9 On the Use and Misuse of Moral Exemplars for Self-Improvement

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Exemplars and the Ethics of Knowing Reality

The idea that we learn to be good by looking to the good persons around us was familiar already in antiquity. Plato puts it into the mouth of Anytus, that voice of sober common sense. To Socrates' question "to whom should one go in order…to acquire virtue" (*Meno* 92d4–5), Anytus replies:

> Why give him the name of one individual? Any Athenian gentleman he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man than the sophists would…I believe that these men have learned from those who were gentlemen before them; or do you not think that there are many good men in this city?
>
> (*Meno* 92e3–6, 93a2–4)[1]

Aristotle even refers us to a widely recognized saying to the effect that it is from good persons that good deeds are learned (ἐcθλωῦν μὲν γὰρ ἄπ' ἐσθλά́, *EN* 1172a13–14).[2] And recent scholars working in an Aristotelian vein have been keen to stress the importance of emulation in moral development—and therefore of moral exemplars as an indispensable source of ethical knowledge (Kosman 1992; Kristjânsson 2006; Fossheim 2006; Hampson 2019; Sanderse 2013; Carr 2023).[3]

But Plato's choice of Anytus as a mouthpiece for the view implies a criticism of it, as Anytus' subsequent inability to point to good men who have made their sons good makes explicit. To put a pair of core concerns in the idiom of the *Meno*, we might ask, "How will we know who to emulate, Anytus, if we do not already know what is good? If, however, we already know what is good, what need is there for emulation?" While some neo-Aristotelians address the latter question, Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) secular exemplarism addresses the former, arguing that it is our feeling of admiration that informs us who the exemplars of virtue are.[4] Such an approach would cut no ice with Plato, who knew how universally admired was Alcibiades, Athens' most grandiose traitor.[5] And regarding any supposed

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need for exemplars, he was more aware than most that Socrates, "the best, and also the wisest and most just" (*Phaedo* 118a17) of anyone he had known, had no one to emulate.

Naturally, this is hardly a conversation-stopper. Aristotelians and neo-Aristotelians, exemplarists and defendants of emulation in moral education will have rejoinders to these and similar concerns. But the emphaticness of Plato's implicit rejection of this approach to exemplars and our emulation of them suggests not just some quibbles at the margins, but a comprehensively different way of understanding what role, if any, exemplars might play in moral life and moral development. While Xenophon, another voice of sound common sense, might be content to observe that Socrates "made his followers hope that by imitating him, they will become like him" (*Memorobilia* 1.2.3, tr. Marchant), Plato shows in his dialogues that he is all too aware that this improvement through emulating the exemplary Socrates *never actually worked*.

The difference between the Platonic and the more (neo-)Aristotelian and contemporary take on exemplars arises, I suggest, from a deep-going difference in the conception of ethics itself. For Plato, it is not actions nor reasons for action, responsiveness to reasons for action nor deliberation and choice which define the domain of what we today might call "the moral." It is rather the Good—fundamentally an object of knowledge—and knowing it by knowing the intelligible reality it informs, that forms the core of a Platonic conception of ethics. That is to say, Platonic ethics is, first and foremost, an ethics of knowledge. An increasingly improved knowledge of intelligible reality transforms not just our opinions, but our ways of seeing and understanding the world around us. *Republic* VI.485b–487a describes the sort of changes in character, behavior, and choice that follow from pursuing Platonic knowledge in the right spirit (*Rep*. 525c–d); the *Philebus*' comparison of the pleasures of the wicked with the pleasures of the good (who turn out to be led by a love of truth) indicates something of the same (*Philebus* 38a–40e). Knowledge of this reality is not at all the sort of knowledge familiar from everyday life; it is, rather, an ideal sort of cognition that is at stake, and exceptionally difficult to attain. This is what makes Plato's ethics idealist, and likewise what makes pursuing such ideal knowledge a transformative endeavor.

Indian Buddhist philosophy is Platonic in just this respect: it similarly offers a knowledge-centered ethics, on which a wholesale transformation is wrought by coming to have ideal or perfect cognition of real reality.[6] Naturally, the Buddhist conception of real reality is quite in contrast to Plato's; neither, correspondingly, do they share an understanding of what knowledge of it is like and how one acquires it.[7] But the shared basis in an ethical view built on transformation through knowing an impersonal reality very unlike ordinary notions of reality leads to a similar diffidence about the nature and role of moral exemplars in moral development and

moral life, including a distinct caution about the misuse of exemplars in moral education.

This shared caution is due in part to an unexpected similarity in the Buddhist and Platonic conceptions of the reality that is to be known. Diametrically opposed though they are in their conceptions of being (unchanging or transient? independent or dependent?), Buddhists and Platonists agree that real reality is not a *person*, nor constructed along personal lines, nor consisting in essentially person-involving categories. But moral exemplars are, if nothing else, *persons*. That, indeed, is precisely their attraction.

But their actual constructive use in moral development lies in the opposite direction. The true moral exemplar, in both traditions, will be *transparent*—they will not figure as the object of attention at all, but function rather as a window through which to share in what they are attending to. Wholesome engagement with them takes them as such, focusing not on the exemplar at all but on the reality, by knowing which the exemplar is exemplary.[8]

What Are Exemplars for?

If, for Buddhists and Platonists alike, admiring and emulating moral exemplars is not a reliable mechanism of stable and positive moral transformation, exemplars can nevertheless play an important role in moral life and the development of character. Their proper role, on the Buddhist-Platonist view under consideration, is to indicate a hitherto unnoticed possibility for goodness, to sustain confidence in its reality, and of our own capacity to share in it.

