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Book Review: Divine Motivation Theory

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everything important about our lives can be explained by Darwinism. He displays a remarkable amount of religious fervor for an atheist. This, of course, is hardly unusual. (Consider, for example, devotees of Marxism.) Unfortunately, however, Dawkins's religious zeal is all (mis)directed to the Church of Natural Selection.

Divine Motivation Theory, by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xvii + 410. \$75 (hardback), \$29.99 (paperback).

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In this ambitious, wide-ranging book, Linda Zagzebski puts forward 'a theological virtue ethics in which morality is driven by the attractiveness of the good,' and central to which is what she labels 'exemplarism' (p. xii). Through divine *motivation* theory, Zagzebski aims to challenge (though not necessarily contradict – see p. 270) divine *command* theory, with its tendency to focus on a conception of morality as law (that is, something that *compels* rather than attracts). Zagzebski divides her discussion into three parts. In part one, she sketches a type of virtue ethics that is 'motivation-based' (p. 1). This part of the theory is intended to be compelling naturalistically; it is not until part two that God becomes central. On this view, the moral properties of persons, acts and outcomes of acts all derive from a good motive, whereby what is meant is 'an emotion that initiates and directs action' (p. 1). Emotions, which for Zagzebski have an important cognitive dimension, are fundamental to her theory (see chapters 2 to 4).

Indeed, they are the foundation of ethics, as appropriate emotion enables us to see the world aright. Her main philosophical inspiration is Aristotle, and one of the most interesting aspects of her theory is the emphasis she puts upon his idea that we learn the good by ostensive definition: hence exemplarism. Zagzebski proposes that just as Kripke and others have suggested that natural kind terms such as gold or water should be defined as whatever is the same kind of thing as *that* (some 'indexically identified instance'), so the same method should be followed in ethics. On this model, the answer to the question 'What is a good person?' is always of the form 'Someone like *that*.'

In other words, not only is virtue basic, but we learn virtue through direct reference to exemplars. Human moral growth and education involves picking out people who are paradigmatically wise or good, and *imitating* them. Just as someone without an education in chemistry can competently recognise gold when she sees it, so someone unable to give an account of the nature of practical wisdom can recognise a good, practically wise person when she sees one. 'We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness' (p. 41). Zagzebski addresses one obvious objection to this, the issue of variability of exemplars and ethical pluralism, in part three (chapter 9). Meanwhile part two (chapters 5 to 8) moves from the naturalistic to 'divine motivation theory' itself. Here, Zagzebski builds upon the arguments of part one to argue that the true foundation of ethics is the motives of God, the ultimate exemplar. She offers divine motivation

theory as an alternative to two conceptions of morality as law, voluntarism and intellectualism. God is essential to morality not because the latter stems from his will or his intellect, but from his *motives*. These motives are components of God's virtues, and God's exemplarity inheres in being 'the ultimate paradigm of goodness and the source of value' (p. 185). Much of part two concerns metaphysical issues, including discussions of traditional problems such as whether perfect goodness is compatible with omnipotence, freedom and moral goodness (chapter 7). It also contains Zagzebski's account of how divine motivation theory addresses the problem of evil (chapter 8). However, for this reader, the most interesting chapter in this part is chapter 6, where we move from chapter 5's discussion of the *imitatio Dei* to a very rich discussion of the imitation of Christ, which draws upon such diverse thinkers as Irenaeus and Bonhoeffer.

For obvious reasons, exemplarism is able to give the incarnation a role of central moral importance. Zagzebski notes the difficulties of the *imitatio Dei* given a 'lofty metaphysical view of God': 'The more worthy of adoration a being is, the less like human beings it is. We cannot imitate a being too far above us, and it is hard to have a relationship with a being who is not human' (p. 233). Hence the importance of that person who combines a divine with a human nature. The person of Christ, rather than a set of commandments, is the most perfect revelation of God (p. 237), and Zagzebski notes the greater importance given in the New Testament to 'the imitation of the virtues of Christ' as opposed to commandment and law (p. 239). Even the injunctions that there are—such as the love commandments—require us primarily to be motivated in a virtuous way. This chapter also includes an interesting discussion about the importance of narratives in relating ourselves to exemplars. This theme, which Zagzebski also discusses briefly elsewhere with reference to Martha Nussbaum amongst others, is one that it would be good to see worked out in more detail.

