see Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* and Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[63] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[64] Scruton, *Beauty*, pp. 5-6, 17-19.

the ugly, avoid it, and would do much to rid ourselves and our surroundings of it. If beauty and ugliness have the qualities just mentioned, then as our intellectual predecessors thought, it is plausible that it may pave a solid route towards moral virtue, and one that also taps into the right affective dimensions. So even in the absence of a substantive account of beauty, the aforementioned characteristics of the beautiful secure certain features for exemplarism that unqualified admiration and the notion of excellence do not.

As noted earlier, Zagzebski moves away from accounts that I have suggested incorporate a notion of moral beauty (notably Aristotle's) because she thinks that they prioritise desire over admiration while she wants to accord priority to admiration. This tendency to prioritise one thing over another, or one faculty over another, has, I think, been responsible for some considerable misconceptions in modern philosophy. None of the above, however, commits me to the view that desire is prior, or that there is any competition for priority between different emotions or concepts. All that I wish to claim is that there is reason to think that there is a tradition that takes beauty to have been central to moral thought and theorising; that pleasure and, insofar as it is linked to it, desire, cannot be neatly teased apart from it; and that taking the notion of beauty on board solves many problems faced by generic admiration.

5 Beauty and Moral Exemplarism

So how can beauty enhance exemplarism? Well, importantly, as already hinted above, I think that beauty can more accurately delineate the moral domain, since it is fully-fledged virtues that most aptly characterise that domain; it can thereby also explain the distinction psychologists make between admiration and elevation, the latter being the emotion taking inner beauty, not just excellence, as its object. Additionally, as I shall now argue, the notion of moral beauty can rescue exemplarism from several difficulties identified above.

First, exemplarism is said to provide a non-conceptual basis for moral theory and one that explains the moral development and workings of communities. It is thus rather surprising that the notion of moral *beauty*, as opposed to excellence, is absent from the theory.[65] One reason for thinking that beauty and the beautiful may be better suited to providing the aforementioned payoffs than admiration, comes from linguistic evidence. There are terms or phrases in many languages, including ancient ones, that link up the moral virtues with the beautiful, not the admirable alone. And insofar as linguistic evidence and etymology give us grounds to speculate about the development of the moral thought and habits of users of a given language, notions like the aforementioned ancient Greek *kalon*, *ewa* (Yoruba term for beauty, referring primarily to one's character[66]), *schöne Seele* and *belle âme* (*beautiful soul* in

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[65] Zagzebski does mention the phrase and the term beauty does come up in her book (e.g., *EMT*, p. 60), but her theory offers no evidence of an aesthetic dimension.

[66] See Polycarp Ikuenobe, "Good and Beautiful: A Moral-Aesthetic View of Personhood in African Communal Traditions" *Essays in Philosophy* 17 (2016): 125-163.

German and French, respectively), and of course *moral beauty*, offer evidence for this. Thus, whether to describe the way the object of moral admiration appears, viz., beautiful rather than merely admirable, or as the formal object of a distinct emotion like elevation that tracks moral beauty, it seems advisable to incorporate beauty in a workable version of exemplarism if we are to adequately explain moral development and thinking.

Second, consider the kinds of counter-examples I advanced against the role that admiration assumes in Zagzebski's theory. It is highly implausible that the admiration pertinent to the beautiful would be an appropriate response to the character of the courageous terrorist, the skilful villain, or the determined dictator. In other words, while it would seem coherent to say that such people possess a human power to a high degree of excellence and even to admire them for it, it would strike one as odd to call such characters or their traits beautiful. By contrast many of the moral exemplars like those that Zagzebski has in mind, like Jesus Christ or Confucius, do seem to be beautiful, at least in those respects in which they seem morally exemplary. Thus, an appeal to beauty seems to overcome some of the difficulties discussed earlier. Moreover, because admiration of some sort seems to be an appropriate response to the beautiful (or if there is a *sui generis* appropriate response to the beautiful, it will most likely be structurally similar to admiration), this move allows much of Zagzebski's theory to remain basically intact.

