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TRAS LAS HUELLAS DE SÓCRATES: REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA EJEMPLARIDAD Y LA EDUCACIÓN DEL CARÁCTER

SARA MARTÍNEZ MARES
JUAN LUIS FUENTES
(Editores)



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SARA MARTÍNEZ MARES
JUAN LUIS FUENTES
(Editores)

ÁNGEL ALEIXANDRE BLASCO
ANA BELÉN ÁLVAREZ HAYA
AMPARO AYGÜES CEJALVO
SARA CARBALLEDA
INMACULADA CUQUERELLA MADOZ
DANIEL DOYLE SÁNCHEZ
ALICIA ENCÍO
JUAN LUIS FUENTES
SANTIAGO ALFONSO LÓPEZ NAVIA
JESÚS IBÁÑEZ PÉREZ
ALEJANDRO LANDERO

JORGE LÓPEZ GONZÁLEZ
MIRIAM MARTÍNEZ MARES
SARA MARTÍNEZ MARES
SALVADOR ORTIZ DE MONTELLANO
JOSÉ MANUEL PAGÁN AGULLÓ
GUADALUPE PÉREZ TORREGROSA
GRACIA PRATS-AROLAS
ANA RISCO LÁZARO
MIQUEL SOLANS
MARIA SILVIA VACCAREZZA

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Editorial DYKINSON, S.L. Meléndez Valdés, 61 - 28015 Madrid
Teléfono (+34) 91 544 28 46 - (+34) 91 544 28 69
e-mail: info@dykinson.com
<http://www.dykinson.es>
<http://www.dykinson.com>

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“Y en verdad que podría tal vez decirme alguien: «¿No te avergüenzas, Sócrates, de haber observado una conducta tal, que ahora te pone en peligro de muerte?» A ese yo le replicaría con toda razón: «Estás en un error, amigo mío, si crees que un hombre que valga algo, por poco que sea, ha de pararse a considerar los riesgos de muerte, y no ha de considerar solamente, cuando obra, si lo que hace es justo o no lo es o si es propio de un hombre bueno o de un hombre malo»”.

Platón (ed. 1990). Apología, en *Obras completas*. Aguilar. 26e-28c

In memoriam

A todas aquellas personas que perdieron la vida en poblaciones valencianas en 29 de octubre de 2024. A quienes las recordarán por haber ayudado a construir sus vidas y a formar parte de su historia, aunque el dolor evoque la pregunta desgarradora de la pérdida de un amigo: «¿Adónde podía huir mi corazón que huyese de mi corazón?» (Agustín, *Confesiones*, IV, 7).

A ti, porque sí que “llegaste a tiempo” a por tu madre, puesto que has contribuido a que ella tenga un sentido y haya vivido una vida.

A todas aquellas personas que sintieron una oscuridad y soledad aterradoras el miércoles 30 de octubre de 2024 en las localidades valencianas y en otras cercanas, porque ese día no hubo ayuda, no se supo ver la magnitud de la tragedia.

A todas aquellas personas que empiezan de nuevo, porque hacen suyo lo más excelente de las capacidades humanas, “la de transmutar una tragedia personal en un triunfo” (Frankl en *El hombre doliente*); para aquellos que podrán decir “mis bienes se han hundido, pero esto no me ha hundido a mí”.

A todas aquellas personas que siguen adelante porque el amor les empuja a hacerlo, porque hacen suya la frase del *Cantar de los Cantares* “Es fuerte el amor como la muerte (...) Grandes aguas no pueden apagar el amor, ni los ríos anegarlo” (Ct, 8, 6.7).

A todas aquellas personas que han escuchado sin dilación el antiguo grito de los débiles expresado en el libro del *Génesis*: “se oye la sangre de tu hermano clamar a mí desde el suelo” (Gn, 4, 10). A todas las personas que han hecho ríos, ríos humanos que muestra que sigue vivo el sentimiento de humanidad y de esperanza, porque encarnan dichos de antiguos filósofos y místicos “La adversidad es ocasión de virtud” (Séneca); “...y la luz brilla en las tinieblas, y las tinieblas no la vencieron” (Jn, 1, 5).

A todas aquellas personas que transforman en bien las corrientes aplastantes del mal, porque no desisten en “volver a hacer por amor lo que hace la gravedad” y porque muestran que: “la pendiente de la naturaleza propici[a] la subida hacia el bien” (Simone Weil en *La gravedad y la gracia*, 2002, p. 183).

A todas aquellas personas que hacen suya, a día de hoy, la frase de Hamlet: «Los tiempos están confusos. Oh, maldita desgracia, que haya nacido yo para ponerlos en orden», porque con sus capacidades materiales, personales o profesionales, ponen orden en el campo de batalla y recorren largas distancias para paliar el sufrimiento.

