T

Facing Moral Complexity. The Role of Moral Excellence in Guiding Moral Judgment[1]

Simone Grigoletto

1. *A Phenomenological Perspective on the Experience of the Moral Agent*

As moral philosophers, we mostly deal with the conceptual analysis of moral theories. However, we should always be reminded that our moral framework does not only affect the scientific production of the contemporary debate on normative ethics. These frameworks do have an influence on moral agency as we live it in our everyday lives. Conceptual work is of primary importance since practice without a strong theoretical background can be easily misguided. At the same time, theory without a constant reference to practice risks to remain empty. For this reason, it is important to adopt a phenomenological[2] perspective of what it is like to be a moral agent.

This sort of analysis reveals a manifold moral experience that perceives the agent as drawn by different moral pulls. From a moral point of view, we seem not to function in a coherent way but to respond to different moral sources. This means that we are attracted by different (and sometimes conflicting) values that can lead us to the so-called "hard" choices. Such a pluralistic moral framework is revealed by a phenomenological analysis of the subject's moral experience. This understanding of morality can

[1] The production of this essay has been sustained and scientifically guided by the Catholic University Center of the Italian Episcopal Conference.

[2] The term "phenomenological" can allude to very different meanings and call to mind various philosophical traditions (the philosophical approach that follows Edmund Husserl's work is a major example). The understanding of the term that I use here is less specific. By phenomenological, I mean the analysis of the moral experience from the first-person perspective.

 DOI: 10.4454/teoria.v39i2.80

be generally defined as *moral complexity*. However, the origins of this approach are difficult to trace. Certainly, the debate in the English-speaking philosophical tradition of the twentieth century is characterized by a multitude of authors that have tried to address this issue. Among them, David Ross, Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Charles Larmore stand out. What all these authors have in common is the inclination to emphasize how the agent's moral experience is ultimately *complex* and as such, cannot be oversimplified in favor of whatever moral framework. The approach of *moral complexity* is then the belief that we, as moral agents, are not required to conform to the moral theories that have greatly characterized (and partly still do so) moral philosophy over the last three centuries. Again, such theories hold that the phenomenological features that characterize a moral agent lead to the espousal of a pluralistic (complex) system of morality. The endorsement of a pluralistic structure of morality is, to a certain degree, another feature that combines the thoughts of the cited authors. This theoretical move seriously considers the need for a framework that acknowledges *moral complexity* by offering the degree of theoretical depth that pluralism can extensively grant. Different moral sources can eventually clash with one another, but rather than being considered a mere problem to solve, this heterogeneity is the very essence of our moral lives. We need to keep this essential complexity intact if we want to provide a truthful account of morality. Isaiah Berlin's words forcefully remind us about this important prerequisite of any moral inquiry: «These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are»[3]. Post-modern societies have broadly displayed such increasing diversity of ideas on how to live a good life. Based on Berlin's words, we then can only acknowledge how *moral complexity* characterizes our lives as human beings. I think that this point is particularly evident when we analyze cases of *moral excellence*[4]. Moral saints and heroes represent a very specific (and yet quite interesting) category of moral agents. For example, if we consider the praiseworthy deeds of Father Maximilian Kolbe or the 9/11 firefighters, we can appreciate the complexity of their choices. Being the exceptional agents that they are, they have acted beyond the call of duty (even if in different ways), but it is not difficult to believe how tough and challenging their choices must have been. These particular moral choices

[3] I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013, p. 14.

[4] *Moral excellence* is my primary concern in sections 5 and 6 of this paper.

represent cases where the pulls of different moral values and the complexity of moral deliberation are particularly evident. The general aim of my paper is to show how these cases turn out to be remarkably efficient in developing and guiding the moral judgment of all moral agents.

2. *Defining Moral Complexity. Axiological and Methodological Pluralism*

I now introduce some considerations about the features of our moral life that a phenomenological approach reveals. Consider the following example:

> Mary has a good friend named John, who lives nearby. She promised to John that she would help him to move out from his current apartment and to bring all his belongings to his new place. When the day of the move arrives, she is about to go to John's place when she receives a call from her long-time friend Juliet. They have not seen each other for a while, so Juliet invites Mary to go out for coffee. If Mary goes out with Juliet, she will not have time to help John that afternoon. Therefore, even if she is filled with regret and would greatly enjoy Juliet's company (more than helping John), she declines Juliet's invitation. After all, she has made a promise to John and believes that keeping it is the right thing to do.
>
> Later that day, Mary is at John's new place, which happens to be much smaller than his former apartment. John struggles to make everything fit in the new place, so he decides to donate much of his belongings that are not necessary anymore. John's friend Mark has a much larger house, which would have plenty of space for John's furniture. John has previously promised to Mark that he would receive all the surpus items from the move. However, Mary suggests that a fairer choice would be giving everything to the local prosocial organization in order to have all the goods redistributed to some people who have less. She believes that giving to those who have less in order to maximize the benefits of the donation is the right thing to do.