Moreover, an appeal to beauty does not depend on the 'acquired' versus 'natural' dichotomy in order to adequately navigate the distinction between the moral and non-moral, provided that we focus on inner qualities of persons, rather than physical or perceptible ones. After all, intuitively at least, candidates for beautiful qualities of persons are plausibly virtues, including, for instance, good-natured friendliness or wisdom, whether or not these are a matter of natural inclinations or acquired through hard work and study. Although these traits are not narrowly moral, they are more than simply excellences like skills or psychological extremes such as unyielding determination etc. The difference to an observer is registered by whether or not they experience the person's qualities with pleasure, and a yearning to make them part of their lives. For what it is worth, if I had to bet on this, I would put my money on the prediction that, if asked to classify examples of admirable and beautiful qualities from a list, people would classify qualities like determination, intelligence, etc. as admirable and kindness, honesty, etc. as beautiful.

Third, none of the things that Zagzebski says about admiration of moral exemplars would be surprising or would require much by way of argument, if she granted that moral virtue is (or comprises) a kind of beauty, that the virtuous are beautiful, and that that is the object of whichever emotion is responsive to virtue. For if so, then it is clear why they are attractive and imitably so: they are desirable, pleasurable, and, like other beautiful things, prompt us to make them part of our lives, where possible.

Predictably then, the notion of moral beauty seems to have some important implications for moral motivation and education.[67] First of all, and as I have argued elsewhere,[68] if moral virtue requires sensitivity to beauty, then complete moral judgements are also aesthetic, and it is a commonplace that beauty evokes conative states in those who appreciate it. For example, Elaine Scarry suggests that "[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being"[69]. Conversely, Yuriko Saito points out that "we often work, or believe we should work, toward improving the aesthetics of everyday environment and life. Negative aesthetic experiences are thus useful and necessary in detecting what is harmful to the quality of life and environment and provide an impetus for improvement."[70] Jointly, these motivational tendencies to reproduce or promote the beautiful while eliminating the ugly, may be powerful drives to steer clear of moral vice and, for at least some of us, pursue moral virtue. In other words if, as many philosophers have thought, beauty is desirable and evokes emotions including love or a desire to understand, emulate, or otherwise preserve, promote or reproduce the beautiful object,[71] then given MBV—and in line with psychological studies on elevation, as opposed to non-moral admiration—it is to be expected that virtue is imitably attractive. For if these thoughts are on the right track, then at least part of the explanation for why moral virtue is desirable or attractive is straightforward: it is beautiful, hence pleasurable to contemplate.[72] So leaving beauty out of our accounts of moral motivation, and moral exemplarism especially, is a mistake.[73]

It would be instructive to see more empirical work investigating the relationship between appreciation of beauty and moral motivation.[74] In one of remarkably few studies, researchers distributed personality questionnaires to people having completed the engagement-with-beauty scale developed by Diessner and colleagues, which asks participants about their sensitivity to different kinds of beauty, including artistic, natural, and moral beauty. They found that those participants who claim to experience morality in the form of virtuous characters or actions as *beautiful*, as

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[67] Many cognitivists about art who tie art to moral knowledge and appreciation, also think that art, not least through qualities like beauty, including moral beauty, can morally improve us. See, e.g., Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), *passim*.

[68] See my "Moral Beauty and Education", *Journal of Moral Education* 48 (2019): 395-411.

[69] Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, p.3.

[70] Yuriko Saito, "Aesthetics of the Everyday", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) (2019), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/aesthetics-of-every day/>.

[71] See, e.g, Plato, *Symposium*; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, passim.; Scruton, *Beauty*, pp. 39ff.; Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 271-277.

[72] Compare Simon Blackburn, "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness", in his *Practical Tortoise Raising and Other Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 26-46, at p. 45.