A todas aquellas personas cuya compasión habla al resto del mundo y dice que no somos sólo materia, números y álgebra, sino que, como “Electra, la hija de un rey poderoso, reducida a esclavitud, con la esperanza puesta sólo en su hermano, encuentra a un joven que le anuncia la muerte del hermano –y en el momento más rotundo de su desamparo, se descubre que ese joven es su hermano”. Como María Magdalena, desesperada igualmente al no encontrar el cadáver de su maestro, y detiene a un desconocido “jardinero” para preguntarle, siendo ese jardinero su mismo Maestro... Para todos los que ayudan a “reconocer al hermano en un desconocido”, porque es también “reconocer a Dios en el universo” (Weil en *La gravedad y la gracia*, 2002, p. 167).

A todas aquellas personas ejemplares, a “los santos de la puerta de al lado” (Papa Francisco), a todos aquellos que responden ante lo trágico de manera virtuosa y nunca han sido reconocidos, porque “¿cuándo te vimos hambriento y te dimos de comer, o sediento y te dimos de beber? ¿Cuándo te vimos forastero y te acogimos, o desnudo y te

vestimos? ¿Cuándo te vimos enfermo o en la cárcel, y acudimos a ti?” (Mt, 25, 37-39), y no lo saben, ni tampoco necesitan darle importancia, sólo lo hacen.

A todas aquellas personas que se resisten a posicionarse del lado de una lectura partidista, divisoria y polarizada. “Leemos las opiniones sugeridas por la gravedad”, decía de nuevo Simone Weil, esto es, desde el “papel preponderante de las pasiones [que uno salga bien parado] y del conformismo social [forzar a una opinión mayoritaria]”. A todas aquellas personas que se esmeran en “prestan atención a la realidad”, en otras palabras, ver que el sufrimiento no tiene color político. El samaritano es quien ayuda al judío herido: en la colectividad, enemigos, en lo particular, en el rostro del otro, prójimos.

A todos aquellos que necesitan denunciar la injusticia aunque no pretendan aumentar el círculo del odio, porque es legítimo pedir cuentas, como cuando ordena el sumo sacerdote golpear a Pablo en la boca tras una denuncia legítima y no se limitó a sufrir en silencio el ultraje, sino que respondió al pontífice: «Y a ti te golpeará Dios, muro blanqueado! ¿Y tú, que estás sentado para juzgarme según la ley, me mandas golpear contra la ley?» (Act, 23, 2 s).

Permítannos una aparente dedicación paradójica. A todas aquellas personas que, como último viso de esperanza, puedan dejarse llevar incluso por el ejemplo de Aquiles, a quien Apolo describe ante los dioses como “pernicioso, el cual concibe pensamientos no razonables, tiene en su pecho un ánimo inflexible y medita cosas feroces, (...) espíritu soberbio, se encamina a los rebaños de los hombres para aderezarse un festín (...) perdió Aquiles la piedad y ni siquiera conserva el pudor”. Aquiles tenía el cadáver de Héctor ya 9 días sin sepultar, una trasgresión impía y cruel que cometió dominado por la venganza; no obstante lo iracundo que pudo llegar a ser, ante la súplica del viejo rey Príamo, padre de Héctor, que fue a escondidas a pedirle el cadáver de su hijo diciéndole “respeta a los dioses, Aquiles, y apiádate de mí, acordándote de tu padre” (*Ilíada*, XXIV). Aquiles lo admiró y lloraron juntos acordándose cada uno de sus muertos, devolviéndole el cadáver de Héctor tras pagar su rescate (esto es, le deja honrar al cadáver).

También a todas aquellas personas que intentan sacar tajada del sufrimiento, porque “el mal ejemplo absuelve, el bueno condena” (Gomá en *Universal concreto*), porque vemos buenos ejemplos constantemente, porque los testigos permanecen aquí, en el lugar donde ocurre lo trágico y no sólo en los medios de comunicación, y porque el tiempo pondrá todo en su lugar.

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CAPÍTULO III

The walking teacher: saints, heroes, and sages ‘in potential’

Alicia Encío
Universidad Internacional de La Rioja

SUMMARY

Traditionally, exemplarism has been considered one complex and controversial educational strategy. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in modeling due to Linda Zagzebski's *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Since then, considerable attention has been given to the contribution that the theory of exemplarism can provide to virtue acquisition. One of the current discussions in the topic concerns the model or exemplar, his or her ideal character, the distance or closeness from the novice to provide an effective methodology which enables to complete *the exemplarist dynamic*. In the field of education, this issue is applicable to the relationship between the educator and the student, where the educator is the exemplar and the student the novice who can admire or be inspired by the model. In the pages that follow, I attempt to propose the best possible model for the educational context which I describe as *the walking teacher* in which humility as a virtue is distinguished.

