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# Exemplars and expertise: what we cannot learn from saints and heroes

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## ABSTRACT

According to a popular line of thought, moral exemplars have a key role to play in moral development and moral education and by paying attention to moral exemplars we can learn about what morality requires of us. However, when we pay attention to what many moral exemplars say about their actions, it seems that our moral obligations are much more demanding than we typically think they are. Some philosophers have argued that this exemplar testimony gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality. We argue against this view by appealing to similar testimony from aesthetic exemplars. If we accept that the testimony of moral exemplars gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality, then we should accept that the testimony of aesthetic exemplars supports a radically demanding view of aesthetic normativity. We argue that we should reject both arguments for radically demanding views, and instead see the testimony of exemplars as having something important to tell us about the nature of ideals. What we learn about morality and aesthetics from attending to the lives of moral exemplars is that those who embody an ideal are subject to obligations that others are not.

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## 1. Introduction

What can we learn about morality from saints and heroes? According to many, particularly virtue ethicists, moral exemplars have a key role to play in moral development and moral education (eg. Croce and Vaccarezza 2017; Engelen et al. 2018; Kristjánsson 2006). Recently, Linda Zagzebski

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(2017) has defended a comprehensive moral theory based upon identifying and emulating moral exemplars. In this paper, we will consider one specific debate in which the testimony of saints and heroes plays an important role: the debate concerning moral demandingness. A common argument made in favour of a radically demanding view of morality is that the testimony of moral exemplars suggests that morality is more demanding than we typically think it is. We will argue against this by appealing to similar testimony from aesthetic exemplars. If we accept that the testimony of moral exemplars gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality, then we should accept that the testimony of aesthetic exemplars supports a radically demanding view of aesthetic normativity. We will argue that we should reject both radically demanding views, and instead see the testimony of exemplars as having something important to tell us about the nature of ideals. What we learn about morality and aesthetics from attending to the lives of moral exemplars is that those who embody an ideal are subject to obligations that others are not.

The question of what we can learn from exemplars about our obligations has important implications for moral philosophers. If we accept that the testimony of moral exemplars shows that morality is radically demanding then we will have to radically alter our moral behaviour and practices. On the other hand, if we decide that exemplars do not have an accurate picture of what we are required to do then this may make us question how much we can learn about morality by attending to the lives of exemplars. Finally, as we aim to make clear, this discussion has important implications for how we think about the relationship between moral and aesthetic normativity.

Our discussion will proceed as follows. First, we will explain the disparity between how many exemplars view the morality of their actions and how typical observers view these same actions (§2). We will then examine the argument that this disparity gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality testimony of moral exemplars gives us reason to doubt the existence of supererogatory acts (§3–4). We will then argue that this argument should be rejected (§5). We will finish by exploring what this discussion can tell us about the nature of ideals (§6).

## 2. The agent-observer disparity

In 1932, Jane Haining left her native Scotland to become a missionary with the Church of Scotland. She took up a position as a matron at a Jewish Mission school in Budapest, where she was in charge of around fifty

orphaned girls. She was on leave in Scotland in 1939 when the Second World War was declared. Rather than staying in the relative safety of Scotland, she made the dangerous journey back to Budapest to continue her work at school and to try and protect the children there. She refused to leave when asked to do so in 1940 and again in 1944 when Germany invaded Hungary and the missionaries were ordered by the church to return to Scotland. She explained her decision by writing: 'If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness.' She was the only foreign worker who remained at the mission when the Nazi troops got to Budapest and was arrested by the Gestapo. She was sent to Auschwitz, along with some of the children in her care, where she was gassed to death later that year, aged forty-seven.

Haining's willingness to sacrifice her life to remain with the children in her care shows an extraordinary level of courage and moral commitment. She is the only Scot to be honoured as one of 'the righteous among the nations' by the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Jerusalem. It is tempting to think that in refusing to leave for safety, Haining performed an act of supererogation (an act beyond the call of duty). She put herself at great risk in travelling back to Budapest to look after the children and to stay after being ordered by her superiors to leave seems to surpass what could reasonably be demanded from her. This is not though, how Haining herself saw her actions. When asked to return to Scotland is reported to have said, 'I will continue to do my duty and stick to my post' (Sherwood 2016).

In this case many observers would be inclined to view this act as supererogatory (beyond the call of duty) rather than morally required. The agent herself, though, views the act as required.<sup>1</sup> As Vanessa Carbonnell (2012, 232) puts the point, cases like this display 'a persistent agent-observer disparity.' In addition Carbonnell (2012, 231) points out that many such cases can be found in the literature on Holocaust rescuers. For instance, John Weidner was a member of the Dutch Resistance movement who risked his life repeatedly to help Jewish people escape the Nazis. When asked if his actions were 'extraordinary' he responded by saying, 'No Absolutely not. I did my duty. That is all.' (Monroe 2004; 117. Cited in Carbonnell 2012, 231). The disparity that Carbonnell is interested in is not a dispute about the moral value of the action but rather whether this valuable moral action generates a moral requirement. As

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<sup>1</sup>A related issue concerns heroes who view their acts as practically necessary rather than morally required (See Archer 2015; Fruh 2017). While we agree with these authors that this seems like a sensible way to interpret some of what heroes say about their actions, we do not think that this is the best way to interpret the cases mentioned here which make specific reference to duty.