[73] It is worth noting that this point seems to apply beyond exemplarism to debates concerning moral motivation in general. For my discussion above suggests that perhaps neither the right nor the good construed independently of aesthetic properties, nor judgements of rightness or goodness independently of aesthetic appreciation, can fully explain moral motivation; instead, a full explanation must appeal to beauty, that is, their aesthetic dimension.

[74] Rhett Diessner et al., "Empirical Relationships Between Beauty and Justice: Testing Scarry and Elaborating Danto", *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 3 (2009): 249-258.

opposed to merely admirable or excellent, also score higher for morally-salient traits like empathy, agreeableness, care for others, etc., on personality questionnaires.[75] In another study, Schnall and her colleagues found that participants who had watched a 'morally beautiful' video (featuring a musician paying tribute to his teacher, without whom he claimed that he would have slept rough and been involved in gang crime), were much more helpful than those who had watched an emotionally neutral (a nature documentary excerpt), or a funny video (from *Fawlty Towers*). Participants were told that the experiment would last an hour. But after showing them the clips and asking them to complete a questionnaire on their responses, the experimenter feigned that the computer was not working, thereby cutting the experiment short. She then told subjects that they could leave, although, they could, voluntarily, help her by completing a set of "boring" maths problems from another experiment. She told them that however many problems they answered would be useful, and repeatedly reminded them that they could leave whenever they wanted. Participants having watched the morally-salient video stayed for forty minutes on average, and many of them for over an hour, whereas those having watched non-moral videos stayed between twenty and twenty-five minutes, all leaving earlier than they had initially signed up for.[76] Thus, although embryonic, available research on the relationship between moral beauty and moral motivation seems promising.

Let me now also remark on moral education. I will be very brief, since I have recently explored some of the links between moral beauty and education elsewhere.[77] As already noted, beauty, and recognition thereof, plausibly prompts attraction, desire, love, emulation, and so on.[78] In light of this, the basic idea is simple: if the connection between beauty and desire, attraction, love, a tendency to emulate the beautiful object, are facts about our normal psychology (or traits that we can encourage); if, moreover, it is possible to educate people's ability to notice not just beauty, but moral beauty in particular; then perhaps there is an available route to virtue via beauty. Of course, motivation is neither guaranteed nor easily premised on such beauty, while it is clear that beauty in general hardly makes us better people, as notoriously demonstrated by art-loving Nazis, Wagner, etc. But this is no more a problem with education through moral beauty than it is with moral (or indeed non-moral) education in general; sometimes seemingly sensitive or morally upright people can turn out to have horribly mistaken moral views or behave in morally abhorrent ways. So we should not so easily dismiss the thought that a general attraction to the beautiful, when combined with a sensitivity to moral beauty, may still provide a promising, potentially robust, programme of virtue education. This, at least, is a thought that seems not only plausible, but is also supported by the considerations above.

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[75] Rhett Diessner et al., "Who Engages With Moral Beauty?", *Journal of Moral Education* 42 (2013): 139-163.

[76] Simone Schnall et al., "Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior", *Psychological Science* 21:3 (2010), pp. 215-220. Cf. Jennifer Silvers and Jonathan Haidt, "Elevation Can Induce Nursing", *Emotion* 8 (2008): 291-295.

[77] See my "Moral Beauty and Education".

[78] See note 71 above.

Finally, Zagzbeski wants exemplarism to provide a link between ethical theorising in philosophy and empirical investigations of morality, which may reveal the deeper structure of virtue, and provide the content of concepts like virtue, goodness, etc. Introducing beauty preserves and may even strengthen this link, since beauty, like the admirable and more plausibly so than excellence, is a response-dependent property. Indeed so far research suggests that we should be optimistic about the prospects of this since the notion of moral beauty itself has recently been defended on the basis of findings from psychology[79] and, besides the research presented above, there is increasing evidence from areas like neuroscience, that moral and aesthetic judgements share common neural pathways.