KEYWORDS

Exemplar, model, teacher, student, virtue, humility.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in modeling due to Linda Zagzebski's (2017) *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Since then, considerable attention has been paid to the contribution that the theory of exemplarism can provide to virtue acquisition (Kristjánsson, 2017b).

The most classical image of a model is associated with the Aristotelian *phronimos*, which Zagzebski identified as the saint, the hero, or the sage. The *phronimos* is the perfectly virtuous person and the model to which we must look if we want to know the good or act according to it (1106b, 35-38). The saints, like Jesus Christ, represent an exemplary life overall since they possess all the virtues. Heroes, though, just embody one virtue to an extraordinary degree, whereas other virtues can be manifested in lower degrees or even be imperfect. Nelson Mandela's heroic actions against apartheid are a clear example of a courageous and just person in the fight for egalitarian dignity among races. The sage, the last category, is the image of perfect wisdom and intellect like Plato or Aristotle, although it has not been so developed in the educational context.

Due to the contextual differences that may separate them from the novice, there is a defined downside in the applicability and imitability of those exemplars. In response to this problem, some contemporaries have considered widening the exemplarism approach to include more attainable and relevant exemplars with whom novices in early stages of development can identify and, consequently, desire to emulate. This liberal account of exemplarism tries to answer the limitations of the rigid theories that associate modeling to a certain kind of perfection. According to this movement two new forms of exemplars should be considered. First, the *enkratic exemplars*, people who act good but experience a feeling in opposition to reason (Croce, 2020). And second, *incontinent exemplars* referring to someone who bows to feelings contrary to his or her desires, should be considered (Athanasoulis, 2022).

In the field of education, this issue is applicable to the general idea that the teacher is a model of character for their students. As human beings, educators have limitations, so it seems incompatible to relate them to the Aristotelian *phronimos* or Zagzebski's saint, hero, and sage. Therefore, two neo-Aristotelian proposals that present new conceptions of these 'perfect' forms of virtue are analyzed. De Caro et al. (2019) and Vaccarezza's (2020) provide us a clearer vision with whom the teacher can identify.

The purpose of this work is to present *the walking teacher* as the best possible model to complement the *exemplarist dynamic* (Croce, 2019). The walking teacher: the saint, hero, or sage 'in potential' is the manifestation of a continuous seeker of the good, virtuous and imperfect at the same time, but a real and admirable person with whom students may identify and aspire to emulate. Although this process is not just dependent on the teacher, there are some virtues or character traits more favorable for the student-teacher relationship and the teacher's own development as continuous learner. One of the three strategies that Vaccarezza & Niccoli (2019) proposed to prevent the emergence of negative emotions when encountering exemplars helped us reflect on some virtues that should characterize exemplar teachers: other-regarding virtues, humility, or self-love.

In our view, humility is a necessary virtue that makes the proposal of the liberal movement compatible. Although it has been a misunderstood virtue, recent interest has focused on its research (Van Tongeren et al., 2019). Therefore, with this proposal we aim to provide new arguments for considering the need for humility as a defining character trait of the model. Acknowledging limitations, weaknesses, and accepting mistakes allows the teacher to adopt a non-defensive attitude towards the students, but most importantly to maintain the desire to increase in moral sensibility. Consequently, humility

might be the key to enable teachers continue their own walking path through their teaching practice (Snow, 1995). That fact that novices witness these daily attitudes and behaviors lead us to conclude that the walking teacher should be the best possible exemplar.

The paper has been divided into four parts. The first part situates the recent discussion in exemplarism since the publication of Zagzebski's work in 2017. As it is presented, the liberal approaches are gaining ground and questioning the idea of modeling as perfection. The second part consists of an application of the debate of exemplarism to the role of the teacher. The different functions of this professional practice are analyzed. It then goes on to examine a liberal account of the teacher as model, known as the walking teacher: the saint, the hero or the sage 'in potential'. The paper concludes by laying out the internal and external benefits that the virtue of humility may have in the exemplar teacher. Humility is described as an essential characteristic of the walking teacher.

2. Exemplarism: between perfection and imperfection

Exemplarism as a virtue acquisition method should not be reduced to mere copying or blind imitation lacking reason (Annas, 2011). To avoid this reduction, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by exemplarism, and for that, an overview of the stages and dimensions which are integrated in the process suggested by Croce (2019, 2020) will be described. First, the affective dimension, known as *natural admiration*, by which the novice "detects exemplars by relying on the natural operations of our emotion of admiration" (Croce, 2020, p. 3). However, moral value is not exclusively defined by what is admired, in fact, the intellectual dimension and critical judgment are also fundamental (Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017). Therefore, the second stage is *conscientious reflection*, this is the disposition to examine the emotional inclinations to make sure that the first tendencies are ordered to virtue and not mistaken. *The conative dimension* which moves the novice to emulation is the last stage of the dynamic. When the learner emulates an exemplar, he or she adopts the attitude of the admired even if the particular situations are different from those of the exemplar. The complete process of these three stages is defined as *the exemplarist dynamic*.