Rai Gaita compellingly describes how encountering someone of astonishing goodness can reveal to us essential but overlooked realities, such as the full humanity of an afflicted person (Gaita 1998/2000, Chapter 2). Nothing in the experience itself may give any indication of how I may come to have such extraordinary goodness myself—though it shows up starkly my lack of it. But the experience reveals, sometimes for the first time, that there is some way of being that puts all the ordinary forms of goodness in the shade. Gaita describes the "powerful presence of Socrates [in Plato's dialogues] and the effect this presence had on even the most querulous and resentful of his interlocutors" (Gaita 2000, xxxvi), suggesting Socrates' presence had something of this revelatory quality, which Plato in his dialogues tries to convey and to distinguish from the admiration elicited by their charismatic sophist contemporaries.

At the conclusion of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt describes the important role of moral exemplars in avoiding moral despair. Exemplars can have an edifying effect on those who come into contact

with them—directly, or at a narrative distance—by keeping us from being swamped with nihilistic dismay in the face of human cruelty and callousness. In her account of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt tells of the "sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness" which arises as the court hears the story of Anton Schmidt, a German army sergeant who aided Jews during the war, for which aid he was eventually executed (Arendt 1963/2006, 231). Arendt goes on to observe that "the lesson of such stories…is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*…the Final Solution…could happen in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*… Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation" (233).

Combining both revelatoriness and bulwark against despair, Jonathan Lear (2022) writes of exemplars who not only "meet the needs of the spirit…for the *kalon*" (47)—for real, if incompletely understood goodness which "shines forth" (43) through them—but who also "instill confidence in this kernel of inalienability of the *kalon*" (46) and in its "robustness" (45) even in the face of the prospect of world catastrophe.

Encountering extraordinary goodness personified (or dramatized) may enable us to know that such goodness is not just a possibility in principle, for someone or another, but also a possibility for *us*. Buddhist and Platonic texts both recognize the power of exemplars to function as proofs of possibility in these ways. In particular, the intimate but elusive mode of the Platonic dialogues on the one side, and the Buddhist tales and philosophical meditation instructions on the other, each in their way present moral exemplarity as an invitation to something we might become ourselves. The third chapter of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* works in this way, first making present to mind the exemplary goodness in bodhisattvas and buddhas (*BCA* 3.1–5) before forming the aspiration "may I be like that" (*BCA* 3.6–23).[9] In addition to preventing moral discouragement, and revealing the sheer fact of an outstanding goodness—each a vital benefit in its own right—contact with a person of exemplary goodness can transform a person by inspiring them to aspire to similar goodness.

But this inspirational function must be handled cautiously. For there is a danger inherent in the attractiveness of the moral exemplar that can inhibit the salutary effect from ever arising, and can indeed be morally counterproductive—namely, our tendency to mistakenly focus on and venerate the personality of the moral exemplar, rather than the reality attending to which made them exemplary. Thus confusing the messenger with the message can never occasion proper moral transformation, and indeed may be more likely to be corrupting. Both Buddhist thinkers and Plato show themselves alive to this danger.

Plato's Concerns

Socrates is not just another pretty face. His is not a *pretty* face at all. Yet something about him proved irresistibly attractive. Plato records this throughout his dialogues, and Xenophon devoted his *Memorabilia,* S*ymposium*, and *Apologia* to the attempt to capture what was so remarkable about Socrates. Even Aristophanes' earlier and distinctly less flattering depiction of Socrates in the *Clouds* indicates something compelling about Socrates. The fact that there was a whole *genre*—Socratic discourses, as Aristotle calls it (*Poetics* 1447b11)—inspired by Socrates confirms this was no idiosyncratic assessment, but a phenomenon indeed as prevalent as Plato suggests it was. We might even say that Socrates' trial and execution for *talking to people in public spaces* confirms in a different way the very real—if also very ambivalent—attractive force that Socrates exerted.[10]

Socrates was attractive not for his good looks, his wealth, his powerful connections. He had none of these. There is no criterion on which he could claim a place among the *kaloi k'agathoi*, the Great and the Good of Athens. All there is left to find attractive in him is his extraordinary character and the correspondingly uncompromisingly virtuous life he embodied. Yet Socrates is also an ambivalent figure—and not just because he had good and bad traits, or was good by one measure, bad by another. Socrates is ambivalent also because even on the measure on which he is good, contact with him seems to have such very different effects: it does not bring out the best, we might say, in Callicles—nor, to take historical persons, in Protagoras or Critias or Charmides or Euthyphro. It famously does not bring out the best in Alcibiades.

Alcibiades—the flower of the Great and the Good of Athens, beautiful, powerful, well-born, wealthy, eloquent, and persuasive—noble Alcibiades first goes in for a bit of desecration, then persuades Athens to embark on the disastrous Sicilian expedition, after which catastrophic failure, he defects to Sparta. How did it come to this? Where did it all go wrong?

By some accounts, it was contact with Socrates that soured Alcibiades—but not because Socrates *corrupted* him. On the contrary, it was contact with Socrates' goodness that had this terrible effect. As Plato tells it in the *Symposium*, Alcibiades sees Socrates' extraordinary goodness. From that moment when he realized that ugly, horny Socrates opened like a statue of a satyr to reveal astonishingly beautiful precious jewels inside (*Kernel* 217e–218e), Alcibiades is changed forever.

What did Alcibiades see that had this effect?

What Alcibiades Sees, and Fails to See

Consider first what Aristodemus missed. We are introduced to Aristodemus at the beginning of the *Symposium*. He is most in love of all Socrates'

lovers (*Symp*. 173b3–4), or as Nehamas and Woodruff translate it, "he was obsessed with Socrates—one of the worst cases at that time." And since that time? Evidently faded into complete obscurity, already within Socrates' lifetime. Socrates invites Aristodemus to come along to the party with him. But when Socrates starts thinking of something along the way, he starts lagging behind, so that Aristodemus shows up at Agathon's door alone. Agathon asks where Socrates is, and, "How is it you didn't bring him?" at which point Aristodemus looks round and discovers that "Socrates was nowhere to be seen" (*Symp*. 174e8–10).