Despite "heterogeneity"[80] in results from different neuroscientific experiments on aesthetic experience, the following finding seems quite well-documented. Results of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans on subjects asked to rate objects for their 'beauty' or 'ugliness', obtained through contrasts between relevant conditions (particularly 'beautiful' versus 'neutral'), reveal correlations between ratings of objects as beautiful and activation of the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), and, in most cases, the medial OFC (mOFC) in particular.[81] This was found for people rating human faces and bodies,[82] paintings, musical compositions,[83] and mathematical proofs.[84] Moreover, correlations between beauty ratings and OFC activity are strong and parametric, i.e., OFC activation increases the more beautiful an object is found and decreases to virtually non-activation in neutral ratings. This should be unsurprising seeing as the OFC is widely thought to be the area of the brain associated with responsiveness to reward and pleasurable experiences.[85]

Moreover, analogous studies on the neural correlates of moral judgement have revealed that when subjects are asked to rate sentences describing behaviours that manifest moral virtue, depravity, or are morally neutral, ratings of moral virtue, but not of other behaviours, correlate with increased activity in the OFC.[86]

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[79] See Paris, "The Empirical Case for Moral Beauty" and Doran, "Moral Beauty, Inside and Out".

[80] Cinzia Di Dio and Vittorio Galese, "Neuroaesthetics: A Review", *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 19 (2009): 682-687, at 682.

[81] Semir Zeki, "Clive Bell's "Significant Form" and the Neurobiology of Aesthetics", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2013), URL = <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00730>.

[82] M. Martín-Loeches et al., "Beauty and Ugliness in the Bodies and Faces of Others: An fMRI Study of Person Esthetic Judgement", *Neuroscience* 277 (2014): 486-497.

[83] Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki, "Toward a Brain-Based Theory of Beauty" *PLoS ONE* 6:7 (2011), URL = <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0021852>.

[84] Semir Zeki et al., "The Experience of Mathematical Beauty and Its Neural Correlates", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2014), URL = <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00068/full>.

[85] See, e.g., Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat, "The Neural Correlates of Subjective Pleasantness", *Neuroimage* 61 (2012): 289-294.

[86] Hidehiko Takahashi et al., "Neural Correlates of Human Virtue Judgment", *Cerebral Cortex* 18 (2008): 1886-1891.

Jointly, the aforementioned findings suggest that the OFC is commonly activated when subjects rate objects both for beauty and moral virtue. This conclusion, moreover, is independently supported by studies investigating the relations between brain activation patterns for ratings of beauty and moral virtue. Briefly, these found patterns of common activation in the OFC between ratings of objects for beauty and morally-laden stimuli for moral goodness.[87] In one such study,[88] which sought to refine the finding, fMRI was conducted on twenty-two participants who were asked to rate a number of faces ranging from beautiful to unattractive and short sentences of actions performed by men that varied in moral badness or goodness (for instance, 'S raped a little girl', or 'S saved his sister from drowning'). Findings revealed that mOFC activation was common for positive ratings both of faces and actions. Moreover, further analysis showed that those participants who showed stronger mOFC activations for one rating, also showed stronger mOFC activation for the other.

While the implications of such findings are hardly straightforward, what seems clear is that, on the assumption that participants in these experiments are accurately reporting on their finding certain objects more or less beautiful or ugly, the results do confirm what we should expect on the basis of MBV, namely that people's brains reveal patterns associated with pleasure when they report finding objects beautiful and good, and lack of pleasure (or perhaps displeasure, although this is not clear from the findings, which disproportionately focus on positive responses) when they report finding them neutral or ugly and neutral or bad.[89] This is probably unsurprising, yet it supports the welcome suggestion that subjects rating stimuli as beautiful or good presumably do undergo a pleasurable experience.[90] Importantly, these patterns, and particularly the activation of the OFC, have not been found in studies of admiration, whether for skill or virtue.[91]

More importantly, if findings indicated very different patterns of activity in the brain of subjects rating objects in terms of beauty and descriptions of behaviours

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[87] See Mihai Avram et al., "Neurofunctional Correlates of Esthetic and Moral Judgments", *Neuroscience Letters* 534 (2013): 128-132; Tingting Wang et al., "Is Moral Beauty Different from Facial Beauty? Evidence from an fMRI Study", *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 10 (2015): 814-823; Takashi Tsukiura and Roberto Cabeza, "Shared Brain Activity for Aesthetic and Moral Judgments: Implications for the Beauty-is-Good Stereotype", *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 6 (2011): 138-148; Qiuping Chen et al., "Neural Correlates of Moral Goodness and Moral Beauty Judgments", *Brain Research* 1726 (2020), URL = <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006899319305888>.