In terms of admirability and following the classical image of the model – the Aristotelian *phronimos* and Zagzebski's saint, hero or sage – it is more challenging to identify heroes' admirable virtue rather than saints', being more probable to make wrong judgments in the former than in the latter. According to David Carr (2023, 2024) the problem of admiration arises in young learners who lack prudence and, consequently, will more frequently identify with inappropriate models due to their lack conscientious reflection, the influence of trends or uncontrolled passion. Fostering critical thinking is the solution to counterbalance this lack of wisdom and avoid all forms of indoctrination, which are one of the main controversial issues that make modelling a suspicious practice (Croce, 2019; Sanderse, 2013).

The applicability and imitability, however, does not just depend on the recognition of the exemplar, but it relies on the motivational component and the identification of the novice with the admired. The question that arises is whether the novice, associated to the student in formal education, has the desire to emulate the saint or hero when exposure takes place.

Vaccarezza and Niccoli (2019) have referred to these classical figures as *distant exemplars* due to the differences in context, age or culture between the admirable and the admired. On the one hand, being in contact with distant exemplars, though admirable, may provoke in the learner the inability to acquire the admired virtue in the model (Croce,

2020). This controversy arises with the saints who display every virtue, whereas the heroes, who excel in a limited number of them, “make it easier for novices to identify their exemplar traits and also make it more likely that they will wish to imitate them” (Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017, p. 14). Despite this apparent benefit, the contextual difference is a persistent handicap that obscures the emulation process. Imagine a 16-year-old adolescent who has recently watched the film *Schindler’s List* which narrates the story of Oskar Schindler, a businessman who during the Holocaust saved the lives of hundreds of Jewish. Although the adolescent might feel admiration for Schindler’s courage, the context in which the model exhibits virtue has little to do with the novice’s reality.

On the other hand, being in contact with these distant exemplars can reduce the frequent problems of closer exemplars. Apart from the emotion of admiration, negative emotions such as envy or shame can appear, especially as the model is closer to the novice (Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019). For instance, models like friends, brothers or sisters, parents, or teachers with whom the student can easily identify or even know personally might increase the feeling of these negative emotions impeding emulation or even evoking to resentment.

Zagzebski (2017) herself, when writing her proposal, was aware of these troubles given that moral development is a gradual process which requires time, so emulating *phronimos* exemplars might not be possible until a certain level of development is achieved. Before that, “we do better at imitating persons who are better than we are, but not so much better that we cannot clearly see the path to becoming like the exemplar” (p. 25). In response to this idea, some contemporary researchers have considered widening the exemplarism approach to more attainable and relevant exemplars with whom novices in early stages of development can identify and, therefore, desire to emulate. As Croce (2020) claims:

Proponents of a more concessive view maintain that it is enough for one to be a moral exemplar if they be exceptionally virtuous in one specific respect (moral heroes), provided that they do not entertain vicious behavior in other respects (p. 1).

Following this idea, the *phronimos* in the classical tradition would act as an aspirational ideal but not as an emulator potential. By ideals we understand those values that are very hard to complete or even unrealizable (de Ruyter & Kole, 2010). In this way the saint, hero or the sage constitute a form of *telos* providing reasons for action and sources of motivation, but the continent or incontinent exemplars act as the means which are conducive to that abstract ideal of the good life (Athanasoulis, 2022; Croce, 2020).

This liberal account of exemplarism tries to answer the limitations of the rigid theories that associate modeling to a certain kind of perfection. Concerning the difficulties of identification with the *phronimos* and assuming the difficulties to encounter with models of such level of virtue outside the narratives, some alternatives have been suggested. With the aim to bring exemplars closer to the novice reality, Vos emphasizes that “modelling will only be a relevant pedagogical strategy if moral exemplars are somehow related to life in its full extent, including its moral complexities and ambiguities” (2018, p. 19). The desire to emulate in those circumstances might then be associated to the admirability of problem resolution in everyday life, instead of the already acquired and perfect display of virtue (Carr, 2024).

Exemplars, according to this view, would not be seen as ideals but more importantly “as real persons who embody virtues (and vices) and live out particular values in the midst of the moral complexity of their lives” (Vos, 2018, p. 21). Following Zagzebski’s words,

the exposure to such exemplars will just be beneficial if the novice's moral development is below the exemplar's (Croce, 2020). In the context of formal education, how do all these theories apply to the teacher and student relationship?