Carbonnell (2012, 231) understands it, this is a disagreement about the level of sacrifice that morality demands of us.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Responding to the disparity: the options

How should we respond to this disparity between the intuitive responses of those who observe such acts and the reported experience of those that perform them?

The first response is to say that the observers are right and the heroes are mistaken. J. O. Urmson (1958) endorses such a response, claiming that someone who acted so heroically but claimed to be doing their duty would be displaying 'a modesty so excessive as to appear false' (1958, 203). While Urmson accepts that this act may appear to be obligatory to the hero at the time of acting, this does not, he claims, give us reason to accept that it is in fact obligatory. As it stands this response may seem to be rather unsympathetic to the point of view of the hero. It is strange to think that the people who perform morally virtuous acts turn out to be making a mistake about morality that mere observers tend to avoid. To make this response more plausible, we might add that the mistake the heroes make is one that is made more likely by the possession of other virtues (Archer and Ridge 2015).

The second way to respond to the disparity is to claim that there is a sense in which both the agents and the observers are right. While the observers are right to claim that these acts are not required *for them*, the saints and heroes may nevertheless be right to claim that these acts are required *for them*. There are two ways in which this response might be defended. First, Carbonell (2016) argues that the demands of morality vary from agent to agent and they do so in part based on our knowledge. This means that those with relevant knowledge may face more demanding obligations in certain contexts than those who lack this knowledge. For instance someone who has attended training on how to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace may be obliged to take steps to remedy the workplace culture in her department in a way that others are not (Carbonell 2016, 46).<sup>3</sup> This may allow us to say, for at least some of the cases in which the disparity holds, that the agent

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<sup>2</sup>These cases involve a conflict between two different normative domains: morality and self-interest. Though as Carbonnell (2012) points out, there may be reason to doubt the extent to which these cases involve a cost to an agent's self-interest.

<sup>3</sup>Though we may also think, as Bruno-Niño and Werner (2019) argue, that we have an obligation to develop our knowledge in such a way that we are in a better position to help.

performing the act does have a duty and the observer does not, and so there is a sense in which both are right. A more general way to support this response is provided by Andrew Flescher (2003), who argues that saints and heroes face a more demanding set of duties than ordinary people because they have an expanded moral sense of moral commitment. While ordinary people may face obligations to morally improve themselves, for as long as they are not yet saints and heroes they will not face all of the obligations that saints and heroes face.<sup>4</sup> If we accept this position then this gives us good reason to think that both the agents and the observers may be right about the obligations they face.

The final response, which will be the focus of the rest of this paper, is to argue that the saints and heroes are right and it is the observers are mistaken. Accepting this approach might be thought to provide a compelling argument in favour of a radically demanding view of morality. After all, if the saints and heroes are right and these acts are in fact morally required then it seems we are all morally required to achieve the same high moral standards that they do. However, for this argument to be convincing, we need to be given some reason to think that this is the right way to solve the agent observer disparity. The next section of this paper will outline the arguments that have been made in favor of this position.

#### 4. Heroism and demands

What reason is there for thinking that we should resolve the agent-observer disparity by siding with the hero? One such reason is provided by Susan Hale (1991) who claims that we must resolve this disparity by either siding with the saint and the hero or by siding with the ordinary observer. Given this choice, Hale thinks we should side with the saint and hero because, 'our concept of a moral saint is the concept of a person whose moral sensibilities are to be taken more seriously than those of the ordinary agent.' (1991, 279) Given that they have the more developed moral sensibilities, we have good reason to trust their moral judgement here over that of those whose moral sensibilities are less developed. This means that we should accept a radically demanding moral view, according to which we are all required to act in the way that saints and heroes do.

It might be objected that the greater moral sensibilities here involve qualities such as sympathy, compassion and empathy that are unrelated

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<sup>4</sup>Dougherty (2017) and Vaccarezza (2019) defend similar positions to Flescher's.

to the ability of conceptual categorization (Hale 1991, 279). Given this, there is no reason to think that those with higher levels of these qualities will be any better at sorting actions into the right moral category. Hale (1991, 280) responds first by pointing out that there is also no reason to think that having lower levels of these qualities will be an advantage when it comes to categorising these actions. So again, we are left in the position of having to choose between the judgement of the saint and the hero and the judgement of the ordinary observer. Given this we must again ask ourselves which perspective is more likely to form an accurate judgement.

Hale provides two reasons to think that judgement of the saint and hero will be superior. First, the judgements of ordinary moral agents are often inconsistent. While an ordinary agent may generally judge the actions of the saint or hero to be supererogatory, now and again witnessing and admiring their actions will provoke the thought that is really how they should be acting as well. As Hale puts the point, 'Sometimes the ordinary agent thinks that a particular action is required, not supererogatory, but that belief is often fleeting; once it passes the ordinary agent resumes thinking that the same action is supererogatory.' (1991, 280) In addition to those observers who occasionally judge that these actions are required, there may also be ordinary observers who consistently do so even though they fail to act in line with these judgements (Finlay 2007, 145). Given this inconsistency in the judgements of ordinary agents, we have good reason to prefer the judgements of saints and heroes.

