**Spiritual exemplars, suspiciousness, and scientism**

*Macao, 11/12/18*

1. **Preliminaries.**

Spiritual traditions recognise certain persons as *exemplars* of a life of aspiration to, or attainment of, a set of spiritual goods – eg Christian saints, Buddhist *arahants* and *bodhisattva*, Daoist *zhēnrén* etc.

SE are diverse in their values, practices, sensibilities, beliefs, convictions, concerns, ‘metaphysical visions’.

Such differences should be acknowledged and explored, not dismissed or glossed over – compare ‘bad’ kinds of perennialism.

I sketch a pluralistic account of spiritual exemplarity based on the idea of spiritual aspirations, then describe two ‘anti-pluralist’ tendencies.

1. **Exemplarism.**

Zagzebski’s thesis: moral qualities/excellences are primarily, perhaps best acquired through encounters with persons who exemplify them, to an advanced or superlative degree (see her *DMT* and *EMT*).

Main components:

1. Exemplars can exemplify *virtue*/s, *role*/s, or a *way of life*.
2. Exemplars can be *contemporaries*, *historical figures*, or *fictional characters* (and become legendarised – a mixture of these).
3. Modes of encounters: *personal*, *testimonial*, *narrative* – Gospels, Hadith, Buddhist Udāna and Avadāna.
4. Encounters must *activate admiration* and *enable emulation*.

Some critical points: (i) the heterogeneity of our responses to exemplars and (ii) dysfunctional forms of admiration and emulation (compare Alfano on ‘polychromatic’ exemplarism) and (iii) aesthetic dimensions (Kidd on the aesthetics of exemplarity).

Zagzebski’s classes of exemplar, distinguished by their special relationship to a specific virtue: **the Saint** (= compassion), **the Sage** (= wisdom), **the** **Hero** (= courage). Other candidate: the **Existential Hero** (= authenticity).

Which of these accommodates spiritual exemplars?

‘Saint’ seems promising: but refers to ‘moral saints’, and, moreover:

1. Some spiritual exemplars fit many classes, depending on one’s focus, values, hermeneutical and doctrinal practices – eg Jesus.
2. Some spiritual traditions reject or challenge those distinctions between those virtues – eg Buddhism on compassion/wisdom.
3. Spiritual exemplarity is properly characterised by reference to a whole matrix of sensibility, experience, and practice, rather than a single virtue.

Alternative proposal: define and distinguish kinds of spiritual exemplar by reference to their particular **spiritual aspirations**.

1. **Spiritual aspirations.**

Central role in spiritual life of aspirations/desires (Ellis; Harrison and Gayle)

Common cited by advocates of theistic forms of spirituality:

1. McPherson on ‘deep desires’ – where ‘our deepest desire correlates with what is seen as the highest or most worthy object of our desire (or love), which the theist claims is God’.
2. Cottingham: spiritual life animated by ‘deep yearnings’, and by an array of ‘sensibilities and impulses’ that underlie and sustain forms of life. They compel us to pursue ‘a balanced and harmonious and integrated life’ with a cosmic dimension.

Further claim: authentic spiritual exemplarity is successful satisfaction of our desires, yearnings, aspirations for a satisfying relationship with God.

1. Cottingham: ‘authentic spiritual experience’ involves ‘a sense of being confronted with something beyond myself’, something ‘worthy of my admiration or love or respect’.
2. Zagzebski: in a ‘divine motivation theory’, God is ‘the supreme exemplar’, who is most profoundly ‘worthy’ of ‘loyalty, respect’, and ‘devotion’.

Objections: (i) there are other kinds of spiritual aspiration, which do not take theistic or interpersonal forms, and (ii) it is unwarranted to confine the scope of ‘authentic’ spiritual exemplarity to theism:

Cooper: ‘a desire to draw close to one’s God is not the only form in which people manifest a yearning to experience a unity with the reality that encompasses them’ (Cooper, ‘Living with Mystery’).

Consider arguments from ‘constitutive religious luck’ (Axtell), Montaigne-style arguments about cultural contingency etc.

I want to motivate a pluralistic account of spiritual aspirations, one that resists the impulse to make claims about authenticity – see Burley’s idea of radical religious pluralism.

Spiritual aspirations: the most fundamental forms that our ‘yearnings’, ‘sensibilities’, and ‘impulses’ for ‘integration’ with the wider order of things.

Distinguish three general kinds of spiritual aspirations:

1. *Aspiration to allegiance* – a person is exemplary as a model of loyalty, love of, devotion to the imperatives or commands of a divine being (Abraham as interpreted by Kierkegaard).
2. *Aspiration to enlightened insight* – a person is exemplary as a model of a life deeply shaped by insight into truths about the nature of reality (eg the Buddha and the Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*)).
3. *Aspiration to emulation* – a person is exemplary insofar as they can emulate the ‘ground’ or ‘source’ of the world, whose qualities, are in humans the virtues (cf. Kidd on early Stoicism; Zhuāngzǐst *zhēnrén*).