Although he was apparently oblivious to Socrates' absence, Aristodemus is aware that "he has this habit: every now and then he turns aside like that and stands motionless, wherever he happens to be" (*Symp*. 175b1–2). Agathon evidently does not know this, so in some sense Aristodemus' faithful following of Socrates everywhere he goes does give him some knowledge of Socrates. And yet, such knowledge as he has, completely misses the point. *All* he sees is Socrates, the habits and mannerisms—Socrates' *personality*, in Simone Weil's sense of it, all the particular historical details and cumulative traits by which Socrates is recognized as Socrates socially. Aristodemus cannot see what Socrates sees when Socrates does that which makes him so strangely compelling (and also provocative and also revolting). He does not even notice when Socrates is in the course of attending to that reality.

Let us take Aristodemus as an extreme case of missing the forest for the trees in his contact with a moral exemplar. He recognizes the goodness—it shines forth, unmistakable; but he seems to think it has something to do with all the distinctive incidentals of Socrates. Aristodemus is so caught up in the details of Socrates' personality—Aristodemus, too, we are told, takes to going about barefoot (*Symp*. 173b2)—that he does not even see that in Socrates' peculiar habit of stopping and thinking there is something happening that is the real source of Socrates' goodness—a source which, in an important way, has nothing to do with Socrates.

Alcibiades gets that. This is what makes Alcibiades such a tormented character. He sees Socrates' oddness, his ugliness.[11] Alcibiades sees the bundle of personality traits that make Socrates a trivial irritant and layabout to the respectable citizens of Athens, and perhaps mark him out as an iconoclast to admiring youths. But he also sees that there is something else—something that has nothing to do with all that, something that is (in Alcibiades' metaphor) *inside* Socrates. And it is this "something else," completely at odds with Socrates' peculiar personality and "so divine and golden, absolutely beautiful, so utterly amazing" (*Symposium* 216e7–217a1), that is the truly valuable thing in Socrates.

But Alcibiades cannot get past the thought that this extraordinary thing is *in Socrates*. This is where Alcibiades greatly mistakes the nature of

Socrates' beauty and the good it speaks of. Alcibiades' analogy to jewels inside the Silenus statue suggests a commodity, a possession of Socrates' which can be traded (*Symp*. 218d–e) or might be scarce. But Socrates' glittering gems are not his to keep or to give; they do not belong to him any more than they might belong to anyone; for the precious beauty Socrates has inside him just is Socrates' uncompromising attention to and care for truth—his "ability to love the truth and do everything for its sake" (*Philebus* 58d5).

Anyone may have *that* beauty and goodness for themselves, so long as they do as Socrates does, and attend and care for nothing else so much as truth. Failing to acknowledge this, reluctant perhaps to undertake the labor it involves (*Symp*. 215e–216b), Alcibiades figures this goodness he has discovered in Socrates as something someone might give to him, without his working for it himself—like donning a new cloak or pair of fancy sandals. And as a thing in Socrates, Alcibiades sets it alongside all of the rest of Socrates' particular traits and quirks, as something that staring harder *at Socrates* would reveal the essence of. He thus, like Aristodemus, tends to become engrossed in Socrates the man, and to interpret the beauty he perceives as learning something about Socrates rather than about reality.

In his brighter and soberer moments, Alcibiades does see that this marvelous goodness in Socrates is not to be got by bargaining, nor by contagion—by sitting next to Socrates on the sofa, as all the beautiful youths compete to do. The precious jewels inside Socrates do not require either acquisition or investigation, for the demand is not, after all, to look more closely at *Socrates*, but to look at *the world* as Socrates does. But when Alcibiades begins to see the reality Socrates sees, he must see himself in that light—and he does not at all like what he sees. Alcibiades, noble and fine, looks at himself from a perspective that cares only for goodness (from the perspective Socrates inhabits) and finds he is neither great nor good. This new experience may be important for his moral development, but it is painful; and now instead of getting caught up in Socrates' personality, Alcibiades ends up getting caught up in his own. In order to escape this discomfort, he attempts to run away from Socrates' influence entirely. Thus the infamous disaster that was Alcibiades' life.

Alcibiades sees Socrates, in a way that Aristodemus for instance does not. He recognizes the relevant beauty, and locates it correctly: it is something *in* Socrates, not something *about* Socrates' person. What is in Socrates, however, is not a commodity that may be traded, but a shareable commitment to reality and the good, and to seeing everything in this light. Alcibiades cannot share this, however, because he is too concerned with what doing so might mean for himself, and too entranced by the contradictory indicators in Socrates' own personality when considered, on the one hand, conventionally, and then on the other hand, according to the scale of

values he has opened Alcibiades' eyes to. Alcibiades then turns around and blames Socrates for his predicament—as if Alcibiades' predicament would not be just the same if there were no Socrates.

To Know Socrates Is to Know the Reality He Knows

As Plato presents it, Socrates' unusual, conspicuous goodness is not something that would helpfully be parsed Aristotelian-wise, as having perfected various virtues and having woven them together into a harmonious whole—even if he is the most just of the Athenians and unusually unconflicted. Both Socrates' outstanding goodness and his strangeness arise from a single source: his unconditional commitment to knowing the good—accepting no substitutes, no proxies, or convenient fixes. As Plato tells it, at least, Socrates himself was made unified and good by organizing all of his resources around understanding an explanatory account of reality (Carpenter 2024b). Such an explanatory account does not just explain why things are as they are, but also grasps that the relevant sense of "why" is "why it should be so," or "why it is best that it be so." Intelligence orders things for the best, the *Phaedo* tells us (97c–d), and so to grasp the intelligibility of reality is to grasp how it is *well*-ordered (and to aim at understanding, in this sense, is to aim at the Good). We thus have not only an impersonal view of reality—but also of the good, of its beauty, and of the love such beauty elicits.