Second, Hale (1991, 280) argues that while there is no reason to think that those with more developed moral sensibilities will be better at categorization in general, there is good reason to think they will be better at *moral categorization*. The reason for this is that the person with the more developed moral sensibilities will be more attuned to the suffering of others and so will be better able to spot when an act should be categorized as beneficent than other people, for example. This means we do have good reason to think the saint and hero have superior abilities of moral categorization and, as a result, to resolve the agent-observer disparity by accepting their judgement.

Another reason to side with the hero is provided by Julia Annas (2015). She argues that given that we take heroes as models of ethical conduct, it would be strange to think they were mistaken about the status of their actions here. She sums up the strangeness of this position in the following way:

We aspire to be like the heroes; we take them as ethical models and try to be like them. But we can't take them as ethical authorities, since we don't believe what they say about their own actions. Heroes on this account, are great as aspirational models; we aspire to be like them and to do what they did. But we reject their own account of what they did. This is, to put it mildly, unsatisfactory. (2015, 7)

In other words, the fact that we take heroes to be moral exemplars whom we should aspire to emulate sits uneasily with also holding that they are making a mistake about the moral status of their action.<sup>5</sup> Stephen Finlay (2007, 144–145) makes a similar point, claiming 'It is an uncomfortable even if not absurd thought that our orientation toward moral saints is to esteem them for their morally admirable acts while considering those same acts to stem from an erroneous judgement of their duty.'

Finlay (2007, 145) argues that the moral character and motivations of saints and heroes provide two further reasons to side with their judgements on this issue. First, given their moral commitments they are more likely than other people to have given serious consideration to what morality demands of them. In Finlay's (2007, 145) words, they 'are more likely to have thought long and hard about the requirements of morality.' People who are less morally committed are less likely to have thought so deeply about these issues and will be more likely to unreflectively accept common assumptions about what is demanded by morality. Second, given that living up to the standards of saints and heroes is likely to be difficult and to involve sacrifice and that people generally do not wish to think of themselves as immoral, there is a clear self-interested motivation for ordinary people to engage in self-deception (Finlay 2007, 145). We have good reason, then, to side with the judgements of those with less reason to engage in self-deception on this issue, as they are likely to be in a privileged epistemic position compared to those who have clear motivation to deceive themselves.

## 5. What the saint and hero cannot teach

In the previous section we explained the arguments offered in favour of resolving the agent observer disparity by siding with the saint and hero and accepting a radically demanding view of morality. In this section, we will explain why this is the wrong approach. One way of arguing for

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<sup>5</sup>While Annas (2015) thinks that denying the heroes point of view is problematic, she does not think we should solve the puzzle by accepting that the ordinary observer is wrong. Rather she takes this puzzle to show the superiority of a virtue-based approach to ethics over a duty-based approach.



this would be to deny that there is anything plausible to the idea that saints and heroes may have special insights into morality. While there may be a case to be made for these claims, this is not the approach we will take. Rather, we accept for the sake of the argument that it is plausible to think that moral exemplars may have special moral insight. We will argue, though, that this does not give us reason to accept that we are all required to act like saints and heroes. It is also worth clarifying that we do not intend to argue that the ideals embodied by saints and heroes are not worth striving for. Susan Wolf (1982) defends such a position in relation to moral saints claiming that a life dedicated to being as morally good as possible does not constitute a compelling personal ideal.<sup>6</sup> Our aim is not to defend such a position but rather to argue that we can accept that saints and heroes offer us compelling personal ideals that it might make sense to strive towards, without thinking that this gives us reason to defer to their view about how demanding morality is for ordinary people.

### ***A. Objection 1: diversity of moral exemplars***

We will now present our own objections to the argument that we all have a duty to act as saints and heroes do. Until now, we have talked about saints and heroes more or less interchangeably, as moral exemplars that perform acts that ordinary people often think are beyond the call of duty. This follows the way in which those who make this argument present their case. However, it is important to note that saints and heroes are typically thought to be different types of moral exemplar. Urmson (1958, 200–201), for example, defines saints as those who perform morally valuable acts in situations where ‘inclination or desire would lead most men not to do it.’ Heroes, on the other hand, he defines as those who perform valuable acts in situations in which ‘fear would lead most men not to do it.’ There are then, different kinds of moral exemplar who can be expected to excel in the performance of different kinds of acts.<sup>7</sup> Saints can be expected to excel in relation to caring acts that most people would be unwilling to sacrifice their self-interest to perform. Heroes on the other hand will excel in relation to acts of courage that most people would be too afraid to perform.

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<sup>6</sup>For a reply to Wolf see Carbone (2009).

<sup>7</sup>In fact, there seems good reason to expand the list of types of moral exemplar further. Markovits (2012) and Zagzebski (2017) both argue that we should also make room for moral sages who excel in moral knowledge and moral wisdom.