Qualifications: (i) each aspiration can take diverse forms; (ii) they can be combined in certain cases; (iii) the aspirations are ways of experiencing the world so require phenomenological investigation (Wynn).

Some implications:

1. authentic spirituality can be defined in terms of aspirations, not participation in religious praxis (Kierkegaard’s ‘Sunday Christians’)
2. individuals could feel different aspirations, that change over time, perhaps in response to practice, reflection, and self-understanding
3. spiritual traditions may have ‘official’ commitment to one specific kind of aspiration but also accommodate other aspirations, too.

Spiritual lives can involve a complex structure of aspirations that relate to different practices, affective and moral responses, doctrinal structures, and metaphysical frameworks.

One ‘anti-pluralism’ tendency, then, is privileging certain kinds of spiritual aspiration – at least, we need non-question-begging criteria for privilege.

In the next section, I consider a more radical ‘anti-pluralism’ tendency.

1. **Suspiciousness and scientism**.

I end by considering some general obstacles to this pluralistic conception of spiritual exemplarity—familiar from wider discourses that voice criticism, scepticism or hostility towards spiritual aspirations, traditions, forms of life.

Worry: spiritual aspirations are often inchoate, elusive, hard-to-articulate; a function of spiritual communities is to help people identify, stabilise, and give practical form to those aspirations (talent analogy) – cf. Cottingham’s talk of spiritual aspirations as a ‘natural birthright’.

Distinguish two kinds of cases (Kidd ‘bleakness’ and ‘receptivity’ papers):

1. a person naturally lacks any spiritual aspirations (perhaps James’ ‘healthy-minded people’).
2. a person possess spiritual aspirations, but contingent factors work to prevent them recognising, exploring, and cultivating them (like the spiritually oppressive societies condemned by Marcel).

Several widespread cultural attitudes and convictions occlude spiritual aspirations, and, so, modes of spiritual exemplarity (Kidd on ‘receptivity’).

Zagzebski notes a ‘general cynicism about the admirable’, ‘reluctance to admire anybody’, ‘reluctance to emulate admirable persons […] even the rejection of the admirable as a moral category’.

I focus on specific kinds of resistance to spiritual aspirations and spiritual exemplarity in particular, encouraged by adoption of a **scientistic stance**.

van Fraassen on a **stance** as a cluster of attitudes, commitments, dispositions and beliefs - a set of ‘epistemic policies’ (Teller) to guide our epistemic activities and enquiry (Ratcliffe).

* **scientistic stances** over-privilege the epistemic practices that are associated with the sciences and their worldview (Peels).
  + a sense of the ‘exclusive sufficiency’ of science (van F).
  + generic attitudes (‘Just say NO to the supernatural!’).
* alternatives include stances incorporating a sense of ‘abiding wonder’, a felt conviction that the world cannot be exhaustively described by the sciences (Feyerabend).

Proposal: employment of a scientistic stance distorts our ability to explore, understand and cultivate spiritual aspirations, and, so, spiritual exemplarity

Consider three modes – inspired by Cooper (*Measure of Things*):

1. **obstruction**

scientistic stances can obstruct the recognition, exploration, and cultivation of spiritual aspirations

* occluding convictions and presuppositions include:
  + it is unintelligible to aspire to ‘allegiance’, ‘enlightened insight’ or emulation of deep aspects of the world.
  + ‘yearnings’, ‘sensibilities’, ‘impulses’ should be passed over or ignored, not acknowledged or taken seriously.
* obstruction prevents the emergence of spiritual exemplars.

1. **degradation**

spiritual aspirations and experiences (of allegiance, say) cannot be taken at face value – they reflect something other, or lesser.

* ‘rubbishing’ or ‘explaining away’ spiritual aspirations
* Marx, Nietzsche, Freud – ‘masters of suspicion’ (Ricoeur).
  + - unacknowledged needs, fears, anxieties
    - psychological immaturity
    - epistemic pathology
    - cultural conditioning
* degradation undermines the status spiritual exemplars have for the person who adopts the scientistic stance.

1. **derogation**

insisting spiritual exemplars who speak of allegiance etc. must be guilty of serious moral-epistemic failings:

1. **failures of self-understanding** – exemplars fail to understand (for instance) that rebirth and *kamma* are ‘mind-numbing and wishful *hocus-pocus’* and ‘silly superstitions’ (Flanagan).
2. **failures of truthfulness** – exemplars fail in honesty, they are bullshitting, dissimulating, or lying – abusing the cultural authority of spiritual traditions for power, wealth, self-gratification, etc.

* individual spiritual exemplars and spiritual exemplarity must be met with cynicism, suspicion, hostility, moral criticism
  + as a general policy, not aimed at particular ‘bad cases’.

Adoption of scientistic stances can encourage obstruction, degradation, and derogation – distorting enquiry by foreclosing certain investigative and interpretive possibilities, into our own, and others, spiritual aspirations.

My points are methodological: if we want to study spiritual exemplars, looking at spiritual aspirations is one way to do that, but we ought to adopt the right stance—for scientistic stances will hinder, not help, those studies.

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