3. The teacher as exemplar

In the context of formal education, the potential of modeling has been described around the role of the teacher whose work can be summarized in three ideas (Kristjánsson, 2006). The first is defined by the demands of the profession. The teaching practice includes by definition that the teacher is an indirect model for the students. The constant interaction and observation can have an inspirational impact on the student regardless of the teachers' intentions (Carr, 2007; Peterson & Arthur, 2020; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). In contrast to the first, the educator can be a guide and intentional model of virtue in response to the moral education aims which are part of the general purpose of integral education (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2018; Sanderse & Cooke, 2021). And last, teachers can make use of the exemplarism method by selecting other models of virtue through stories, videos, biographies, etc. (Carr, 2019; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019).

Sanderse (2013) underlines two problems concerning the functions just outlined. The first is that the teachers' character traits do not necessarily have to be admirable. So, if exemplarism is reduced to this classical image of perfection (Zagzebski, 2017), then the teacher's role would be limited to the presentation of external models through fiction. In other words, providing students with "the perfect" categorizations of exemplars –the *phronimos* or the saint– would mean that the teacher is no longer a model, and his role would be limited to the last potential of modeling which is the use of characters present in narratives or literature.

Nevertheless, teachers' moral exemplarity cannot be dismissed because of their weakness or imperfection. As human beings, educators' have limitations, so it is incompatible to associate them with the Aristotelian *phronimos* or Zagzebski's saint, hero, and sage. The persona of the teacher as a role model then, ought to be associated with the recent forms of continence, struggle, and complexity. Consequently, new approaches or conceptions of the teacher as a model need to be described following the liberal accounts presented in the previous section (Croce, 2020).

The second problem with exemplarism is that notwithstanding the teachers' admirable character traits, it might not induce the emulation of the novice. In some cases, the influence that models have in learners is not recognized in the short run (Sanderse, 2013), which makes the teachers' role more uncertain. This means that even if the teacher is a model, the students will not necessarily admire their displayed traits, since the learning process is ultimately dependent on the student's agency. Moreover, to make it more challenging, when in contact with the admirable, the emotions that can be aroused are not necessarily positive emotions, but negative emotions like envy or shame are also possible reactions.

Conscious of the greater difficulty in achieving the dynamics of exemplarism, Vaccarezza & Niccoli (2019) propose three strategies that can help prevent the emergence of such feelings. To us, some of these suggestions provide us with key information to better analyze the image of the exemplar teacher which we aim to describe in this proposal. For example, one of the strategies described is that the teacher recognizes his or her own walking path which they can share with the students. This opening up of the teacher to the student, on the one hand, might be an important source for trust and confidence which can reduce defensive attitudes or feelings (Jonas & Yacek, 2024). This

strategy, on the other hand, makes evident how the pathway to virtue is a never-ending process so students, as well as educators, are walking towards their ideal *telos*.

The difference between both agents might be that, due to the age variance, the teacher's experience is wider and, hence, wiser. This idea apparently contradicts Aristotle himself when he said in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "it matters little whether he is young in age or youthful in character; the defect does not lie in time, but in living and pursuing all things according to passion. For such people knowledge is useless" (1095a, 5-10). However, the intrinsic value of teaching and teacher's responsibility towards their labor cannot be ignored. For that reason, we ought to assume that teachers desire to live their life in accordance with the good in its broadest sense. In these terms, the voluptuous life is not an option when thinking of the teacher as a model. But, even if the vicious life or life according to passion have been denied, other forms of failure, error, struggle and complexity are going to be present in the teacher. Therefore, how could the teacher be described following the liberal account of the theory of exemplarism?

4. The walking teacher: saints, heroes and sages 'in potential'

We have argued that the classical account of exemplarism does not correspond to a realistic image of the teacher. Hence, the liberal theories that are being proposed should be applied to the teaching practice. To achieve this, we will look at some recent descriptions of the *phronimos* that go against the summative form of virtues or involve unapproachable ideals. Our contribution suggests a kind of perfection characterized by being 'in potential', this means, assuming that the teacher is on the way to virtue. Precisely, this pathway to virtue is what makes us refer to the teacher as the best possible model.

De Caro et al. (2018) present a new form of practical wisdom which reacts against the traditional Aristotelian account of *phronesis*. In this classical view, practical wisdom is referred to the possession of all ethical virtues that orient the person towards the good. In this view, the image of the exemplar is identified with absolute perfection and with the accumulation of virtues such as Zagzebski's (2017) sage, saint or hero.