This is what Socrates sees—or is involved in exploring, in trying to come to know—when he stops stock-still on a neighbor's porch on his way to a dinner party; when he refuses to become complicit in state-sanctioned criminality (*Apology* 32b–c, 32c–d); when he interrogates the fetching Charmides about the nature of self-control in the *Charmides*; when he retreats from battle in an orderly way, and only on command (*Laches* 181b; *Symposium* 221a–b); when he is unintimidated by the bullying tactics of Polus or Callicles (*Gorgias* 461c–e, 485c–486e); when he can keep his cool through the dazzling sophistries of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*. In everything he does, he is unmoved by anything contrary to finding the best possible understanding of what is truly good, his motivations and actions informed finally by that. Which actions show up as possible or choiceworthy do so by holding on to the irreplaceable priority of the real, as yet imperfectly known, good.[12]

This single-mindedness, being unmoved by the conflicting motivations that afflict most of us most of the time, is what makes Socrates stand out. But the very thing that is the source of the charisma is at the same time the reason why the worship and the love of *him* is unhelpful (even counterproductive) to ethical development, and he does not want it. Socrates wants what is good, and what is good is for each of us to want only what is really good, and not be distracted by imperfect or imaginary goods. We

will not become like this by being enraptured with *Socrates*, a poorly-shod bug-eyed son of a stonemason.

The only sense in which, and mechanism by which, Socrates might transfer the extraordinary goodness he has is by bearing witness to the real goodness there to be seen and increasingly well understood by anyone who might turn their attention to the task. If one will engage in genuinely joint inquiry with him, focusing on the intelligible reality to be understood rather than on the personalities involved in seeking it (as Theodorus manages, with some difficulty, in the *Theaetetus*), then Socrates can at least elicit the sort of activity that would be appropriate if one aims to understand real reality and real goodness. Contact with Socrates will only improve one if one turns away from Socrates' personality—*and* indeed from one's own, and the associated cares—to take as good and worthwhile only what really is so, and to take it as *one's own task* to find out for oneself what that is.[13] To be improved by contact with Socrates' exemplarity one must see past him—see through him—to the reality that he attends to.[14]

The reality Socrates sees is one that is not in any way special to him; he has no privileged access. There was no revelation to him alone. His access—*thinking* about it, seeking publicly assessable reasons—is anyone's access ("the power to learn is present in everyone's soul," *Republic* 518c4–5, tr. Grube); the reality known is independent of anything personal to anyone. Seeing what Socrates sees necessarily draws one out of oneself, out of one's personal relations and presumptions about socially determined values, and toward a standard of goodness which would give one perspective and ground for assessing the real worth of these everyday presumptions about what is good, bad, desirable, to be done.

There is thus something self-effacing about Socrates, about exemplars generally, closely related to the impersonal nature of the reality one is to orient oneself by in order to become exemplarily good. Socrates' disavowals of knowledge are not evasive and they are not naive; they are an attempt to insist that attention be directed toward how things are, and not toward something about Socrates. They are part of the exemplar's attempt to bring about that same goodness in others, so far as it is possible for one person to help another make that sort of transformation, by redirecting their attention ("turning the whole soul," *Republic* 518c8) toward the right place—away from the persons striving to know reality and toward the reality they are striving to know.[15]

There is something uniquely compelling about the exemplar, the person of outstanding or remarkable goodness. Being in their presence, whether imaginatively or in person, commands our admiration. And it is not possible, Plato has Socrates and Adeimantus recognize, "that someone can consort with things he admires without imitating them" (*Republic* 500c4–5). But the "things" at issue here are "the things that are" (500b7), normatively

ordered intelligible reality—not particular individuals. A childhood of carefully managed engagement with carefully chosen exemplars, described in *Republic* II–III, sets us up to admire and emulate directly what is truly good—not particular manifestations of it in those who have been made good themselves by such attention to reality.

Alcibiades and Phaedo and Crito—to say nothing of Aristodemus—can never be improved by contact with Socrates so long as they remain fixated on *Socrates*, on him as a person, or on themselves as the particular, socially situated individuals they are (even as seen through Socrates' eyes). Only by looking through him to *what* he sees and to *how* he sees can their contact with him be edifying. Indeed trying to make it about personalities, whether out of obtuseness or fear, will have a positively deleterious effect on moral character. Aristodemus simply fails to see that the reality that moves Socrates is more compelling, more important and worthy of attention, than Socrates himself. He thus misses entirely the opportunity to turn his soul toward the improving project of knowing impersonal reality as it is. Alcibiades sees that there is some inward quality of Socrates that merits admiration, and he even sees—sometimes—that it is non-transferrable and must rather be something he gets for himself and not *from* Socrates. But this requires that he first be honest with himself about himself, and judge himself dispassionately by the standards of truth and goodness that Socrates respects. By this measure, Alcibiades suffers a painful realization of his own inadequacy, and gets lost in the dissonance within his own personality, at once Great and Good and nothing of the kind.

Buddhist Transparency

Indian Buddhists of course do not share the Platonic conception of an intelligible, well-ordered reality. For the Buddhists, reality really is just one damn thing after another. Studying the details of the patterns of interlocking dependencies by which things arise may be salutary, but not because it can ever lead to a meaningful explanation of the order of things. On the contrary, when we see *that* everything is transient, without self, and suffering, we know everything we need to know in order to effect substantial moral transformation. Well-defended, holistic explanatory accounts don't come into it (Carpenter 2024a).