Situations such as this one are common in our everyday lives. We happen to make moral judgments in different contexts, according to diverse backgrounds, and with various aims. As such, we recognize a plurality of variables regarding how we make moral deliberations. If we examine our moral experience through a phenomenological approach, we realize how complex[5] our moral life is. Understanding the phenomenology of our com-

[5] I use "complex" as a non-technical term for now, meaning composite, heterogeneous, and manifold.

mon moral judgments reveals the manifold essence of morality. Moral experience ultimately discloses that the agent's moral life, if considered as a whole and not specifically involving a single case, appears to be complex. I believe that such complexity is the result of two different features of our moral life: *axiological pluralism* and *methodological pluralism*.

The first way of recognizing pluralism is by analyzing the content of our moral judgments. If we compare different moral judgments, we notice how we deliberate according to a variable set of what happens to be morally valuable in the given circumstances. What I mean by *axiological pluralism* is the fact that our judgments are based on values[6] that vary their relevance from time to time. In other words, our judgments vary in their specific content. In the above-cited example, Mary decides to keep her promise, grounding her judgment on her respect for the promisee[7]. Respect (or the autonomy of other moral agents) happens to be the value that appears especially important to Mary, given the circumstances. In that particular scenario, that value trumps all the others, assigning a prominent importance to keeping a promise. In contrast, when she suggests how to donate fairly, her focus changes. She is mainly concerned with the moral value of equality (or a certain understanding of utility, one might say). In this second situation, a different value takes priority over the others. This example shows how, in real-life situations, different moral values (one irreducible to the other) can vary in their moral relevance for the agent. My contention here is simple: the moral phenomenology of the moral agent highlights a plurality of moral values that happen to have variable moral priority. Moral experience is characterized by a pluralism of values, suggesting that we are not necessarily required to pick one of them as having a constant priority over the others. This idea aligns with the standard definition of moral pluralism as a framework of multiple, potentially ultimate moral ends that express a *pro tanto* priority over the others.

A second way of understanding the heterogeneity of morality is to recognize that we do not make all our moral judgments by following a unique and coherent methodology. There are different (at least two) ways in which we make moral deliberations, and their priority varies from time to time. What I call *methodological pluralism* is the fact that our judgments do

[6] This term will likely be misunderstood. What I mean here is simply that different fundamental ideals of morality might happen to be relevant in the particular case.

[7] A Kantian line of argumentation could be even more specific, claiming that a promise needs to be kept because of the respect for the autonomy of all other rational agents. Arguably, we might deduce from this argument that Kant's ultimate moral end is individual freedom.

not always follow the same path to provide a moral deliberation. Again, in the above-cited example, Mary decides to keep her promise by virtue of a moral claim derived from a deontological approach. At the same time, once she is confronted with the issue of a fair donation, she morally deliberates according to a consequentialist approach. Cases such as this reveal that according to the situation, one methodology for moral deliberation might trump another that is considered less efficient in dealing with the situation faced by the agent. The consequentialist approach might appear more apt for what is morally at stake in cases such as the fair donation of one's belongings. Conversely, there happens to be cases, such as keeping a promise, where grounding our deliberation on a deontological framework appears to fit the circumstances better[8]. This is not to say that in a particular situation, the methodology that the agent endorses is the only one available to reach the same conclusion. There are ways to ground a promise on consequentialist approaches and ways to respect equality according to a deontological theory. Nevertheless, the choice among the feasible options is left to the agent, who will pick the most reasonable and efficient way to account for the relevant moral value. In one of the influential papers coauthored by Joshua Greene, he and his colleagues have made a claim similar to the present one[9]. Through an experimental inquiry, they have tried to show that a moral deliberation by the same agent is a combination of rational and emotional engagement. Moral judgment can be either *impersonal* or *personal*, according to which of the two elements is more influential. These entail two distinct mental events. The experiments conducted by Greene and his collaborators confronted the emotional responses that different subjects revealed in the analysis of moral dilemmas of different kinds compared with what they revealed in cases of non-moral choices. What Greene and colleagues' study has shown is primarily the fact that our moral judgment is a combination of different factors (rational and emotive) and further confirms how it is ultimately complex. Moreover, their analysis has underlined how judgments, considered distinctively moral, can be of two kinds (at least) and how this is true even at the cerebral level. This

[8] In certain cases, the choice of the relevant methodology might even exceed the limits of rationalist theories (such as the two reported in the example) to conform to a *sentimentalist* approach. I leave this issue aside for now, since it is not functional to my point to further articulate this specific issue.

[9] J. Greene *et al.*, *An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment*, in «Science», 293 (2001), pp. 2105-2108. The main claim of this paper and Greene's subsequent works is that emotions play a major role in moral deliberation.

conclusion resembles what I have defined here as *methodological pluralism*. However, my classification of pluralism aims at giving an account of a philosophical distinction (deontology and consequentialism in the above-cited example) rather than a distinction of psychological and cerebral activities.

