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**Introduction: the role of the exemplar in Arendt and Spinoza: insights for moral exemplarism and moral education**

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**ABSTRACT**

In late October of 2019, we brought together scholars from very different traditions in order to explore the notion of exemplarity and the role of exemplars in education. Bringing together scholars working on ethics and moral exemplarism, Spinoza scholars and Arendt scholars, we attempted to bring these different perspectives to bear on the role of exemplarity in education. Not in order to create a synthesis of ideas or to find solutions for practical issues, but in order to explore collegially the important issue of exemplarity in education. On the one hand, it was an attempt to put something on the table, and on the other, it was an attempt to bring people together in order to share a couple of days away from everyday academic life so as to engage the object of study without distractions. Part of what it occasioned can be read in this special issue.

**KEYWORDS**

Exemplarism; Arendt; Spinoza

“Can you feel the warmth of the Hive?”

Tom in Leave No Trace (2018).

In a haunting scene in the motion picture *Leave No Trace* (Granik 2018), Tom, an adolescent girl living on the edges of normality, teaches her father about the miraculous workings of a beehive, symbolically asking if he can feel the warmth of the hive. In this scene, portraying the pedagogical triangle of teacher, object, and student, the father is taught not only about the wonders of bees and their habitat, but also a lesson about the benefits of commonality and solidarity. The daughter tells the father – who is suffering from PTSD and craves only solitude – not to be afraid of the bees, as he extends his bare hands to the hive. In this symbolic gesture, the daughter is also telling him to extend his hands to others and to feel the warmth of living together with others. The daughter inadvertently uses the hive as a way of exemplifying to her father the value of community. She is teaching him more than the example is intended to exemplify. In her work on exemplarity, Harvey (2002) has shown how examples always carry with them more than simply pointing to something general through the particular.
Examples are symbolic signifiers as much as they are simple instantiations of general rules.

In late October of 2019, we brought together scholars from very different traditions in order to explore the notion of exemplarity and the role of exemplars in education. Bringing together scholars working on ethics and moral exemplarism, Spinoza scholars and Arendt scholars, we attempted to bring these different perspectives to bear on the role of exemplarity in education. Not in order to create a synthesis of ideas or to find solutions for practical issues, but in order to explore collegially the important issue of exemplarity in education. On the one hand, it was an attempt to ‘put something on the table’ thus offering it up for collective study, and on the other, it was an attempt to bring people together in order to share a couple of days away from everyday academic life so as to make it possible to engage the object of study without distractions. Part of what it occasioned can be read in this special issue. However, the value of the colloquium was just as much the feeling of collegiality and community that developed during the two intense days. This warmth of the hive can unfortunately not be rendered in this format, but perhaps the papers speak in some measure at least of the ideas and thoughts that were exchanged during the colloquium.

Moral exemplarism is emerging as a prominent ethical theory answering to practical challenges within both politics and education. Largely due to its heritage from classical Aristotelianism, exemplarism highlights the ancient notion of emulation as a crucial component of social and moral life. Emulation, however, is not the only way in which exemplars can function in moral judgement and education. Here, the insights of Arendt and Spinoza represent neglected perspectives capable of broadening the understanding of the exemplar in education. While Arendt’s theory of judgement offers a nuanced account of how we employ exemplars in judgement, via her concept of enlarged thinking, Spinoza’s political psychology promises to further enable the use of exemplars as means of both political and personal deliberation by highlighting the interconnectedness of human sociability and the improvement of the understanding.

As different as they are, both Arendt and Spinoza are frequently acknowledged as key figures in the development of modern ethical, political, and educational reflection. Yet, to limit ourselves to a narrow historical evaluation of their contribution would amount to missing out on a major source of insight for rethinking today’s ethical, political, and educational concerns. While established scholars of Arendt and Spinoza have utilized their methods and ideas to illuminate contemporary problems, this discussion deserves both greater attention and continued development so as to facilitate the further exploration of the implications of exemplarism for contemporary moral education.