It is also worth noting that, while saints and heroes may be categorised in relation to the kinds of actions in which they will excel in performing, this does not mean that all saints and heroes will excel in relation to all saintly or heroic acts. Someone who is able to run into burning buildings to save people's lives may find themselves paralyzed with fear when confronted by snakes. This does not seem enough though to prevent us from categorizing this person as a hero, particularly if they regularly perform acts of great courage that most people would be too afraid to perform. Similarly, a saint may perform extraordinary acts of compassion towards her fellow human beings but find her compassion towards animals to be no better than average. Again though, if they have dedicated their whole lives to helping people, then it still seems appropriate to class such a person as a saint. Even within a particular category of moral exemplar we would not expect all exemplars to perform all of the acts that exemplars of that type would perform.

What both of these points show is that someone can be a moral exemplar without performing all exemplary moral actions. In fact, there seems good reason to think that for the majority of people that we would think of as moral exemplars there will be a range of excellent moral actions that they are unlikely to excel at. The reason for this is that the outlook, personality and character traits required to become one type of moral exemplar will be difficult to combine with those needed to become the other. The outlook and traits required to become a heroic firefighter may be quite different from those required to provide compassionate care for people. This is not to say that it would be impossible to combine the two but it does seem like those who embody both ideals will be rare.

This presents a problem for the argument that we all have a duty to act as saints and heroes do. According to this argument, the fact that exemplars who perform acts that many would think of as supererogatory view these acts as their duty gives us reason to think that these actions are in fact required. However, this argument is in danger of misrepresenting the evidence provided by the agent-observer disparity. It is not the case that all exemplars would view any action that most people would consider to be supererogatory to be obligatory. Rather, the phenomenon is that those who perform supererogatory acts often claim that they had duty *to perform the act that they performed*. This is important, as this phenomenon gives us no reason to think that moral exemplars as a group agree that all saintly or heroic acts are in fact obligatory. So even if we accept that we should defer to moral exemplars, it is not clear that the agent

observer disparity gives us reason to think that all saintly or heroic acts are morally required.

There are several replies defenders of a demanding view of morality could offer at this point. First, they could argue that moral exemplars may at least agree that morality demands more of us than is commonly accepted. It is unclear, though, how this point follows from the agent-observer disparity. Second, they could argue that this point is simply down to the fact that even moral exemplars are morally imperfect. In support of this point, it could be pointed out that moral exemplars need not be morally perfect and may have some imperfections. A morally perfect person, though, would judge all saintly or heroic acts to be morally required. This does not seem like a promising response, as there is no reason to think that this is the case. Even if some reason could be given, the argument would have changed from one based on an observation of the testimony of those who perform such actions to a claim about what an imagined hypothetically morally perfect person would say. This is a far weaker basis on which to base an argument in support of morally deference to their deontic assessments.

In summary, even if we accept that we should defer to moral exemplars, the agent-observer disparity gives us no reason to think that there will be agreement among such exemplars about which saintly or heroic acts are in fact obligatory.

### ***B. Objection 2: non-moral exemplars***

Now that we have considered an objection based upon various kinds of moral exemplar, we can move to consider the testimony of *non-moral exemplars*. As we hope to show, the testimony of this kind of exemplar stands to offer the most persuasive arguments against those who argue that the testimony of moral exemplars gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality. Our focus will be on how one form of non-moral exemplars, aesthetic exemplars (which we construe broadly to include musicians, actors, poets, as well as visual practitioners and those who embody ideals of beauty) regularly testify that they have compelling reasons to orient their lives in ways that allow them to pursue aesthetic value. We believe that similar claims could be made about other exemplars, such as epistemic exemplars, sporting exemplars and political exemplars but do not have the space to explore these different possibilities here.<sup>8</sup> We introduce this form of

exemplar with a literary example, before turning to the testimonies of non-fictional aesthetic exemplars.

Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* memorably depicts the final days of Charles Strickland, a character who Maugham publicly acknowledged was based on the life of the nineteenth-century painter, Paul Gauguin. Like Gauguin, Strickland finds himself faced with an unenviable practical dilemma: Should he stay in Paris to support his wife and children or should he embark on a dangerous journey to become an artist in Polynesia? While Gauguin's diaries documenting his dilemma are now lost, Maugham reconstructs them to offer a vivid account of how the painter might have replied to accusations that he abandoned his moral obligations to pursue his passion for art. As Strickland explains to the novel's narrator: 'I've got to paint. I can't help myself. When a man falls into water it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown.' (2009, 47) Gauguin's case brings the objection we wish to examine here into sharp relief. The artist is confronted with two ideals: one moral (his duties as a father and a husband) and one aesthetic (his duties as an artist). Like Strickland, the historical Gauguin chose art because he believes that he has better reasons to do this, reasons that are so powerful that they override the reasons generated by his moral duties.<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth noting that it is not only fictional aesthetic exemplars who are motivated by seemingly binding reasons generated from aesthetic commitments. Take the twentieth-century sculptor, Anne Truitt, for example. In her personal journal, Truitt claims that: 'Artists have no choice but to express their lives. They have only, and that not always, a choice of process.' (1982, 38). We can interpret Truitt's observation in two ways. First, most obviously, in choosing what to express in their art, artists have no choice but to make their lives the content of their work. Nevertheless, Truitt's remarks are simultaneously a comment on her feeling that she must respond to what she views as her vocation to be an artist (cf. Weber 2004). References to this feeling of vocation recur throughout her journal, from her 'feeling angry that she cannot work in the studio as much as I want to' (1982, 58) to her description of abandoning a career as a psychologist to become an artist as, 'a feeling

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<sup>8</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point.