Nevertheless, for the Buddhist as for the Platonist, knowing reality is edifying; the reality known is impersonal, and one's knowing of it is a process of depersonalization. The standard formula for the attainment of ultimate realization in the *Middle-Length Discourses* is the strictly impersonal, "He understands: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being'" (*MN* 11.17, e.g., tr. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi). The stock phrase

for conversion in the *Divyāvadāna,* the *Divine Tales*, underscores the epistemic element: "with their thunderbolts of knowledge they broke through that mountain which is the false view of individuality that arises with its twenty peaks of incorrect views" (tr. Rotman [2008], 104, 113, 231, 152, 187). We thus find here too the curious self-effacingness of exemplars, their odd *transparency*.

The moral exemplar on the Buddhist view is the one who knows reality as impermanent, no-self, dependent—without significant relations between things, and no overall purpose or overall controller, neither at the local level nor in some grander sense. Knowing this, she becomes disenchanted with everyday goods and bads, with selfish desires and daily frustrations, with any *individuating* emotion that would attach to the socially recognized person. She is thus liberated from suffering, and what remains is equanimity suffused with care for all that still suffers.

The Buddha—the Awakened One—is the paradigmatic Buddhist exemplar. He "woke up" to the suffering that is the nature of reality, and how we create and sustain it by our attachment to notions of ourselves as agents, as subjects, as transcendent unities magically distinct from all the petty characteristics we are so keen to disown. Once he woke up, the Buddha taught: he taught out of compassion or care for beings, and what he taught was the same impersonal reality he had woken up to, together with its implications for how to engage—or rather disengage—affectively. The Buddha is exemplary in both of these respects: (i) the knowledge of reality as pervasively impersonal, with the implication that persons are not the autonomous agents they take themselves to be; and (ii) the impersonal care for suffering that remains through the destruction of all personal concerns. In philosophical contexts, we find both Dignāga and Vasubandhu prefacing their compendious works (respectively the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*) with praise of the Buddha in these terms and in this order.[16] Buddhaghosa, in his meditation on the Buddha, equates the Buddhist path (the fourth Noble Truth) not with doing but with understanding: "the way that is the act of understanding cessation is the truth of the path" (*Visuddhimagga* VII.27, tr. Ñāṇamoli).

The Bodhisattva refers to Śakyamuni Buddha in any one of his lives prior to the one in which he was enlightened, typically appearing in the countless *jātaka* tales of the Buddha's previous lives. But *a* bodhisattva is anyone who has committed themselves to attaining a similar awakening for the benefit of all beings. Any bodhisattva may also be a moral exemplar, particularly when this honorific is used for someone who has significantly progressed along the path toward perfect awakening. The Theravāda tradition speaks of Arhats (Pā., *Arahant*), committed renunciants who have attained some significant portion of transformative understanding of reality. And in the Buddhist tales, we also encounter exemplary laypeople, who function

narratively in much the same way—expressing through how they see a particular situation the insight into the nature of impersonal reality toward which they are oriented and by which they have been transformed. Their presence in Buddhist literature shows acknowledgment of a legitimate role for exemplars alongside guards against their potential misuse.

Buddhist Exemplars in Narrative Tales

Popular Buddhism enjoys a rich wealth of story literature, recounted in a variety of contexts and transmitted widely throughout the Buddhism-influenced world. Such storytelling is credited by Ranjini Obeyesekere with being centrally responsible for making one "Buddhist,"[17] and the role of such tales in moral formation is perceptively treated by Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen (1996). Such tales include not only the very ancient *jātaka*s, but also *avadāna*s, some of which arose from stories in the *vinaya* texts giving the case history for particular practical determinations made by the Buddha (but in the *sarvāstivāda vinaya* growing vastly beyond this purpose);[18] the immense collection of interlocking tales illustrating the verses of the *Dhammapada*, the *Dhammapadāṭṭakathā* (*Dhammapada Commentary*); and rich literary retellings of *jātaka* tales, for instance by Āryaśūra in his *Jātakamālā*.[19]

These stories, often set up to illustrate a Buddhist adage given explicitly at the beginning and at the end, frequently contain a tacit or explicit summative statement by the Buddha about how things are, usually where this is not otherwise knowable ("The consciousness of the goodly youth Godhika has not fixed itself anywhere"; "The men who died in the flood are the same who, in a previous life, poisoned the well"), or about what should be done now ("Find a mustard seed from any house that has not known sorrow"; "Let the ogress hold your baby"). Being asserted by the Buddha (or the Buddha-as-Bodhisattva, or sometimes a bodhisattva or advanced practitioner), these declarations enjoy authority and are normative: *this* is how we too ought to see the situation, judge, and respond. Seldom, however, do we see the Buddha-as-Bodhisattva (or as Buddha) offer reasons or explanations for his assertions, judgments, or recommendations. The Buddha himself, it should be noted, rarely *acts,* except as a bodhisattva in extraordinary gestures of giving and care.