To this end, the colloquium served to facilitate a critical dialogue in order to promote a reappraisal of Arendt’s and Spinoza’s ideas concerning the role of the exemplar and of their relevance for contemporary educational inquiry and for
the development of exemplarism as a moral and educational concept. Specifically, the three plenary discussions aimed to provide a forum for critical discussion where the invited plenary speakers and discussants engaged with questions from the participants of the colloquium.

The concept of exemplarity is receiving increasing attention in contemporary education. In times of increasing unrest and uncertainty due to international conflicts, climate change, and political upheaval, education is frequently conceived as a sphere for enhancing security and future participation in political life. Education, it is believed, can play a part in developing morally conscious citizens and in securing the future survival of democracy. These thoughts connote an instrumental approach to education, where ethical theories and philosophy are tasked with ‘fixing’ immediate political problems. In this colloquium, we wanted to approach the role of exemplars in education from a different, more educationally attuned, vantage point. This meant engaging the idea of exemplars as an object of study, and not as a means for primarily improving educational processes or fixing societal issues. Engaging with three distinct perspectives and theories on exemplarity - moral exemplarism, Spinoza, and Arendt - permitted us to highlight central aspects of how we can think of exemplars educationally and how these may function in educational processes. In the following we will briefly outline the three perspectives in order to set the scene for the different contributions to this special issue.

In moral education theory, exemplarism is increasingly gaining popularity, to the point that something like an exemplarist approach is arising among Aristotelian education scholars (Croce and Vaccarezza 2017; Kristjánsson 2006; Sanderse 2013). However, it is the ethical theory of exemplarism as formulated by Linda Zagzebski, which presents the most comprehensive attempt at formulating a philosophical foundation for exemplarist moral education (Zagzebski 2010, 2015, 2017). Zagzebski outlines the philosophical framework of exemplarism as a theory facilitating the practical study of exemplars as a motivational force for moral education and self-improvement. Being deeply rooted in classical virtue ethics, exemplarism focuses on how the emotion of admiration can be employed to engage the imagination so that stories of human exemplars can enrich ideas about the good and virtuous life. Zagzebski suggests that, above all, it is the practical utility of exemplarism that sets it apart from other competing moral theories. The practical utility of exemplarism is also what connects it with education as education is frequently conceived as the social arena par excellence for fostering young people through the use of exemplars.

Zagzebski attempts to formulate a theory that can both describe the basis for moral judgement and guide us in making particular moral judgements. Zagzebski uses the term ‘hook’ to describe the link between a moral theory and a moral practice (Zagzebski 2017, 8). The exemplar functions as a guiding rod for moral action, and we acquire moral virtue by admiring and attempting to imitate the admirable exemplar. Exemplarity thus founds the theory as both
theory and practice. The basis for her claim is the theory of direct reference as proposed by Hillary Putnam and Saul Kripke in the 1970s. The theory of direct reference states that we can refer to objects by direct reference without needing description (Zagzebski 2013, 198–199). We can thus refer to objects by claiming that they are objects like that, without needing further knowledge about them, or needing observation nor description. Zagzebski uses the examples of water and gold to illustrate this point. We do not need to know that water is H2O in order to refer to and understand what is being referred to when we use the word water. The same goes for gold, and in fact, for many centuries we did not know the deeper structures of gold and water, but referred to them and understood what we meant by the words nonetheless. In the same way, exemplars – through direct reference – allow us to identify moral goodness in various instantiations of it, and such practices are already embedded in our moral practice (Zagzebski 2013, 199–200). Description or empirical studies can confirm or negate our assumption, but that does not preclude us from using figures as examples of moral goodness, and it does not preclude us from learning from them. That they are seen as admirable affords us the opportunity to imitate moral goodness.