<sup>9</sup>Bernard Williams (1981a) argues that the success or otherwise of Gauguin's artistic pursuits have an important bearing on our moral assessment of him. Moreover, Williams (1981b) emphasizes that a 'ground project' – a term that captures Gauguin's trip to Tahiti perfectly – generates reasons to act in ways that are equally as binding as the reasons for which we act morally.

of having laid down a burden and picked up a more natural responsibility' (1982, 61). Finally, Truit explains – using terms that are equally as charged as Strickland's – that 'I cannot help doing the work that I do, which feels to me as vital as my breath.' (1982, 111).

Truit is not alone in experiencing reasons pertaining to an aesthetic ideal as highly motivating. Take, for example, James Graham from Glasgow post-punk band The Twilight Sad. Graham describes what drives the band in the following way: 'we're doin' it for a reason. It's not to be popular. We're doing this because we have to' (Steinberg 2019). In each of these real-life cases, those who are pursuing an aesthetic ideal take this ideal to be of great importance, as well as something they *have* to pursue. Tellingly, this need to express one's life is often described in terms of duty. Marlon Brando – to pick a different kind of aesthetic exemplar – claimed that, 'To grasp the full significance of life is the actor's duty.' (Quoted in Shipman 1974, Ch. 1).

Evidence of the motivational force of aesthetic ideals can also be found in those that discuss aesthetic exemplars from a third-personal point of view. According to Baudelaire, nineteenth-century dandies have a spiritual-like dedication to pursue the ideal of elegance. In his words, '[dandies] have no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons, to satisfy their passions, to feel and to think' (1863/1995, 28).<sup>10</sup> Again, this ideal seems to be one that brings with it a duty to act in certain ways. As Baudelaire explains, 'The Dandy must aspire to be sublime without interruption; he should live and sleep in front of a mirror' (1887/2017, 73). Take, for instance, the testimony of the actress Joan Rivers, who explained that her decision to have multiple cosmetic surgeries by appealing to a sense of duty. Rivers tells us that 'I owe it to my fans not to become a little dottery old lady.' (BBC Radio 4 2009).

What can we learn from these examples? One thing is that those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of aesthetic ideals often make similar claims about the demands of these ideals to those who dedicate their lives to moral ideals. In both cases, exemplars of these ideals report a sense of duty or responsibility to live up to the ideal. However, as with the moral case, observers are likely to disagree with these exemplars. The idea that Maugham's Gauguin had a duty to devote himself to art, even if it means violating his moral obligations, may well strike many as

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<sup>10</sup>An anonymous contemporary commentator even compares the commitment of Baudelaire's dandy's to that of the saint, writing that, 'Dandies, like saints, are never much beloved by their fellow-creatures. Like saints, they [dandies] have an ideal perfection of manner and dress, and ideals are felt to be impertinent.' (Anonymous 1888).

simply false. Likewise, many may evaluate the idea that artists have a duty to dedicate their lives to their work, or that dandies have a duty to dedicate their lives to cultivating beauty, in a similar way. These claims seem no less likely than to strike observers as false than the claims from moral exemplars who claim to have had a duty to act as they did. Just as in the moral case, then, there is an agent-observer disparity for those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of aesthetic ideals.

How should we respond to this disparity? Are the aesthetic exemplars right about the extent of our aesthetic responsibilities? Unfortunately for those arguing that we all have a duty to act as saints and heroes do, the arguments given in favour of siding with the moral exemplar in the moral case also give us reason to side with the aesthetic exemplar in the aesthetic case. First, the aesthetic exemplar will be more attuned to aesthetic sensibilities, so *mutatis mutandis* we have reason to trust their aesthetic judgments over those with less developed aesthetic knowledge. Artists, for example, are likely to have a greater understanding of what makes an artwork beautiful or powerful and what is involved in creating such works. Dandies have a far greater understanding of how to cultivate elegance than most people and are likely to have a richer appreciation of the benefits of a life dedicated to its pursuit. There seems good reason, then, to think that when it comes to making judgements concerning aesthetic responsibilities, the judgements of aesthetic exemplars will be more informed about what it takes to promote aesthetic value than the judgements of ordinary people.