However, in the new proposition of the unity of virtue thesis which they explore, a more realistic view of these 'perfect' model is presented. In their article, the attribute of wise or sage is extended to those who "(i) are oriented – both affectively and cognitively – to an overall good life and fare well in at least some moral domains, but also (ii) acknowledge their shortcomings in other domains and try to improve there" (De Caro et al., 2018, p. 295). In this regard, you could be wise if you were just open to the good and attentive to each situation instead of having to possess all the virtues in every specific context, as the traditional conception of wisdom advocates. In the alternative that is being explored, however, the wise person is defined as an ethical expert who is on the way to achieve an ideal perfection but who, on their way, also performs a kind of perfection due to the constant improvement that results from the overall orientation to the good.

In a subsequent paper in the same direction, Vaccarezza (2020) provides an image of the *phronimos* "as an observable ideal, verifiable and even admirable and imitable" (p. 152). The particular characteristic in this proposal is that we can think of *the phronetic exemplar* as an imperfect moral agent whose only requirement is to be devoted to increasing his own moral sensitivity. Being mature or becoming the *phronimos* does not necessarily mean being perfectly virtuous; error, failure and vice may also be part of adulthood. Indeed, virtues are required if a good life is to be manifested but embodying a sketch of the good life, having the capacity for good deliberation and, most importantly,

having a clear desire to be a continuous learner in terms of morality is what makes a defining exemplar.

Both ideas presented above describe an image of an exemplar in constant movement, although incomplete, who is always attentive to new domains or having the disposition and the openness to be more sensitive to the good. These recent forms of the *phronimos* are more applicable to the exemplar teacher leading us to consider it the best possible model. The *phronimos* teacher described above is a walker who has not reached the end but who has a clear *telos* to which he or she is approaching: the pursue of the good life. Certainly, this image of the teacher as a model is more plausible than the classical view of Zagzebski (2017) and, for this reason, we have referred to the teacher as the walking teacher: the saint, the wise and the sage ‘in potential’.

These approachable forms of the *phronimos* have contributed to a better understanding of the teacher as model. However, the problems that surround the applicability and imitability of models have not yet been overcome. Despite being in total accordance with this flexible idea of the wise which we have transferred to the teaching context and named the walking teacher, De Caro et al. (2018) and Vaccarezza (2020) seem to have ignored one fundamental element when presenting their corresponding definitions. According to the first, the ethical expertise is only characterized by the single virtue of wisdom and the other virtues are just descriptions of the ethical expertise in particular domains. Therefore, the aim of the sage would not be to possess all the virtues in a particular moment but rather to be oriented to the good and try to improve in those domains in which one fails or are still unexplored. With regard to the second, although it is said that the *phronimos* must “enumerate several virtues that substantiate the good life” (p. 152), no attention is given to specific virtues that might be of fundamental importance.

In our view, the sage, the hero and saint ‘in potential’ or the walking teacher cannot miss the role of the silent virtue of humility which underlies the definition that both works have given to these liberal accounts. Thus, being aware of one’s own limitations in every domain as the Caro et al. (2019) described and being opened to new situations like Vaccarezza (2020) suggested are some core-defining elements of humility shared with these conceptions of the *phronimos*. Nevertheless, the consideration of humility has not been made explicit.

In the ongoing debate on the theory of exemplarism this virtue has only been mentioned on two occasions. The first is suggested by Vaccarezza & Niccoli (2019) where they present humility as a virtue that can avoid the emergence of negative emotions and foster the admirer to perceive emulation as desirable and possible, reducing their feeling of shame or humiliation. The second reference corresponds to Croce (2019). He described exemplars of humility as a potential benefit for arrogant students, who can be struck by the humble reactions of their models in ordinary circumstances.

The polemic nature of humility turns back to Aristotle who did not even consider it a virtue (Kristjánsson, 2017a). Despite the frequent misunderstanding and lack of consensus around the concept, recent interest has been placed in its research to even consider it a fundamental virtue (Van Tongeren et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2018). In the section below we will explain the benefits that humility offers and why it should be a fundamental disposition in this exemplarism debate and, more specifically, to consider the walking teacher as the best possible model.

5. The walking teacher is humble

The origins of humility in Western history trace back to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This virtue is intrinsically linked to the transcendental aspect of human existence,

situating humans as creatures whose will is subject to the will of the Creator, to whom all of creation is oriented. Moreover, humility serves as an antidote to pride, the opposing vice that prevents the acknowledgment of a Supreme Being. In this sense, the role of humility is to eliminate barriers towards the freedom to acquire higher goods (S. Th. II-II q. 161 ad. 4).

Despite this, humility has also been described with connotations such as submission, dependence, or debasement giving the virtue a negative tone. Consequently, some have not considered humility a virtue, or it has even been described as a vice. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent critic of Christianity, regarded humility as a sign of cowardice and weakness that prevents individuals from reaching their full potential.