My claim is that moral pluralism is structured (at least) at two levels: value-related and methodological levels. Amartya Sen implicitly alludes to a similar point when focusing on the idea of justice in cases of just allocation of resources[10]. He proposes a scenario where there are plural and competing reasons for justice, all of which are impartial in different ways. Suppose you have to choose which one of three children has to receive a flute about which they are quarreling. The first child is the only one who can actually play the flute. The second child is clearly the poorest and the one who has no toys to play with (the other two being clearly richer children). The third child is the one who has made the flute after many months of work. Who should receive the flute if you have to make a just decision? This scenario points out that there is no clear answer to this question. Of course, different theories of justice would straightforwardly point out which one of the children ought to receive the flute[11], but which of the three ways of deliberation we ought to follow remains an open question. Accordingly, we might end up making an arbitrary choice. This happens for two reasons:

> I also want to draw attention here to the fairly obvious fact that the differences between the three children's justificatory arguments do not represent divergences about what constitutes individual advantage […], but about the principles that should govern the allocation of resources in general. They are about how social arrangements should be made and what social institutions should be chosen, and through that, about what social realizations would come about. It is not simply that the vested interests of the three children differ (though of course they do), but that the three arguments each point to a different type of impartial and non-arbitrary reason[12].

The problem here is not only which of the moral values at stake takes priority over the others (be it hedonistic utility, economic equality, or autonomy). We also face the problem of which of the theoretical frameworks

[10] A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (MA) 2009, pp. 12-15.

[11] As Sen underlines, the economic egalitarian would assign the flute to the poorest, the libertarian would offer it to the flute maker, and the utilitarian hedonist would give it to the person who can actually play the flute.

[12] A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, cit., pp. 14-15.

(granted that all three provide impartial results in their own ways) needs to be espoused to make the just choice. The phenomenology of cases such as this reveals the double layer of moral pluralism. Both *axiological pluralism* and *methodological pluralism* play a role in our everyday choices and as such, need to be considered when we analyze our moral choices.

3. *Moral Judgment: Philosophical Tradition and Contemporary Insights*

Following a pluralist moral framework can make agency a very delicate procedure. This is true for at least two causes: a) it might be hard to recognize the moral reasons for the action, and b) it might be hard to decide which of the reasons takes priority over the others (in other words, it is difficult to choose what to do). Both these topics are widely covered by the philosophical tradition from its early stages to its contemporary developments. The first of these two problems is generally covered by questions over the use of the practical reason, intended, in this regard, as the faculty that recognizes the moral reasons for the action[13]. The second problem concerns the usage (and development) of the agent's moral judgment as the capacity to understand what to do in the given situation. In this paper, I focus on this second issue.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is well aware of the fact that *deliberation* and *choice* embody crucial moments of our moral lives. They both represent something that is specific to fully formed moral agents who can avoid the lures of appetite and other passions[14]. Accordingly, Aristotle claims that choice is particularly helpful when we need to evaluate someone's moral character and ability to pursue the virtues. However, while the process of deliberation has primary importance in our moral experiences, it is far from being an easy task to accomplish:

> Now every class of men deliberates about the things that can be done by their own efforts. And in the case of exact and self-contained sciences there is no deliberation […], but the things that are brought about by our own efforts, but not always in the same way, are the things about which we deliberate. […] Delibera-

[13] This Kantian understanding of practical reason is famously argued in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, when Kant discusses the categorical imperative as the primary principle of practical reason.

[14] This group does not include children. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, 1111 b 5.

tion is concerned with things that happen in a certain way for the most part, but in which the event is obscure, and with things in which it is indeterminate. We call in others to aid us in deliberation on important questions, distrusting ourselves as not being equal to deciding. We deliberate not about ends but about means. […] They assume the end and consider how and by what means it is to be attained; and if it seems to be produced by several means they consider by which it is most easily and best produced[15].

This fascinating passage includes many interesting points about the deliberative process. First, the calculation that characterizes hard sciences is not representative of the sort of process that outlines moral agency. From a moral perspective, choosing what to do might entail different features that can alter the process from time to time (the sort of variation that does not happen in hard sciences). This process might eventually make the picture "obscure" and "indeterminate", transforming each choice into the product of a brand-new deliberative process. It is interesting to see here how Aristotle recognizes the help that can come from others who embrace a different perspective and can be more equipped in facing the indeterminateness of the situation.