Second, there is something strange about taking aesthetic exemplars to be models of aesthetic conduct and then rejecting their view about the normative force of aesthetic reasons. As Finlay argues, it seems odd to praise and admire the moral actions of a saint while judging the act to be motivated by a moral error. In the same way, it would be odd to admire an artist's dedication to their work or a dandy's dedication to elegance while at the same time judging this to stem from a mistaken view of their aesthetic responsibilities. Of course, some readers may find neither claim odd. That is okay. All we wish to persuade you of is that these responses should be regarded as equally odd. If one finds it odd in the moral case, then one should find it odd in the aesthetic case too.

Finally, the character and motivations of aesthetic exemplars give us further reason to side with their judgements about the extent of our aesthetic responsibilities. Aesthetic exemplars' aesthetic commitments mean that they are more likely to have thought carefully about what aesthetic

reasons demand of everyone, giving us reason to trust their judgment over those who have spent less time considering these issues. They are likely to have a richer understanding of the value of beauty, grace or elegance and so a more informed view of the role that the promotion of aesthetic value should play in our lives. Moreover, given that living up to aesthetic ideals is likely to be difficult (think about all that time dandies spend tending to their appearance), those who do not live up to these ideals clearly have a self-interested motivation to engage in self-deception about what our aesthetic reasons require. Most of us don't want to invest the time and effort required to devote oneself completely to the life of a dedicated artist. Nor do we want to dedicate as much money, care and effort to our personal appearance as dandies were willing to do. Those of us who are neither moral nor aesthetic exemplars, then, have just as much reason to engage in self-deception about the extent of our aesthetic responsibilities as we do about the extent of our moral responsibilities.

This parallel argument creates a problem for those who claim that the testimony of saints and heroes gives us reason to accept a radically demanding view of morality. Given that an almost identical argument can be given for deferring to aesthetic exemplars, it looks like we must either adopt the same response to both arguments or be given some reason to think that the argument works in the moral case but not the aesthetic one. Again, we are not claiming that we should accept that non-exemplars are deceived in both cases. Rather our claim is that those who accept this argument in relation to moral judgments, should also accept the parallel argument about aesthetic judgements.

Of course, there are many things that could be said in favour of accepting the argument in the moral case but not the aesthetic case. First, we might think that moral reasons override other reasons, which would give us reason to trust the moral exemplar but not the aesthetic exemplar. Note, though, that if we accept that moral reasons always override other kinds of normative reasons, then we already have reason to accept a radically demanding moral view, as we will always be required to do what is morally best. By taking this response then, the argument from the agent-observer disparity becomes redundant.

Second, it might be argued that, unlike moral exemplars, aesthetic exemplars do not embody a compelling ideal. Some may well feel this way about Gauguin. By itself this response will not persuade many, given that a life dedicated to art or beauty is widely viewed as admirable,

both interculturally and across generations. Some will not be attracted to the aesthetic life, of course, but in order to persuade others of this view an additional argument must be given to explain why a life dedicated to art or beauty is not in fact admirable.

Finally, it could be argued that we should reject what aesthetic exemplars say because they appeal to the existence of aesthetic duties and there are no such duties.<sup>11</sup> This response risks begging the question, since it already assumes that the testimony of aesthetic exemplars cannot be trusted. From Gauguin to Truit, from Baudelaire to Brando, we have seen that aesthetic exemplars explain their arduous pursuit of their ideals precisely in terms of duties and their cognates (responsibilities, commitments, etc.) It would be hard to deny that these figures are sophisticated aesthetic experts (who could be better qualified?) so we should trust their testimony that aesthetic obligations exist. Even if we have good independent reason to reject the existence of aesthetic obligations, we could understand the claims of these exemplars as relating to the motivating force of our aesthetic reasons and the importance of living up to our aesthetic responsibilities. This would allow us to run the argument without making any appeal to the existence of aesthetic obligations.<sup>12</sup>

For these reasons, the arguments stand or fall together. Given this, there is good reason to think that we should reject both arguments, as the demands of accepting them both are incompatible. It is simply not possible to fully devote one's life to an aesthetic ideal *and* a moral ideal simultaneously. Those pursuing aesthetic or moral ideals at the very highest levels are forced to choose. To be an exemplar, involves making these choices in a way that does not apply to those who wish to aspire to these ideals more moderately. Note that we have not said that it is impossible to be morally good whilst devoting your life to an aesthetic ideal. Rather, our claim is simply that it is practically impossible to be a *moral exemplar* and an *aesthetic exemplar*. Given this incompatibility, we have strong reason to reject both arguments rather than accepting both.

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<sup>11</sup>For arguments against the existence of aesthetic obligations see Dyck (2021).

<sup>12</sup>Some might think that our argument here depends on the existence of aesthetic supererogation. While some defend the existence of such acts (Archer and Ware 2017, 2018), this category is controversial and so may seem to be a weak foundation for our argument. However, our argument does not appeal to this category but rather points to a disparity between the reaction of the aesthetic exemplar (it is my duty to act this way) and the reaction of the observer (that person does not have a duty to act in that way). Neither the agent's nor the observer's reactions depend upon the existence of aesthetic supererogation. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to consider this point.



## 6. What we do learn from such testimony?

We have argued against the view that the agent-observer disparity should be resolved by deferring to moral exemplars, and so accepting a radically demanding view of morality. Nevertheless, this does not mean that testimony provided by both kinds of exemplars has nothing to teach us about morality and aesthetics. As we will argue now, such testimony teaches us something useful about what is involved in devoting one's life to an ideal.