In spite of story after story, we never come any closer to a sense of the Buddha as a person. We do not "get to know him" in a way that could make us "feel close to him." The stories do not educate us into adopting that sort of personal relation to the Buddha, or to any of the exemplars represented, even those of advanced lay practitioners. Although the birth stories recount pre-enlightenment lives of the Buddha, there is no fixed order to them, yielding a narrative arc and a sense of how to get from "ordinary

person like me" to perfected bodhisattva. In any story of the Buddha, he is already extraordinary. Even in stories of bodhisattvas and advanced lay practitioners, we are given no sense of their trajectories or inner lives. The intention and effect of their presentation as exemplars, then, are not constitutively tied to their being particular persons, who we can perhaps relate to and thus make sense of emulating so as to become the sort of persons they are. If Ian Kidd is correct and "to fully take someone as a model for one's own life requires as full a picture of how they lived theirs as is possible" (2018, 391), then Buddhist narratives as a *genre* positively resist eliciting emulation. For they are completely lacking in the "dense, detailed description of how the exemplar acted, spoke, felt, thought, and lived," devoid of "an emotionally charged style rich in biographical, contextual detail" (387) which is supposed to "activate our admiration for an exemplar as depicted and enable emulation of them" (386).[20] While there is much of Buddhist exemplars saying what they think in Buddhist narratives, such thoughts are overwhelmingly thoughts expressing a way of understanding reality and our situation within it: the transience and interdependence of reality, the pitiable absence of control, and of insight into this lack of control. This is, I suggest, no accident, but rather a feature of the pervasive recognition of the danger inherent in exemplars: the more personable they are, the more likely that one becomes attached to the person themselves, engrossed in their story or in all the rich detailed emotional tapestry of life that it is the Buddha's aim to help us to see through. Famously, we should not become attached in that way even to the Buddha. Thus the stories are composed in such a way that the more we look at the Buddha or moral exemplar, the less there is to see.

Instead, the stories take a wider view and, by the presence of the Buddha (or a recognized surrogate) within them, imply that this wider view is normative. The Buddhist narratives reveal how—as the Buddha or other extraordinary person sees it—each person, at varying stages of moral progress, is caught up in a web of relations, to other persons, to their previous and future selves; how their decisions come from somewhere, from their aims and ambitions and fears, from previous decisions and circumstances, from interactions with others;[21] how care and not resentment cures suffering; and that the ordinary world, driven by lust and hatred and ignorance, is a pitiable one, in need of care.

By revealing this as how the Buddha sees reality and thus the world around us, the stories tell us that we *ought also* to focus our attention on the transience and essencelessness of reality, and from this attend to the long and wide view—to how things fit together over a lifetime, between lifetimes, between the different lives and decisions of neighbors, friends, and family. We *ought* to see the dependent arising within all human events and relations, the emptiness of unhindered agency, the vanity of worldly

measures of success and value, the suffering inherent in this transience, no-self, and dependent arising; we ought to see the misfortune and even wickedness of others as so many opportunities to alleviate suffering. When the Buddha does not describe the world explicitly in these terms—"do not distress yourself that what is breakable has broken," and, "they are innocent and merely reaping the consequences of actions in a previous life"—his skillful teaching sets tasks that will bring the ordinary person round to this way of seeing reality: go get a mustard seed from the house that has known no bereavement; let the murderous ogress hold your baby. This is the *true* view, the *right* way to see things.[22] This is seeing reality as it is. The more we look at the Buddha, the more he will direct our attention elsewhere, toward the entangled transience of reality.

Buddhaghosa's Meditations

If the Buddha is a moral exemplar, his exemplarity is outstandingly self-effacing; and we become good not by study of a particular good man and his particular actions and doing as the good man does, but by discounting particularity and seeing as the good man sees. We see this point reiterated in Buddhaghosa's treatment of *samādhi* in the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Path of Purification*. *Samādhi* is mental cultivation, in the form of a series of structured exercises, which leads one ultimately to liberating knowledge (*prajñā*)—insight into the fundamental nature of reality as dependently arising, empty of self.

Tellingly, the section on *prajñā* is notably short on narratives and exemplars. But even in his exposition of mental cultivation, when Buddhaghosa does appeal to moral exemplars it is always with due caution, drawing back from anything that may invest the exemplar with too much specificity and personality in which one may become enamored or engrossed. For instance, recalling the Buddha's reaction to being "severed limb from limb with a two handled saw" by bandits (*Visuddhimagga* IX.15) may help us to attain a similar attitude of loving-kindness (*metta*) and care (*karuṇā*). But such "review[ing] the special qualities of the Master's conduct" (*Visuddhimagga* IX.25) is just one of several equally plausible tools for dissolving feelings of enmity, which is in any case a mere preliminary to the cultivation of impersonally extended loving-kindness and care.

The way the particularity of the exemplar vanishes or becomes transparent just as one engages with it is especially conspicuous in Buddhaghosa's presentation of meditation on the Buddha himself. Here, if anywhere, one would expect to be presented with a vivid depiction of the Buddha, of his admirable and inspiring qualities. Indeed, in the introduction of the "Recollection of the Buddha" exercise, this is described as "mindfulness with the Enlightened One's special qualities as its object" (*Vism*. VII.1). But when the details of this exercise are actually set out, at *Visuddhimagga*

VII.2–67, the "special qualities" selected foreground the Buddha as knower of reality, or as teacher of this knowledge, and great portions of this exercise are devoted to dwelling on what he knew and taught reality to be. Meditation on the Buddha, by which we are ourselves improved, is meditation on the things he came to know, in virtue of which he is awakened.

For instance, in this exercise the Buddha is first considered under the term "accomplished" (*Vism.* VII.3–25); but the accomplishment at issue is predominantly the elimination of "ignorance" which is the hub of the wheel of rebirths (VII.7, VII.8). *Visuddhimagga* VII.9 to VII.22 goes on to rehearse what that ignorance is ignorance *of*—that is, it rehearses in detail what the Buddha taught about dependent arising. The next salient characteristic of the Buddha to recollect is his being "fully awakened" [*sammāsambuddha*] (VII.26); and again this introduces lengthy passages of description *not* of the Buddha, but of what the Buddha knew. The way to correctly call to mind the fact that the Buddha "completely discovered all things rightly by himself step by step" (VII.27) is to go step by step oneself through the catalog of things he came to know: every identifiable element (eye, ear…body, mind…feeling, consciousness, contact) is suffering, rooted in ignorance, and to be brought to cessation through understanding. Under the heading of the Buddha's "clear vision and virtuous conduct," rather more is said about the former than the latter and no descriptions of actual acts of the Buddha are to be brought to mind. The Buddha as "knower of worlds" is even more explicitly focused on not how the Buddha looked but how he saw. The Buddha may indeed be lovely and worthy of devotion and reverence. But if we would be like him, we must *see like him*. And what he is looking at is not himself and his lovely virtues, but the nature of reality.