A second interesting point is the acknowledgment of pluralism. When we decide what to do, we focus on the various means at our disposal in order to achieve a certain end. This approach introduces the possibility that we have various means available. Choosing the "easiest" or the "best" way to do something ultimately means determining which of the available options takes priority over the others. According to Aristotle, this is the situation where we exercise the faculty of *practical wisdom* (φρόνησις), namely the feature we attribute to those who deliberate well about good ends and the means to achieve them[16]. In this paper, I focus on finding seeing possible ways of developing and supporting this faculty. The first two features of the deliberative process that we can draw from the ancient thought is the possible indeterminateness of this process and the variety of the means that we can choose.

Thomas Aquinas has expressed similar attention to the deliberative process by assigning the core of his moral system to *voluntas* (the will). Moreover, for Aquinas, a virtue is an *operative habit* expressed by the capacity of choosing and deliberating wisely over time[17]. Moral deliberation

[15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, 1112 a 30-1112 b 17.

[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, 1140 a 24-1140 a 32.

[17] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, II, q. 55, a. 3 (trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947).

is then not only the primary expression of our moral dimension but also the way of defining our virtuous character. Interestingly, for the reading of the moral complexity delineated here, the intention behind the widespread anthropological interpretation of Aquinas' thought is for the deliberative process to be an inner dialogue amid a plurality of voices[18]. Moral choice deals with the plurality of contingencies and as such, is not necessarily an easy task[19]. Moral deliberation confronted with the plurality of reality is described as a process that has to face a certain degree of uncertainty. This feature, together with the plurality and the indeterminateness underlined by Aristotle, represents a proper description of the phenomenology of a moral choice. Authors from the ancient and the medieval philosophical traditions have never used terminology that explicitly evokes a more contemporary concern for moral pluralism; nevertheless, it is significant that they have not missed highlighting the *complexity* typical of the moral dimension.

Such terminology is much more present in more recent works. The contemporary debate on decision-making has a clear focus: the rational capacities of the subject who recognizes, evaluates, and picks the more suitable moral reasons in order to achieve the intended end. This trust in the subject's moral reasoning is well summarized by Charles Larmore in these lines:

> To exercise the faculty of reason is to engage in reasoning, to adduce considerations we see as reasons in order to conclude that we should believe this or do that. […] Reason involves a receptivity to reasons[20].

Responsiveness to reasons defines the specific *practical* character of this faculty of reason. Acknowledging the reasons in favor of a certain course of action is practical because it is something connected with our intentions and ultimate ends. This is why this faculty of reason has a strong motivational component (i.e., it leads to acting). Additionally, the specific object of practical reasoning is what distinguishes the practical from the

[18] See G. Grandi, *Alter-nativi. Prospettive sul dialogo interiore a partire dalla "moralis consideratio" di Tommaso d'Aquino*, Edizioni Meudon, Trieste 2015. Grandi argues that Aquinas' conception of the inner life of a choice later inspired Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (pp. 131-132).

[19] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, II, q. 14, a. 1 (trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947).

[20] C. Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 109.

other major role of reason, the *theoretical*. In this regard, we are concerned with what to believe and generally speaking, with our understanding of the world. The definitions of belief and intention (in relation to our ultimate ends) are, in sum, the primary objects of theoretical and practical reasoning. This fundamental distinction of the roles of reason has widely characterized the contemporary debate[21].

In the course of the 20th century, many philosophers supported the idea that our moral decision-making process is characterized by a plurality of sources of the good. Among the supporters of the pluralistic approach, we find authors such as Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Charles Larmore. The grounding idea is that when we engage in moral reasoning, we face different kinds of moral forces that could potentially count as moral reasons. This is what makes the experience of the moral agent ultimately *complex*[22]. According to these authors, what is essential to emphasize is that the various reasons that our practical reason acknowledges to have *prima facie* importance are not simply the different specifications of a unique ultimate idea of the good. In fact, the good appears intimately divided and heterogeneous, and we need to recognize this feature. As our everyday experience often shows, a moral conflict consequently becomes a common component of the moral domain. Finding a clear answer to solve such complexity remains an open question and in many aspects, a fascinating and relatively unexplored field of moral philosophy.

The plurality of moral options that we have to face is an aspect that has been evident since the time of Aristotelian ethics. In the following sections, I highlight how remarkable agents and in general, any instance of *moral excellence* could help us deal with the complexities of moral choice.

[21] To be fair, the distinction between the *theoretical* and the *practical* has always been of primary importance in philosophical investigations. Arthur Schopenhauer provides an interesting example, where he distinguishes between a *theoretical* philosopher and a *practical* one. See A. Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes: Volume I Early Manuscripts* (1804-1818), Berg, Oxford 1988, p. 122.

[22] In his famous paper, Nagel introduces the idea of the *fragmentation of value*: T. Nagel, *The Fragmentation of Value*, in Id., *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979, p. 131. It is interesting to remember here that Nagel concludes this essay by referring to the important role of the Aristotelian notion of *phrónesis*.