First, we should note that we could accept the arguments offered in the previous section without thinking that the testimony of saints and heroes gives us reason to think that everyone should act as they do. Does this mean the exemplars we have considered are simply mistaken to claim that they had a duty to act as they did? There still appears to be something unsatisfying about such a position. *Prima facie*, it seems like a strange result that those most committed to morality and aesthetics are so likely to be mistaken in this way. Archer and Ridge (2015) seek to mitigate the strangeness of this result by explaining why a particular virtue that moral exemplars possess (that of moral depth) may predispose them to this kind of mistake. We could extend this account to cover aesthetic exemplars as well and argue that they too possess a virtue that predisposes them to a mistaken view of their duties. While this makes the position somewhat easier to accept, there remains something odd about accepting that exemplars are mistaken in this way. At the very least, it seems preferable if we could make sense of this exemplar testimony in a way that does not attribute widespread error to those who have successfully dedicated their lives to the pursuit of moral and aesthetic ideals. Rather, it would be best to make room for the intuition that these moral and aesthetic exemplars are experts in their respective domains. We will now provide an alternative way to interpret this testimony in a way that allows us to make sense of it without attributing error to these exemplars but that avoids the problems raised in the previous section.

All the exemplars we have examined so far are committed to an ideal. Whether this is the ideal of the heroic soldier, the devoted protector of children, the committed artist, or that of the dandy.<sup>13</sup> What we want to suggest now is that embodying and attempting to live up to ideals

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<sup>13</sup>Though this does not mean that everyone who performs an act of supererogation will be living a life committed to an ideal. Small favors, acts of charity and forgiveness may all be supererogatory but may be performed by people who are not devoted to any particular ideal. Even acts of heroism may be performed from a split-second decision rather than a long-serving moral commitment. Our claims in this section then should be understood as referring to those whose acts of supererogation stem

requires us to take up a special class of obligations. These obligations are not obligations that apply to everyone, but rather obligations that apply to those who embody an ideal. We can think of these as being similar to Kantian hypothetical imperatives; they are commands that apply to those who have willed and committed themselves to a particular end. These ends are hypothetical, because they only apply to the person for as long as they are committed to the end. If the person abandons this commitment, they will no longer be subject to these commands.

We find the building blocks for the first part of this argument by acknowledging that those who attempt to embody an ideal are committing themselves to a certain end. They are committing themselves to be a brave soldier, a dedicated carer for children, an artist who expresses her life, or a magnificent dandy. For as long as they remain committed to these ideals, there are certain things they must do. Furthermore, all the ideals we have considered are widely acknowledged to be valuable and important, which suggests that the means to them are rightly regarded as having gravity and seriousness. A brave soldier would not pass up an opportunity to save the lives of his comrades. A devoted protector of children would not abandon them to the Nazis. A dedicated artist must seek to express herself through her art, just as a dandy must aspire to the heights of sartorial elegance. This means then that in order to live up to these ideals, all of these exemplars are *required* to act as they in fact do. When the saint, hero, or aesthetic exemplar claim that they had a duty to act as they did, we should not interpret them as referring to a universal duty possessed by all. Rather, we should interpret them as making a claim about a hypothetical imperative that is linked to an ideal.

It is this form of requirement that best explains the various features of the situation that we have discussed so far. By understanding testimony as referring to hypothetical imperatives, we can make sense of the fact that saints and heroes tend not to demand that others act as they do or blame others for failing to do so. The reason for this is that the duty is attached to the ideal and others may not be committed to that ideal. This also explains why different kinds of moral exemplars may claim different kinds of seemingly supererogatory acts to be their duty. The reason for this is that they are committed to different ideals. What is required to be a protector of children will be quite different from what

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from a commitment to an ideal rather than to all those who perform a supererogatory act. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point.

is required to be a brave soldier. Most importantly, however, this way of understanding saints and heroes explains why the testimonies of aesthetic exemplars involve similar claims. Just like moral exemplars, aesthetic exemplars are attempting to embody an ideal, and doing so requires that the exemplar act in certain ways. Finally, this way of understanding this testimony does not involve attributing any error to saints and heroes. This means they can retain their status as moral experts. They are correct in saying they have a duty to act as they do, but this is a duty that is attached to their commitment to an ideal, not a duty that binds everyone.

We might worry that appealing to hypothetical imperatives will be unable to explain why these imperatives appear to be binding for these exemplars. In contrast to categorical imperatives, we always have the option of disregarding hypothetical imperatives simply by abandoning the end to which they relate. But where these hypothetical imperatives are connected to embodying ideals, things may not be this simple. This is because living up to these ideals may be a fundamentally important commitment for these exemplars, and these commitments may even be duty generating.