Like the narrative tales, Buddhaghosa's meditation on the Buddha does not tell us anything about Śakyamuni Buddha, or any other exemplar. The "recollection of the Buddha" rather picks out the Buddha-as-knower in order to direct attention through him, toward the reality he saw, as he saw it. The result of this transparency of the exemplar is that we are thereby made that little bit more like the Buddha.

Transparent Exemplars and Good Friends

On the ethical view of transformation through knowing an impersonal reality, exemplars are rightly used when they are self-effacing—when their outstanding goodness attracts our attention not to themselves but to the reality they see, and by seeing which their understanding of everyday reality is transfigured. This has the unexpected implication of taking away pressure for our exemplars to embody a saintly perfection. For there can be exemplary acts and exemplary moments—moments in which, for the witness, the real good shines through and commands attention. Anton

Schmidt, to whom Arendt refers in the passage above, not need be flawless in order for calling the fact of him to mind to be salutary.[23] Because the power of the exemplar is in pointing us away from themselves toward reality, the mass of particularities of the individual who so points us is not in view one way or another. Someone otherwise mediocre may in one important instance *get it right* about how things are to be seen, from the right (impersonal) perspective, and a witness to this may themselves thus be turned toward the possibility of such insight, even if the person on the whole is not exemplary and to be emulated.

Thus, while diffident about the use of exemplars of outstanding goodness, Buddhists and Platonists each recognize the critical importance of the company we keep. Our friends may not be outstandingly virtuous; but if they are good friends to have, they will support us in keeping our attention turned in the right direction. In the Buddhist tradition, the "good friend" need not be a moral paragon, yet they may be good for us by their shared commitment to real goodness instead of facsimiles of it, by their shared conviction that seeing real reality as the Buddha did is the sole route to attaining this. The good friend reminds us not to become attached to the teacher (or exemplar) any more than to anyone else—reminds us not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself, no matter how dazzling the finger.

Plato likewise appreciates the importance of good friends in focusing our efforts on knowing real goodness. It is thematized in his complicated discussion with Callicles (485e–488b), who may not be in a position to act as a good friend in fact. And the centrality of dialogue (both informal and as *dialektikē*) and joint inquiry in the Platonic texts illustrates the same point. The interlocutor with whom dialectic is fruitful and improving is the one who shares in the search for the truth of how things are, regardless of who might initially hold what hypothesis or background convictions on the matter. The extraordinary reversals of Plato's *Protagoras* illustrate this sharply, as Socrates and Protagoras reverse positions over the course of the dialogue, but only Protagoras—invested as he is in his public *persona* rather than reality—comes out of it humiliated. This stands in stark contrast to Theaetetus and Theodorus, in the *Theaetetus*, who can engage with Socrates in a way that sees past their personal investment and cares only for finding the truth. With respect to outstanding exemplars, friendship in both traditions is expressed not just in encouraging attention to them, but in helping us to resist becoming trapped in an admiration and emulation which would cause us to miss the good that made our exemplar good.

In both traditions, moral exemplars are not primarily for emulation, but for illumination. Their conspicuous goodness lights up the possibility of a real goodness and a worthy ideal that shows up everyday morality

for the modest thing it is. Exemplars may even illuminate the fact that this goodness is a possibility *for us*, but only if the exemplar's personality is effaced for us—as the Buddhist tales and meditation instructions actively promote, and as the depictions of Socrates in Plato's dialogues likewise, if indirectly, attempt to instill. However different their accounts of reality and knowledge of it, Buddhists and Platonists agree on this much: to become good, we must see reality truly; and to see truly, we must turn away from all factors of personality—even (especially) when looking to others as moral exemplars. Instead, one must look *through* the exemplar toward the impersonal reality they are committed to knowing, and manifest their same commitment to seeing all particular situations in that light.

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Notes

1 Translation by G. M. A. Grube; other translations are my own unless otherwise noted. All translations of Plato used can be found in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper.
2 In the context of friendship, "each takes the impress from the other of those traits in him that give him pleasure—whence the saying: 'Noble deeds from noble men'" (*EN* 1172a13–14).
3 Discussed in detail by Angier (this volume); Sanderse goes so far as to say, "there is pedagogically no way to become virtuous than by emulating role models" (2013, 36); see also Kristjânsson's "there is, in fact, in the Aristotelian model no other way for young people of getting to know those qualities and learning to emulate them than by following the example of the role model" (2006, 47). Carr (2023) offers a balanced assessment of emulation for moral development.
4 Others working in this vein, sometimes constructively critical, include Croce (2019); Herdt (2019) (the focus of this 2019 special issue is, in fact, exemplarity); and Kidd (2018), who takes a cross-traditional perspective.
5 Kotsonis (2020) elaborates on this concern that admiration may not just misfire but may be socially and culturally conditioned in ways that make it systematically liable to be an inconclusive indicator of goodness. In his astute discussion of the dangerous admiration of 'the fine' or beauty in Plato, Fine (2021) observes that "balanced against the promise of beauty to manifest what a good life consists of and to move one to live accordingly is an acute worry that this experience can mislead" (169). Moss (2007) also highlights Plato's mistrust of our attitudes of admiration: "The censorship of poetry about gods and heroes,

in [*Republic*] Books 2 and 3, was premised on the idea that we take poetry's heroes as role models: we admire and strive to emulate them" (431).