However, recent research efforts are aiming to reclaim the value of humility, recognizing it as a natural virtue essential for leading a good life with independence from religious contexts from which the negative understanding of the virtue was originated (Alfano et al., 2020; Ballantyne, 2023; Smith & Kouchaki, 2018; Wójtowicz, 2021). Apart from the growing interest in the field of Philosophy many researchers in the field of Psychology and Positive Psychology are focusing their studies on the conceptualization and measurement of humility.

There is an ongoing conceptual clarification of what humility is against other related concepts, but it is not our aim to delve into this semantic discourse. Our purpose instead is to acknowledge the benefits that humility can have in the exemplar possessing the virtue and in those who are around. The reviews developed by Van Tongeren et al. (2019) and Worthington Jr. et al. (2021) from 2000 to 2017 clarified the conceptual grounds for the virtue, summarizing humility in two main dimensions, one internal and another external: “(a) an ability to accurately acknowledge one’s limitations and abilities and (b) an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused” (p. 463). Based on these two dimensions, what are the internal and external benefits that make us consider the humble teacher as the best possible model?

5.1. Internal benefits

The internal dimension of humility is defined as the ability to accurately acknowledge one’s limitations and abilities. As virtue, it is the disposition to adequately acknowledge how one is, being able to objectively recognize one’s own defining characteristics. The walking teacher might require this disposition if approaching the good is the desired aim.

To start, humility as a form of personal knowledge is valuable in itself and, as such, it is inherently desirable. That the virtue of humility is a true self-understanding means that the walking teacher is aware of the ‘backpack’ they are carrying to perform the teaching task¹⁴. The limitations and weaknesses are known by the educator, who also recognizes their virtues and strengths. According to Snow (2015), practicing humility is a path to success in personal respect, gaining confidence, self-esteem, and acquiring autonomy.

What is key to consider here is that the knowledge the virtue provides with is not static; thus, the act of teaching itself shapes and illuminates the understanding of oneself, leading to the discovery of new personal insights that may have been underexplored or to the actualization of previous understanding. Due to awareness of the fallibility of their character, the walking teacher may also be simultaneously conscious of the potential for change and new discoveries. For that reason, another significant contribution of humility is the empowering effect it may produce. This potential may be manifested in continuous

¹⁴ The analogy of the backpack is an expression used to refer to the set of knowledge, learning, experiences, circumstances that each person carries.

learning, the updating of one's ideas, the recognition of fallibility and limitations, or the willingness and effort to improve. Following Peterson and Seligman (2004), the contribution of humility to learning requires the individual to be educated in the ability to embrace both positive and negative feedback.

Yet, the accurate understanding of our own nature cannot be achieved without perspective. This implies that the teacher's persona should possess the ability to observe oneself in connection to the situation, others, the world, or even the transcendent reality. This contextualization allows the teacher to position within a broader context, recognizing that they are just a small part of it. This way, the walking teacher will be able to comprehend the role played in the student's education, as well as acknowledge the involvement of other individuals in the process, including parents, other teachers, students, or even God, upon whom consideration should be given. The process of decentralization allows the walking teacher to admire the good in others and submit to them when their own limitations require others to compliment (S. Th. II-II, q 161).

Humility, in addition to reducing challenging behaviours and promoting self-awareness, paves the way for the development of other virtues or the openness to new domains. This is the reason why to some, humility ought to be considered a foundational virtue on which the acquisition of the rest of the virtues depends (Wright et al., 2018). According to these authors, the right psychological positioning of oneself relative to others and the world that humility provides is necessary for virtue-growth. Furthermore, not only the psychological positioning is necessary but most importantly, it is required if full virtue development want to occur. The philosophical explanation to this is that humility frees a person from the contamination of its opposite vice, pride, and other vices from this family, predominating, arrogance, vanity or conceit (Roberts, 2009).

The acquired freedom that results through humble actions might, therefore, foster openness to others and the development of other virtues within the system (Gulliford & Roberts, 2018). Although further research is needed, in the review conducted by Worthington Jr. et al. (2021), for example, high humility was hypothesized to be a precursor to most virtues and the 20 studies that they analyzed have at least shown interconnections of humility with altruism, forgiveness, gratitude, and self-regulation.

Day to day experiences put the teachers in total exposure, some of which might push them to the limit and lead them to error. In the teaching manner and style, the student can witness the teachers' limitations and virtues. By acknowledging limitations, one also discovers the potential for improvement. Forgiveness, for example, is one of the interpersonal virtues that relates to humility, so a humble teacher will tend to acknowledge their mistakes more easily and manifest forgiveness (Lavelock et al., 2017). Thus, humiliation experiences though distinct from humility and not desirable in themselves, can be transformed into paths of maturation and growth (Snow, 1995).