4. *Interpretation of Reasons and Moral Capabilities*

Moral agency is not necessarily an easy task. Moreover, it is an activity that requires dedication and exercise[23]. As such, it is plausible that different subjects present different moral skills and capabilities[24]. In fact, some agents are better than others at recognizing moral reasons and display a more developed faculty of moral judgment. Those are the agents that we usually engage with when we suspend our judgment and seek advice. An even more limited and uncommon group of agents – moral heroes and saints – is considered exceptionally good at this task. They are said to go beyond the call of duty in remarkable ways, exemplifying what we call *moral excellence*.

In the recent history of the contemporary debate on normative ethics, this peculiar category of acts and agents has drawn a notable amount of attention. An essay that has certainly encouraged and introduced the issue back in the 1960s is Urmson's *Saints and Heroes*[25]. In brief, the author points out how the classical tripartition of moral acts defined by deontic logic (obligatory, forbidden, and morally indifferent) is insufficient to account for the whole spectrum of human agency. The praiseworthy deeds of moral saints and heroes, who go beyond the merely obligatory, are not defined by those categories. This claim has given rise to the debate on the concept of *supererogation* in an attempt to define acts that are not morally obligatory but still morally relevant and praiseworthy[26]. Moreover, this concept has an important theoretical function; assigning a dedicated category to acts that express *moral excellence* prevents our theories from being too demanding. Allowing the existence of *supererogation* also means that not *all* morally good acts are obligatory. From a theoretical perspective, this means that a moral theory does not necessarily have to maximize the good, which is a major relief for the regular moral agent. Endorsing a non-maximizing moral theory means that we do not need to sacrifice everything

[23] Aristotle famously states that virtue is a *habitual* state (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1219a).

[24] This does not prevent us from identifying universalizable moral duties. In this sense, a moral duty is a requirement to act in a certain way, regardless of one's moral skills.

[25] J. Urmson, *Saints and Heroes*, in A. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1958, pp. 198-216.

[26] This work on the definition has not arrived at a clear conclusion yet. Existing moral theories, such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, have famously struggled to provide a satisfactory account of supererogation.

we have in order to benefit a distant stranger. If that would be the case, we would live in a world with a handful of moral agents who are actually capable of keeping up with those high standards.

This scenario introduces an interesting and provocative question: why are we not all moral saints and heroes? I would like to reiterate the fact that not all moral agents have the same moral capabilities[27]. Saints and heroes become famous for their ability to demonstrate *moral excellence*[28]. They do so because they rely on more refined moral tools, excellent decision-making skills, and the capacity for self-sacrifice to benefit others. In other words, they have a deeper understanding of moral life and what it takes to aim at the good. Somehow, it is easier for them to deal with *moral complexity*, and for this reason, they stand out with respect to other moral agents. An interesting way to understand this point is enlightened by John Kekes' definition of *moral depth*:

> Depth involves discerning an underlying unity among apparently complex and unrelated phenomena. It is to see the same phenomena as many others also see, but to penetrate below their surface and construct a theory or a vision, depending on the subject matter, that leads to a possible understanding of the reality of which the appearances are manifestations. It is to possess a perspective, an organizing view that provides the foundation of understanding of what was previously problematic, even if no one recognized its problems[29].

Saints and heroes are capable of a deeper understanding of moral life, which is what makes them particularly praiseworthy. This ability allows them to have a deeper connection with their moral values and grants them a remarkable ability to bring about the good that they inspire. These exceptional agents deeply identify with their values, making it possible for them to face cases of great self-sacrifice[30]. However, a mere deeper understanding of the given situation is not the only aspect that constitutes *moral depth*. Kekes claims that depth is not only a cognitive process, but it also has emotive features and action-guiding aspects[31]. The possession of varying degrees of *moral depth* (intended as the combination of moral

[27] By moral capabilities, I generally mean the faculty of moral judgment and the ability to act accordingly.

[28] As shown in the next section, this might happen for different reasons.

[29] J. Kekes, *Moral Depth*, in «Philosophy», 65 (1990), p. 440.

[30] This is what makes them capable of performing what is usually considered *supererogatory*. See A. Archer, M. Ridge, *The Heroism Paradox: Another Paradox of Supererogation*, in «Philosophical Studies», 172, 6 (2015), p. 1589.

[31] J. Kekes, *Moral Depth*, cit., p. 441.

understanding, emotional involvement, and action guidance) is one of the characteristics that differentiates moral agents from one another. My claim is that this aspect has often been overlooked, opening up the undesired possibility that our moral theories become too demanding. From a moral perspective, if we do not recognize different moral capabilities, we would all be required to become saints and heroes.