While the admiration-imitation model is highly relevant for contemporary education, and for working with values and moral education, there is a dimension missing from the theory. This concerns how exemplars function when they are not based on admiration and emulation, but instead function as leading strings (Kant 1965, 178) for judging. This way of engaging the role of examples and exemplars has been explored by Hannah Arendt in her work on judgement, which draws specifically from the work of Kant (Arendt 1992, 1998, 2006; Beiner 1994, 1997; DeCaroli 2007; Korsgaard 2018). However, the specific role of exemplarism in her theory of judgement remains under-explored. This in spite of the fact that over the past decades Hannah Arendt has received increasing attention in various areas of educational research, such as educational theory, philosophy of education, educational leadership, philosophy for children, and inclusive education (Biesta 2006, 2010; Gordon 2001; Gunter 2013; Harwood 2010; Hayden 2012; Higgins 2011; Korsgaard 2016, 2018; Masschelein 2011; Levinson 1997; Vansieleghem 2005). According to Arendt, our ability to judge right and wrong hinges on our ability to ‘go visiting’ the perspectives of exemplary others, something Arendt, following Kant, coins enlarged thinking. In other words, our ability to judge depends upon the company – fictitious or real, past or present – we choose (Arendt 2003, 145–146). This is not an admiration-emulation model of exemplarism, but rather a way of conceiving the role of exemplars in our thinking about and judging in particular situations. The colloquium providing the basis for this special issue explored how Arendt’s use of exemplars in formulating a theory of judgement – in critical dialogue with the work of Spinoza – can help to elucidate some of the underdeveloped aspects of exemplarism in Zagzebski’s theory of moral exemplarism.
Spinoza’s employment of the exemplar is well documented and debated in contemporary Spinoza scholarship (see e.g. Rosenthal 2002; Gatens 2009, 2012; Steinberg 2018a). Recent developments in the field have seen an increasing interest in the strong link between Spinoza’s ethical theory (formulated in relation to his metaphysics in the Ethics) and his political philosophy (laid out in his Theological-Political Treatise and in his unfinished Political Treatise) (see e.g. James 2010, 2012; Steinberg 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Focusing on the link between ethics and politics has involved elucidating the curious connection between Spinoza’s naturalistic psychology and his political philosophy in ways that indicate how the means for striving for individual eudaimonia in many ways parallel, and are constrained by, the means for establishing political stability and collective flourishing (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999; Steinberg 2018b). This involves investigating how the imagination can be productively employed via narratives so as to create a cognitive bridge between a largely inadequate understanding of the world and a – relatively speaking – more adequate understanding, necessary for maintaining both political stability and promoting individual well-being (Gatens 2009, 2012). Part of this means reevaluating the roles of desire, passion and the imagination in the context of Spinoza’s political philosophy in a way that involves what Heidi M. Ravven (1990) has called ‘the education of desire’ and Justin Steinberg an ‘affective reorientation’ (2018b, 100). Put more broadly, this means shifting the understanding of Spinoza’s political philosophy from a kind of classical liberalism to a particularism couched in a perfectionist framework.

In his political texts, Spinoza makes use of exemplars borrowed from Scripture, explaining how a given political context – such as that of the Hebrew state – can be manipulated through narratives (such as Moses guiding the Israelites by way of prophecy) in a way that illustrates the power of the exemplar as a tool for political governance (Rosenthal 2002). While Spinoza’s political texts appear to highlight aspects concerned more with the tempering of dangerous passive affects, his ethical theory also places focus on the positive aspects of using exemplars. In the Ethics, Spinoza introduces the exemplar of the free man as a cognitive tool for imagining and striving for moral perfectionism in a way that is highly sensitive to the particularities of historical and geographical contexts. The exemplar of the free man evokes connotations of a deeply educational nature, where the education of the individual is bound up with the formation of the collective imagination, and where the flourishing of the individual and the flourishing of the community are both conceived to hinge on the relative improvement of the understanding (Gatens and Lloyd 1999). While the educational implications of Spinoza’s moral philosophy has been the focus of recent scholarship in educational theory (see e.g. Dahlbeck 2016, 2018), the promise of his version of moral exemplarism for moral education offers an exciting and under-explored aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy that this special issue seeks to address.