[88] Tsukiura and Cabeza, "Shared Brain Activity for Aesthetic and Moral Judgments".

[89] Cf. David Davies, "This is Your Brain On Art", in Gregory Currie, Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin, and Jon Robson (eds.), *Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.69-70, 73-74.

[90] Of course, it may be that the rating act itself grounds pleasure. Also unclear is whether so-called ratings amount to genuine judgements. Of these, the first point seems unlikely, given that certain stimuli are clearly beautiful and there is considerable consensus on them. Moreover, the suggestion that simply rating something as beautiful without experiencing it as such arouses pleasure is odd. The latter concern is more substantial, and I cannot fully address it here. Instead, I shall simply assume that subjects' 'finding' something beautiful or 'experiencing as' beautiful, is equivalent to judging, or at least grounds judgement.

[91] See Immordino-Yang et al., "Neural Correlates of Admiration and Compassion", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106 (2009): 8021-8026.

in terms of moral goodness, that would be *prima facie* reason for scepticism about MBV. But findings are perfectly in line with MBV. So the evidence, whatever else it may or may not show, supports precisely what we would predict in neuroscientific terms on the basis of MBV, assuming aesthetic judgements and experiences have some relation to brain states: there is shared activity in the brain between ratings of beauty and moral goodness, which is both strongly and parametrically correlated to such ratings.

Hence, while not directly supporting MBV, both the fact that MBV is not undermined by neuroscientific evidence, and that available neuroscientific evidence reveals what we would expect if MBV were true, are good news for MBV and offer strong support for the prospects of further empirical investigation into MBV under an exemplarist framework, without encountering the kinds of conceptual and phenomenological tensions identified above (§4).

6 Objections

Below, I briefly respond to three objections to my proposal to incorporate beauty in exemplarist moral theory, by way of showcasing the cogency of that proposal.

The first objection concerns the claim that exemplarism needs to incorporate an aesthetic dimension, specifically by acknowledging the concept of beauty. But nothing that has been said so far appears to introduce anything distinctively aesthetic into the account, the notion of beauty here not doing much more than the notion of admiration did in Zagzebski's existing account.

If the thought here is that admiration is already an aesthetically-inflected emotion, then I have little to add except, and this is important, to note that the relevant aesthetic quality that it picks out when it is morally relevant, is beauty. But if, as is plausible, one does not consider admiration as an aesthetic emotion as such, but perhaps as an emotion with aesthetic variants, or as an emotion that is non-aesthetic or that can occasionally be directed at objects of aesthetic interest, then I am suggesting that the notion of beauty needs either to supplement or replace admiration.

Now, what is distinctively aesthetic about beauty as understood in MBV will depend both on which account of beauty is thought to be appropriate, and what conception of the aesthetic one subscribes to. For our purposes, it suffices that there is an account of beauty available in the literature; what makes it aesthetic is that it is a matter of how the object's form is evaluated and experienced on acquaintance with the object. In that respect, talk of beauty seems warranted, and is distinct from admiration, which refers only to an emotional response and which can (when for instance it takes the object's form as its object and is responsive to that object's form in direct experience), but need not be, aesthetically charged.

But is there not a problem with my suggestion, namely that most people may not, in fact, be able to experience this sort of moral beauty, since it is dependent on appreciative skills that are themselves acquired and possibly a result of considerable effort and experience?