A second argument in favor of the fact that we do not have to be all saints and heroes is the existence of *exclusionary reasons*. As discussed by Joseph Raz[32], this kind of reason explains how we can refrain from following a certain moral reason for action. When we are confronted with the matter of what to do in a given situation, many moral reasons for action stand out. After some considerations and eventually, the counsel of others, we identify the best reasons for action. Now, at this stage of the deliberative process, many moral reasons are simply not considered. This might be the case for at least three different motives. First, some moral reasons are not considered because other reasons *outweigh* them and take priority. In other words, some reasons are judged to be worse from a moral perspective and are then discarded. Second, the normative force of a given reason can be *undermined* by some further consideration. For example, I have promised my brother that I will lend him my bicycle, so he could go to the gym. I then have a moral commitment to do so. However, the fact that in the meantime, he has found another way to reach the gym undermines my moral commitment to the point where it loses its normative force. At this point, it is important to highlight, as Piller does[33], that *outweighed* reasons, different from *undermined* reasons, keep their normative force. However, such force has a lower intensity than the one of the reasons that take priority, but still, *outweighed* reasons keep their pull. A third kind of reason that prevents moral excellence from being the standard are *exclusionary* reasons, which are particularly important for the concept of *supererogation* as they often come up in cases of moral sanctity and heroism. *Exclusionary* reasons, as Raz defines them[34], are second-order reasons that allow the agent to refrain from taking action for some reason. For example, if I see someone who is drowning in white waters, I have a primary inclination to do something to help this person. However, even if these moral reasons

[32] J. Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990.

[33] C. Piller, *Kinds of Practical Reasons: Attitude-Related Reasons and Exclusionary Reasons*, in S. Miguens, J.A. Pinto, C.E. Mauro (eds.), *Analyses*, Porto University, Porto 2006, pp. 98-105.

[34] J. Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, cit., p. 39.

gain an initial considerable normative force, they lose it as soon as I realize that I have absolutely no swimming skills to personally dive into the water and save the unlucky stranger. Rather, I will do my best to make sure that rescue arrives as soon as possible. We could argue that a case such as this is one where again, the moral agent's skills matter. This time, it is not a case of *moral* skills (such as the different degrees of *moral depth* addressed above), but the inability to swim plays a *morally relevant* role here. It prevents the agent from becoming a moral hero by diving into the water to save a stranger, a possibility that has been *excluded* by the reasons he ought to follow. In fact, the motivating force that saving someone in danger normally has is excluded from playing its regular normative role, given the *exclusionary* reason that I recognize (my inability to swim). This specific kind of moral reason thus explains why on many occasions, we are not required to play the hero or the saint.

A third line of argumentation that prevents moral agents from being required to aim for moral *excellence* involves the distinction between the *requiring* and the *justifying* roles of reasons. Joshua Gert has introduced[35] a double role that reasons can perform; when we recognize moral reasons for taking action, it also means that we perceive their normative force that drives us to act in a certain way. Gert has claimed that not all moral reasons play the same role; accordingly, they do not present the same strength[36]. They could have a *requiring* role, that is, they are necessary and sufficient to make a certain course of action obligatory. If I have promised to help my friend move out of his apartment, I have a *requiring* reason to do so. Reasons could also have a *justifying* role, that is, they support a given course of action while not making it obligatory. I have good reasons to donate a certain amount of money to my preferred nonprofit organization (these reasons would *justify* my donation), but while I recognize the good that this action would bring about, it is hard to claim that I am facing the same normative strength presented by a moral obligation. In general, supererogatory acts are characterized by a *justificatory* role of moral reasons[37].

These lines of argumentation are not meant to weaken the role of moral excellence in our moral lives. Instead, they are supposed to prevent our

[35] See J. Gert, *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, in «Erkenntnis», 59 (2003), pp. 5-36; Id., *Moral Worth, Supererogation, and the Justifying/Requiring Distinction*, in «Philosophical Review», 121, 4 (2012), pp. 611-618.

[36] J. Gert, *Requiring and Justifying: Two Dimensions of Normative Strength*, cit., p. 9.

[37] J. Gert, *Moral Worth, Supererogation, and the Justifying/Requiring Distinction*, cit., p. 612.

acknowledgment of moral reasons from becoming over-demanding and creating a frustrating moral experience (since moral excellence is hardly achievable). In fact, Zagzebski's *Exemplarist Moral Theory* provides an interesting and valuable example of the role of moral exemplars for our theoretical framework[38]. She claims that rather than being concerned with principles and norms, our primary moral concern should be the identification of moral exemplars who are worth our deepest (and well-reflected) admiration. When a moral exemplar is the object of our admiration, it triggers our willingness to "be like that"[39] and emulate the admired character (whether real or fictional). In these terms, *moral excellence* is still of primary importance in conducting our moral life, although, as I have highlighted above, pursuing it at all costs turns out to be problematic. Moral exemplars, as underlined in the last section of this paper, express a more refined moral sensibility. When we cannot come up with a choice of our own to overcome the possible bewildering experience of moral complexity, we should trust their judgment.