One way to make sense of this is in terms of living one's life authentically. An important part of living an authentic life is to live one's life according to one's own criteria for success and failure. Nietzsche, for example, enjoins his readers to 'Be yourself!', to 'live according to your own laws and standards' (1997, 126), even proposing that his key existential imperative is that one is duty bound to 'become what you are' (*Du sollst der werden der du bist*) (2010, 263). Although this imperative sounds like a universal imperative, it remains contentless until developed into a specific vision of what it would be for a particular person to become what they are. Nietzsche plays on this distinction with his use of '*du sollst*', which equates to 'thou shalt' or 'you must' in contemporary English. The idea is that given *who one is* one has a binding obligation to act in whatever way it takes to *become that person*. Further indication that Nietzsche understands 'becoming what one is' as both binding and hypothetical comes when he tells us that the process involves 'giving oneself laws' and – like Baudelaire's dandies – 'creating oneself' (2010, 264). Taking this view seriously lends plausibility to the idea that hypothetical imperatives attached to embodying ideals can be binding. The ideals that the saints, heroes and aesthetic exemplars embody may be a core part of who they are. In order to live authentically, they must act in line with the hypothetical imperatives attached to these ideals. If we accept

Nietzsche's claim that we have a duty to become what we are, then these exemplars have a duty to perform acts that would otherwise be supererogatory, as this is necessary for them to become what they are.

Another way of making sense of the idea that these commitments are duty generating can be found by drawing on recent work on aesthetic obligations. The issue of whether aesthetic reasons can ever generate aesthetic obligations has long been debated in aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> Recently, philosophers have investigated various ways that aesthetic obligations can be grounded. Robbie Kubala proposes that we can understand their apparently binding nature in terms of 'self-promising' (2018, 271). For example, someone may be so struck by the beauty of an oil painting that they promise to themselves that they will find out the meaning of the painting, as Ishmael does in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. According to Kubala, this promise that Ishmael makes to himself to interpret this work properly generates an obligation to do so. Anthony Cross adds to this point by arguing that we are motivated to make these kinds of promises to ourselves because our aesthetic commitments are an integral part of our practical identities (2022, 409). By making aesthetic commitments we help to ensure that our aesthetic choices, and the identity that is partly constituted by these choices, will persist over time.

This way of viewing aesthetic commitments helps to make sense of why aesthetic exemplars may feel required to act as they do. They have committed themselves to embodying an aesthetic ideal and there are a number of hypothetical imperatives associated with living up to this ideal. A similar story can be told for moral exemplars. They may have committed themselves to a certain ideal by promising themselves that they will embody that ideal. This self-promise can generate an obligation to live up to that ideal and this in turn means that the moral exemplar must fulfil the hypothetical imperatives attached to that ideal.

We have outlined two ways in which to make sense of the idea that the aesthetic and moral exemplars we have considered have a duty to embody the ideals that they do. Such duties may arise from a duty to become what one is or arise from a self-promise. Those who have a duty to embody an ideal will then have to fulfil the various hypothetical imperatives associated with that ideal. This allows us to make sense of the idea that these exemplars really did have a duty to act as they did without committing us to thinking that other people are also subject to these duties. While these exemplars may have needed to act in this way in

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<sup>14</sup>See Kubala (2020) for an overview of these debates.

order to become who they are or to fulfil a promise they made to themselves, the same will not be true for other people.

Understanding things in this way reveals something important about what is involved in being committed to an ideal. Embodying an ideal involves fulfilling certain hypothetical imperatives. You cannot be a saint if you are unwilling to dedicate your life to helping others. You cannot be a dandy if you do not take care in your appearance. These hypothetical imperatives can become duties if someone has a duty to embody this ideal, whether this is a duty of authenticity or a self-promise. But these duties apply only to specific individuals. Most people do not have a duty to be a saint, hero or a dandy. What we learn, then, from paying attention to the testimony of moral exemplars is not that we all have a duty to be saintly and heroic. Rather, what we learn is that those who are committed to embodying an ideal will face a number of special obligations that others do not.

## 7. Conclusion

We have examined an argument often appealed to as providing evidence against the existence of supererogatory acts. Moral exemplars who perform such acts often claim that they had a duty to act as they did, which suggests that these acts are in fact morally required. We have argued that this argument does not provide independent evidence in support of a radically demanding view of morality. Those who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of aesthetic ideals make similar claims to those who dedicate their lives to moral ideals. In both cases, exemplars of these ideals report that they had to act as they did. In both cases, this sense of responsibility is unlikely to be shared by observers. This leaves us with a choice. We can either accept that both moral and aesthetic exemplars are right about the demandingness of the values they appeal to or, as we have argued, we can reject the idea that we should defer to these exemplars about the demandingness of normative requirements. This solution leaves us with a puzzle. Why are both moral and aesthetic exemplars so frequently mistaken about the areas of normativity in which they seem to be experts? The answer, we have argued, is that they are not mistaken but rather that those who embody an ideal are subject to obligations that others are not.

Our argument has important implications for how we should think about the role of exemplars as sources of knowledge about normativity. While we have much to learn from both moral and aesthetic exemplars,

we should be cautious about being too quick to conclude that the obligations they face are also duties for others. We should investigate carefully and critically what we can learn from exemplars and what we cannot.<sup>15</sup>

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