While this may seem to be a problem, we should, in the first place, and as Aristotle pointed out, consider well-brought-up folk when considering how big a problem

it is. Moreover, we should note that admiration also faces the same problem, for those that have not been well brought up, and even some who have been, may perfectly coherently not admire the virtuous, and consider them time wasters, losers, or bores. The reason, here, I suspect, will have to do with whether their lives, insofar as they seemed to have been so one-dimensional, could even plausibly be deemed desirable from the perspectives of those who are not already living it and so have not devised *post hoc* stories to explain why it might appear desirable.

Finally, it should also be noted that whether or not people respond to and experience the beauty of virtue is a separate question from whether or not they use the term beauty. In a culture where aesthetics and ethics are increasingly dissociated linguistically, it will be unsurprising if people do not use that term. But unless the damage has already been done, it is to be expected that they still find virtue beautiful, that is, experience beauty on encounters with virtuous people or acts, rather than simply garden-variety admiration.

The last objection I consider is simple: is all this not just a terminological dispute, and so trivial and unimportant?

In response, I note that some terminological disputes are important and this is one of them. The reason stems directly from features of exemplarist theory. For instance, exemplarism points to connections between philosophical and empirical research, so what kind of response or emotion we are enquiring into will make a difference in empirical investigations, assuming as is plausible that admiration and the response to beauty (or admiration specifically of the beautiful) have different profiles, neural pathways, etc. Similar considerations hold for other practical domains, such as education. It is one thing to instil admiration and another to cultivate a taste for certain kinds of beauty, and presumably the avenues to each are also different and to be pursued with different strategies and using different terminology.

Moreover, a recent study suggests that there may be a difference in the level of engagement and emotional investment we make depending on whether we are making moral judgements *simpliciter* compared to judging moral beauty. Cheng et al. asked twenty eight female participants to judge the individuals in sketches depicting morally salient behaviours on their moral goodness or their inner beauty, and found that whereas, consistent with the empirical evidence on moral beauty cited above, moral judgements and moral beauty judgements share activation of the OFC, moral beauty judgements additionally recruited neural pathways relevant for theory of mind, empathy, and emotional uplift.[92] According to the scientists involved in this research, these findings further substantiate that the moral beauty view picks out a genuine phenomenon distinct from mere perception or judgement of moral qualities and one linked to other experiences of beauty, while also supporting the link between moral beauty judgements and the emotion of elevation and its associated phenomenology, which also recruits similar neural pathways. These findings suggest that more than just terminology might be at stake here. For although it is possible that this change was down to simply a change in the verbal processing of the

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[92] Chen, Qiuping et al. "Neural Correlates of Moral Goodness and Moral Beauty Judgments". *Brain Research* 1726 (2020), URL = <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006899319305888>.

instruction, it seems far more likely that the different instruction effected a change in attention and appreciative stance, leading to a more thorough, affectively charged engagement with the object. If this is true, then it suggests what we already knew: if we prime people differently, and shape their conceptual repertoire one way, we will have one set of results; if we change these practices, we may well obtain different results. Beauty offers a more comprehensive, motivationally robust, and other-directed attitude towards its object, and appears to be associated with morally relevant self-directed motivation, something that mere admiration lacks. It thus needs to be acknowledged, both in construing an exemplarist moral theory, and in building our moral motivational, educational, and research programmes.

7 Conclusion

I have suggested that Zabzeski's exemplarist moral theory currently fails to adequately anchor morality in exemplars because of its reliance on the emotion of admiration, and because of the priority it accords to the admirable over the desirable. Such features render the theory too broad to adequately track adequate moral exemplars through which to define moral terms. I have suggested instead that incorporating beauty in exemplarist moral theory—in effect reintroducing the notion of moral beauty in moral theorising—may provide a stronger anchor for such a theory, insofar as it would considerably narrow the scope of the admirable, whilst offering greater phenomenological plausibility, and more robust links to the motivational, educative, developmental, and interdisciplinary goals that exemplarism promises.[93]

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