5. *Moral Judgment and the Role of Moral Excellence*

Over the last 60 years, the field of moral psychology has progressed extensively. Unsurprisingly, the subject that has drawn major attention is moral development, that is, understanding how we can educate, improve, and enhance our moral faculties. In this regard, Jonathan Haidt's influential studies appear particularly interesting. Since the early 2000s, he has studied a specific emotion called *moral elevation*, defined as a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they witness acts of human goodness, kindness, and compassion[40]. According to his studies, this emotion triggers in the viewers the willingness to perform acts of moral goodness themselves. In less technical terms, moral agency is "contagious" and can be transferred from one agent to another. We could infer that a similar

[38] L. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

[39] According to Zagzebski, her moral theory has a direct counterpart in Kripke and Putnam's *Theory of Direct Reference*. If gold is a substance *like that*, similarly, a good act is acting *like that* particular exemplar. While not free from possible criticisms (I have discussed some of them in S. Grigoletto, *Following the Wrong Example. The Exclusiveness of Heroism and Sanctity*, in «Ethics & Politics», XX, 2 (2018), pp. 89-104), this approach avoids the problematic task of providing a descriptive content to the question about moral goodness.

[40] J. Haidt, *The Positive Emotion of Elevation*, in «Prevention & Treatment», 3, 1 (2000).

process happens in the case of moral judgment. We can form and develop our faculties to guide us through the decisions on what to do by examining what those whom we trust and admire do. The formation of moral agents starts with and consists of their appreciation of the cases of moral goodness that surround them. *Moral excellence* represents an ideal case of moral goodness; thus, it has a significant potential to develop the agents' moral faculties and skills.

Therefore, my general claim in this paper is that we need to acknowledge the dual role of *moral excellence*. First, *moral excellence* is praiseworthy in itself because it introduces remarkable value in the world. The deeds of heroes and saints (considered typical examples of *moral excellence*[41]) are praiseworthy, primarily by virtue of the moral value of their outcomes. A risky rescue of a person or an organ donation is morally good *per se*. Second, we could argue that these acts play a secondary role in how they influence other agent. The studies on *moral elevation* support this claim and suggest this further role of moral goodness. As *moral excellence* is the best possible way of expressing our moral agency, we can conclude that it is also the best way of influencing the judgment of other agents. In these terms, *moral excellence* represents the best tool for our moral development.

In the philosophical debate, Zagzebski's *Exemplarist Moral Theory* has introduced similar claims. Even if she does not dedicate much space to the question of moral judgment, her recent book is responsible for reviving the talks about the fundamental role of moral *exemplars* in our theoretical framework. All the exemplars whom Zagzebski has taken into consideration[42] are, for different reasons, models of *moral excellence*. Accordingly, she defines all the moral terms in relation to the admired moral exemplars[43]. For the sake of my argument about moral judgment, it is interesting to consider her definition of a right act. Judging when facing moral complexity (but also judging in general) ultimately means deciding on the right thing to do:

[41] However, it would be a mistake to consider saints and heroes the only agents capable of moral excellence. While their moral capacities are certainly outstanding and uncommon, individual supererogatory acts are accessible to any moral agent. It is also important to remember here that not all supererogatory acts display the same degree of praiseworthiness. These acts range from donating a kidney to offering someone coffee, for example.

[42] They are Leopold Socha, Jean Vanier, and Confucius.

[43] L. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, cit., p. 21.

A right act for A in some set of circumstances C is what the person with phronesis (persons like that) would characteristically take to be most favored by the balance of reasons for A in circumstances C[44].

Following the exemplarist account, once we have identified an exemplar whom we admire (a person like that), we could try to figure out what he or she would decide in our circumstances. There is an important specification to point out here[45]. This definition of a right act does not entail doing *exactly* what the exemplar would do. Rather, it defines a scenario where we examine the given situation (circumstances, who is deciding, who is affected by the act, etc.) *through* the moral judgment of the admired exemplar. That is why Zagzebski discusses the balance of reasons *for* A. We are not referring to what the exemplar would do for himself or herself but to what he or she would choose, knowing all the details of our own choice to be made. This rules out the strict and mere emulation of the exemplar[46] and opens up a situation where we, as regular moral agents, somehow borrow the exemplar's moral capacities and apply these to our circumstances. As such, given that we are those who, in the first place, pick exemplars through our deep admiration of them, as moral agents, we do not passively follow someone else's choice by mere emulation. The point being discussed here is the *endorsement* of the moral judgment of a remarkable agent by virtue of our admiration that attracts us to him or her. Avoiding any possible mimic of someone else's choice or delegation of responsibility, this way of dealing with moral deliberation is better described by the intimate trust in the exemplar's judgment.

This way of overcoming the possible struggles involved in a moral choice – something that is particularly troublesome in the *complex* structure of a pluralistic approach – underlines the relevant role of *moral imagination*. Facing *moral complexity* could be less complicated when we do so by imagining the situation through the moral judgment of those who are considered to possess remarkable capacities in this regard. An exemplar (and moral excellence *tout court*) embodies the expression of a more refined faculty of moral judgment. Exemplars can eventually play the role

[44] *Ivi*, p. 201.