Moreover, the openness to context characterised by humility will enable teachers to experience awe (Stellar et al., 2018) and reflect gratitude towards others, including students (Fuentes, 2021). These daily examples of the actions of the walking teacher will serve as a potential source of admiration for students. The influence may not be immediate; indeed, the exemplary nature of the model may often be recognized over the years. Whenever it happens, it is crucial to contemplate this reality and remain hopeful in the meantime, continuing the path the educator must navigate (Jonas & Yacek, 2024).

The acknowledgement of one's own limitations and strengths would not correspond to virtue if no action was taken in accordance with it. For this reason, apart from the internal dimension just described above, the humble disposition in the walking teacher would have external benefits in the relationship between the teacher and the student

(Encío et al., 2024). These contributions are essential for this reflective analysis on exemplarism, justifying why the walking teacher is the best possible model.

5.2. *External benefit*

The second main dimension outlined by Van Tongeren et al. (2019) results from the anthropological condition of the human being: one cannot be without the others.

Although some authors may have questioned the interpersonal dimension of humility, it is worth highlighting the value of humility for its effects on others (Snow, 2017). What seems certain is that whether as part of humility or a consequence of it, the benefits of the virtue in interpersonal relationships are undeniable, as attitudes become more receptive and less defensive; more open to listening than closed to one's own ideas (Richardson, 1988; Tangney, 2000; Van Tongeren et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2018).

Looking back to Aristotle's conception of friendship in book 8 and 9 in the *Nicomachean Ethics* can provide us with an overview of different forms of relationship in which a disposition of humility or pride may be manifested. On the one hand, relationships can be constructed in utility or in pleasure-seeking terms. Relationships which are only constructed in this way reflect a life where the main interest is the personal benefit that the agent can obtain. The authentic friendship, on the other hand, aims at the good of the other for noble motives. To Aristotle, a life constructed in virtue is the only way to approach this type of friendship. But which are the manifestations of humility that contribute to the virtuous relationship between the teacher and student in the Aristotelian sense?

The teaching task possesses very specific characteristics that, by definition, orient educators towards others. Consequently, teaching itself promotes a context conducive to the practice of humility. The centrality of the action is not on the teacher but on the students' growth and flourishing. To achieve this, the teacher displays the character traits that are constitutive of their 'backpack' within the educational context. The uniqueness of humility lies in its ability to place the teacher as part of a broader whole and display who they are, putting their will outside themselves. That is why humility and other-regarding virtues are closely related, as explained in the previous section.

Humble people are more likely to establish and maintain social relations so that the teacher-student connection may be more easily acquired (Davis et al., 2011). Being in contact with a humble teacher then, might reduce shame and fear of facing errors, uncertainty of not knowing, and pressure imposed by the teacher's authority (Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019). Precisely, this trait fosters in the student a greater confidence because someone humble has a greater capacity for listening, is more willing to consider the learner, and values what they say and do, regardless of any errors they may make (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Waks, 2003).

If we want the students to emulate the exemplars and be inspired by them, it seems better if the social relations are constructed in humility rather than pride. The trusting *ethos* that the humble teacher can provide the students may also be inspirational for them (Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019). In that climate, the teacher may model certain attitudes or believes as a direct model of good character, and due to the caring environment achieved, it can increase the impact on the student.

This way, since the students might feel more confident and appreciated by their teachers, negative emotions can be avoided, being more probable that the student admires the teacher's character traits which after reflection he aspires to emulate, completing the whole exemplarist dynamic.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to reflect on the characteristics of the walking teacher as the “perfect model”. The relevance of this investigation lies in the deep application of the ongoing discussion in exemplarism to the field of education, specifically to the teacher and student relationship.

The significance of the liberal accounts provides a new image of the teacher as an exemplar. Without reducing their responsibilities in terms of modeling, we have sketched an idea of a more realistic person who can be described as wise while assuming imperfection and struggle. The particularity of the saint, the hero and the sage ‘in potential’ is their constant movement towards an increase in moral sensitivity or new domains of action that lead them to pursue the good.

The virtue of humility has been the core in the presentation of this realistic and dynamic model which we have named the walking teacher as the best possible exemplar. The silent virtue of humility when embodied in action manifests itself in a constant willingness to excel. This attitude requires the ability to recognize one’s limitations as well as to embrace one’s strengths and place them at the service of others. Therefore, the potential of humility does not just influence the teacher’s own learning and development, but also contributes to creating a secure learning environment for the students.

The article suggests avenues for future research, particularly in exploring how humility and the more realistic account of the walking teacher can impact on students. Through these reflections the learner has been brought closer to models who, like them, are walking towards virtue. The realism in the teacher, the closeness in the student-teacher relationship thanks to humility, or the similarities in the continuous learning process in which both are immersed may lead the students to admire, to be inspired, and ideally, to emulate.

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