The colloquium offered us a unique opportunity to come together from different fields and traditions and jointly explore a central philosophical concept
in relation to a practical problem: that of moral education. In the contributions to the colloquium we find very different ways of approaching the issue and different traditions of thought being exercised. In the first contribution Maria Silvia Vaccarezza outlines three ancient paths to flourishing via imitation of exemplary individuals: The Platonic, the Stoic, and the Aristotelian. Endeavouring to reconcile these models practically, Vaccarezza proposes a multi-step educational program incorporating different models and eliciting different sorts of admiration and imitation in the novice. In the second contribution, Justin Steinberg turns to the Renaissance humanist rhetorical approaches to pedagogy of Juan Vives in order to argue that Spinoza’s political theory can give us a model for how he might have approached a treatise on moral education. Illustrating how Spinoza joins Vives’ humanist understanding of *ingenium* (character) with a Hobbesian scientific approach, Steinberg suggests that Spinoza offers us a pedagogical model in the guise of a political method that is in part science, in part art. The third contribution by Steven DeCaroli narrows in on the concept of crisis in Arendt’s work. DeCaroli draws a connection between judgement and crisis, linking it to the work of the classroom. The relationship between crisis and judgement in Arendt is examined in connection to Immanuel Kant and Adolf Eichmann, two figures who DeCaroli argues embody opposing aspects of what it means to judge, epitomized by a conceptual tension between *example* and *cliché*. In the fourth contribution, Michel Croce proposes a liberal account of moral exemplarism, challenging two key assumptions of Linda Zagzebski’s exemplarist moral theory – that moral exemplars are exceptionally virtuous agents and that imitating their behavior is the main strategy for acquiring the virtues. Croce discusses the notions of *enkratic exemplars* and *injustice illuminators*, arguing that there are good reasons for considering them moral exemplars although they fail to satisfy (either of) the key assumptions. In the fifth contribution, Moira Gatens explores Spinoza’s notions of *singularity*, *similarity*, and *exemplarity* in relation to the distinctive human capacity to educate the senses and the passions and to cultivate reason, and thereby to flourish. Building on this exploration, Gatens goes on to read the education of Victor Frankenstein’s ‘monster’ (in Shelley’s novel) through the lens of Spinoza’s philosophy of affect. The sixth contribution, by David Lewin, continues to explore the relationship between narrative fictions and moral education by considering some philosophical issues concerning the influence of folk and fairy tales on moral development. Lewin discusses issues of representation and reduction, drawing on a distinction between a problematic reductionism and an appropriate pedagogical reduction, suggesting that pedagogical issues of representation require us to think about how to represent complexity in ways that are reductive without being reductionist, that can delight and engage without being horrifying or tedious. The seventh contribution by Heidi M. Ravven returns us to the exemplarism of Spinoza. Ravven suggests that Spinoza attributes to society the role of moral educator, a role that is to be carried out via Religion and Politics and hence also via an educational system. Ravven argues that, for Spinoza, while
intellectual virtue is exposed as the necessary and only true fulfillment of the virtue of moral models, it is not ready to hand but must be taught. Because teaching necessarily entails an initial measure of authoritative transmission and even coercion, Ravven suggests that moral models must be internalized. In the penultimate contribution, Morten T. Korsgaard explores the significance of exemplarity for Hannah Arendt's theory of judgement. Via the metaphor of going visiting, the paper explores how judgement for Arendt does not concern determination of what to do, but rather concerns widening one's understanding and reconciling oneself to the world. The final contribution by Johan Dahlbeck and Moa De Lucia Dahlbeck offers a reading of Spinoza as moral exemplarist where his political theory suggests that instead of constructing his exemplar on the idea of a supremely moral person, Spinoza emphasizes the concept of *ingenium* in order to chisel out an imperfect model of human behavior. The authors argue that the purpose for this is to avoid a utopian and inefficient political theory and to work out a moral practice that is capable of assisting people and communities in ethical self-transformation.

**Note**

1. In the film, a father suffering from PTSD and his daughter are searching for a place to live their life in peace. The father craves solitude and is unable to live up to the requirements of society, and the daughter is increasingly longing for company and belonging. Being ousted from their secluded forest habitat, after being spotted by a jogger, the pair find themselves in and amongst 'normal' life. At first the father tries to find his feet, but being unable to stand the stress of being around people the pair once again escape into the woods. After an accidental fall, the father receives treatment in a small community also living 'outside' of regular society. Here the daughter finds the community and solidarity she has been craving, while the father continues to struggle.

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