[45] This is something that Zagzebski herself seems to take seriously even if she uses different terminology: *ivi*, p. 202.

[46] This is something that would be very problematic, as I have claimed elsewhere. See S. Grigoletto, *Following the Wrong Example. The Exclusiveness of Heroism and Sanctity*, cit., pp. 89-104.

of facilitators of wise decision making by all other moral agents, as their moral excellence shows innovative ways of overcoming the impasse of hard choices. When there seems to be no way to resolve a given situation, moral agents have the possibility to endorse the faculties of those who can imagine a way out.

The role of *moral excellence* (well embodied by the deeds of saints and heroes) is representing a useful moral beacon. Facing *moral complexity* can greatly benefit from this support, particularly when making a moral judgment. This claim aligns with the well-established tradition that holds that the development of our *phrónesis* goes through the appreciation (and admiration) of the *phrónimos*[47]. However, it is important to remember that endorsing the moral wisdom of those who are particularly praiseworthy differs from delegating our own choices. Clearly, from a moral perspective, blindly accepting someone else's verdict is quite different from choosing to follow the lead of those who are capable of *moral excellence*.

6. *Conclusion*

The core argument that sustains the general points presented in this paper is not a complex one. In concluding this essay, it might be helpful to summarize the main argument as follows:

Premise 1. A phenomenological analysis (first-person perspective) discloses a complex and pluralist connotation of human agency.

Premise 2. Moral complexity requires a specific development of our moral judgment.

Premise 3. Moral excellence introduces exemplary (and creative) ways of overcoming the struggles involved in making a moral choice within moral complexity.

Conclusion. Moral judgment can be positively affected and developed by taking into consideration cases of moral excellence (whether represented by moral exemplars or exemplary acts).

While this paper serves as preliminary work toward a detailed study of its key argument, the original point here is to combine the role of moral excellence with moral judgment and decision-making issues within a plu-

[47] A study that explicitly takes into account the transmission of moral content through the deeds and the lives of saints is C. Palmer, R. Begley, K. Coe, *Saintly Sacrifice: The Traditional Transmission of Moral Elevation*, in «Zygon», 48, 1 (2013), pp. 107-127.

ralist framework. It might be helpful to expand this sort of claim with some experimental work on moral education[48] to test the role of moral excellence in judgment formation. As it seems the case, if this approach turns out to be promising, we would have a powerful way of addressing the pitfalls of *moral complexity*. As I have stated in the first section of this paper, the plurality of the sources of the good acknowledged in a *complex* system can make deciding what to do particularly difficult. As suggested in this essay, referring to moral excellence can be a useful way to support our moral choices. St. Thomas Aquinas suggested a similar strategy to help guide our *prudence*:

> Now it happens sometimes that something has to be done which is not covered by the common rules of actions, for instance in the case of the enemy of one's country, when it would be wrong to give him back his deposit, or in other similar cases. Hence it is necessary to judge of such matters according to higher principles than the common laws, according to which {synesis} (judging according to common law) judges: and corresponding to such higher principles it is necessary to have a higher virtue of judgment, which is called {gnome} (judging according to general law), and which denotes a certain discrimination in judgment[49].

From a moral perspective, I have emphasized how referring to the "higher principles" in order to support our moral judgment in more difficult cases means drawing from the inspiring and remarkable achievement of *moral excellence*. In an era when some experts suggest the way of artificial moral enhancement, we could much more easily return to appreciating the extraordinary deeds of our moral saints and heroes in order to enhance our moral judgment.

Abstract

Post-modern societies have been marked by an increasing diversity of ideas on how to live a good life. As the current debate on normative ethics shows, this trait has opened up the field to various pluralist moral accounts. Accordingly, a phenomenological analysis of the agent's first-person

[48] Even if *moral excellence* is not the primary object of investigation in this field, moral education is a rather vast area of research by both philosophers (see K. Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education*, Routledge, London 2015) and developmental psychologists (see D. Narvaez, D. Lapsley, *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009).

[49] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, II, q. 51, a. 4.

experience discloses the manifold moral sources that can guide his or her choices. This pluralism needs further characterization. In this paper, I introduce a distinction between axiological pluralism *(the set of moral values) and* methodological pluralism *(the heterogeneity of moral reasoning). This distinction discloses a well-known problem: how can the agent recognize the moral reasons for one's action in such a moral structure? I argue in favor of the traditional role of* phrónesis*. In particular, I emphasize how* moral excellence *(as highlighted by the contemporary debate on the concept of* supererogation *and recent works on* moral exemplarism*) can provide a valuable source of the formation and the enhancement of moral judgment.*

Keywords: Moral judgment; Exemplars; Supererogation; Pluralism; Moral complexity.

Simone Grigoletto
University of Padova
grigoletto.simone@gmail.com