6 Carpenter (2023) sets out the outlines of this broadly shared view. The impersonal idealism I find in Plato and Indian Buddhist philosophers differs from what Gowans (2023) calls "self-cultivation philosophies" more in emphasis than in principle. Having no 'human nature' to perfect, impersonal idealism emphasizes comprehensive transformation rather than self-cultivation; and the knowledge which promises such transformation is of reality as such rather than any kind of actionable, situational knowledge.

7 These differences matter for the sort of transformative effects to be expected—Carpenter (2024a) explores these—but not so much for the question at hand.

8 The contemporary Aristotelian interpretation that comes closest to this is that of Hampson (2019), who emphasizes the need for an ethical emulator to "take on the perspective" of the exemplar. But that perspective remains thoroughly person-oriented and situational.

9 Verses 22–23 draw the two moves together with, "Just as the Sugatas [saints] of old took up the mind of Awakening…So too I shall generate the mind of Awakening for the sake of the world" (translation adapted from Crosby and Skilton).

10 The actual charges were "corrupting the youth" and impiety. While there may have been political motivations for the trial, relating to Socrates' time on the Prytanes or his (in)actions under the reign of the Thirty, any basis for the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth arose from Socrates' signature activity of conversing in public. There could have been no conviction on these charges without a jury of 500 Athenians familiar with his public persona of conducting public interrogations of prominent persons.

11 Nails and Monoson (2022) devote a substantial section to "Socrates's Strangeness."

12 May Sim, in this volume, quotes Epictetus saying, "Socrates became fully perfect in this way, by not paying attention to anything but his reason in everything that he met with" (*Handbook* 51). The emphasis on where to turn one's attention is shared with Plato; but not only are their conceptions of reason different (*prohairesis* for Epictetus, *noũs* for Plato), Plato's Socrates does not focus on *his own reason* at all but on the true intelligible reality which intellect can grasp.

13 That it is one's own task, and that one seeks to understand for oneself, does not imply that this is a solitary enterprise. On the contrary, it may even be necessarily dialectical. The point is rather about the motivation with which one enters into the project, and the self-sufficiency in explanation aimed at (see Carpenter [2024b] for further discussion).

14 According to Griffin (2014), the later Platonists' use of the figure of Socrates in moral development echoes this. While he insists that "Socrates was viewed by Iamblichus and his successors as a target for imitation, a paradigm for *mimēsis*," he immediately qualifies this with "this means something a bit different for a Neoplatonist from what it means for many readers today" (Griffin 2014, 105–6). We readers "are meant to imitate the characters [in a Platonic dialogue] in being 'turned'…from materiality… By studying the reasons for the behavior of the *character* Socrates, we come to desire the *knowledge* that he has" (107). Imitation or emulation of Socrates takes the form of changing one's whole mental state, through reasoned argument, so that it is thoroughly informed by a correct understanding of reality.

15 True teachers, Lear (2022) writes, "are exemplars of the love of their subject. Many of the teachers who influenced me were not interested *in* me at all" (76).

16 "Homage to the Buddha," Vasubandhu writes, "He has, in an absolute manner, destroyed all blindness… 'Blindness' is ignorance, for ignorance hinders the seeing of things as they truly are" (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, I.1, tr. Pruden 1988). Dignāga salutes the Buddha "who is the personification of the means of cognition, who seeks the benefit of all beings, who is the teacher" (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* I.i.1, tr. Hattori 1968).
17 "Looking back on my childhood, I realize we were never given religious instruction as such, either in school or at home. We participated in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies…and listened to many, many Buddhist stories. That was how we learned to be Buddhists" (Obeyesekere 1991, x).
18 Rotman (2008, 15–30) offers a concise overview of plausible suggestions of how and when various *avadāna* collections arose and how they were used in Buddhist practice.
19 *Divyāvadāna*s are translated by Rotman as *Divine Tales;* the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* is translated by E. W. Burlingame as *Buddhist Legends*; Khoroche offers a nice translation of Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*.
20 Carpenter (2020) details how different this lack of rich inner life and conflict makes Buddhist narratives from the sort of literature central to moral formation on Nussbaum's account of it.
21 Hansen (2002) describes specifically the Cambodian Buddhist narrative *Gatilok* as eliciting appreciation of dependent arising in particular. Transience, no-self, and non-violence are other central themes.
22 The narrative context is also nicely sensitive to degrees of imperfection. Devoted laypeople see a situation one way, while their less committed friends see it otherwise. Mallikā (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* IV.3a) offers one description of the appropriate response for the monks, likening the death of her husband and sons to the dropping of a jar of ghee; but to her daughters-in-law, who do not (yet) aspire to the correct, impersonal view of reality, Mallikā describes the situation in terms of *karma*: "your husbands were blameless, and have merely reaped the fruits of misdeeds in previous lives; do not grieve; cherish no resentment against the king [who killed them]" (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* IV.3a, [355], tr. Burlingame). We, the audience to this tale, can discern two recognizable perspectives one might adopt, each of them—in a way—good. But we can also see in their difference the gulf between worldly virtue, which the daughters-in-law might be exhorted to, and a goodness of a different order, which Mallikā at least partially expresses in her description of her loss to the monks.
23 Jonathan Lear writes eloquently of the "local exemplar" (Lear 2022, 48–55), about whom "I do not need or want to be persuaded of his supreme excellence" (53).
24 See Heim (2014), Chapter 4, for an extended discussion of Buddhaghosa's use of narratives.

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