Various questions arise about this rich and thought-provoking book. First, Zagzebski opines that the problem of ethical pluralism discussed in chapter 9 cannot be solved without 'a theory of the self and the way in which the self revises itself' (p. 349). In this context, it is surprising that she makes no reference to Stanley Cavell's discussion of a view very close to exemplarism in such texts as *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and *Cities of Words*. In discussing the logic of exemplarity, Cavell (and James Conant after him) has developed Emerson and Thoreau's idea of the self as 'doubled,' according to which we are able to take a critical distance from our current self and present a further state of the self that needs to be attained. On this view, it is precisely the exemplary other who discloses to us our 'next,' 'higher' self. In an interesting reflection on Nietzsche's view of exemplarity in 'Schopenhauer as Educator,' Conant discusses proper and debilitating forms of relating oneself to an exemplar, which I myself have connected with Kierkegaard's important distinction between 'admiration' and 'imitation' in *Practice in Christianity*.¹ It would be interesting to learn what Zagzebski would make of all this, given the closeness of this discussion of 'higher selves' to such observations as her idea that the imitation of Christ 'involves the attempt to become a new self, a self that is clearly *myself*, but also the self that I recognize that I am not yet' (p. 245). To mention but one point: Zagzebski notes the danger of 'inverted ego-

ism' in relating to an exemplar: 'in identifying with my hero, I may begin to think that I am he' (p. 235). But the Cavellian tradition also puts great emphasis on the opposite problem: the way in which 'admiration' of an exemplar can be, in Conant's words, 'ethically impotent'; in this case, the hero is so far above me that I let myself off the ethical hook, thinking, as Nietzsche puts it, 'here there is no need to compete.'² (Nietzsche, by the way, is an obvious counter-example to Zagzebski's claim that 'secular ethics in the Western world differs from religious ethics, not so much in having different exemplars, but in not having exemplars at all' (p. 384).)

Second, mention of Nietzsche prompts an important objection to a fundamental aspect of Zagzebski's theory. When introducing exemplarism, she suggests: 'If a theory has the consequence that neither Jesus Christ, nor Socrates, nor the Buddha is a good person, we should question whether the theory is a theory about what we call a good person' (p. 41). Here, perhaps, is the Achilles heel of her variety of exemplarism. Insofar as the scope of this 'we' remains unclear, Zagzebski is open to the objection that she may simply be ignoring the challenge to 'morality' of critics as radical as Nietzsche. If there is anything to his charge that the triumph of 'slave' morality has led to aspects of human flourishing more commonly associated with 'noble' morality being undervalued, then it is far from obvious how Zagzebski's form of exemplarism could recover them. (It is notable that another important contribution to the development of virtue ethics, Christine Swanton's recent book, affords a central role to Nietzsche.)³

A third point is prompted in part by Zagzebski's compelling suggestion (in chapter 9) that the way in which we 'revise' the self involves the 'second-person perspective' we get on ourselves from 'close interaction with others, particularly those others who are wise and who know us intimately' (p. 372). Here, perhaps, we need a clearer distinction than Zagzebski provides between our day to day intimates and primary exemplars: those paradigmatic good, practically wise persons such as Jesus, Socrates and Buddha. In trying to solve the problem of whether the life an exemplar desires is identical to the life the exemplar lives, she suggests that we find out by 'ask[ing] the exemplars' (p. 116). But Jesus, Socrates and Buddha do not hold regular office hours, and I assume that Zagzebski would not wish to endorse a view of prayer whereby relating to Christ is like arranging a chat with my pastor. In chapter 9's discussion of paradigmatically wise persons in different religious traditions, the idea seems to be of wise Christians, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims, for instance, in the here and now. It is perhaps for this reason that Zagzebski segues into a discussion of what we can learn from our friends. This is natural enough, as Aristotelian ethics gives a special role to the 'virtue friend.' But this brings to light an important question: What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of self-transformation through our relations to exemplars such as Jesus, Socrates and Buddha, and self-transformation through our friendships at their best?

One major element Cavell stresses in *Cities of Words* is conversation, and he explicitly connects this with Aristotle's discussion of conversations between virtue friends. Is Zagzebski's introduction of the wise friend who knows us intimately recognition of the need to complement our relation to primary exemplars with something more 'everyday'? If so, I suspect she is right. In his essay on friendship, Francis Bacon claims that 'the light,

that a man receiveth, by counsel from another, is drier, and purer, than that which cometh from his own understanding and judgement; which is ever infused and drenched in his affections and customs.⁴ It is not clear how relating oneself to an exemplar in solitude is likely to minimise this danger: the image of the exemplar may be insufficient to check my self-deception. But conversations with (something like) an Aristotelian virtue friend who genuinely has my best interests at heart can often reveal my confusions to me more directly, not least because such friendship is straightforwardly dialogical in a way that relating oneself to a primary exemplar cannot be. Although Cavell's hero Emerson talks of the exemplar *as* a 'friend,' this is potentially misleading, in that it fails to respect the distinction I am suggesting we need. Thus our imaginative relations to exemplars cannot replace our real friendships. Aristotle stresses the need for equality between virtue friends, but the relation between me and the truly exemplary is inherently unequal. I suggest, then, that our understanding of the model of self-transformation through encounter with the primary exemplars Zagzebski discusses, important though this is, needs to be complemented with the relatively mundane experience of conversations between virtue friends. Zagzebski, I suspect, would not disagree with this, but she might be clearer about the relative weight that primary exemplars (Jesus, Socrates, Buddha) and derivative exemplars (the practically wise Christian or Buddhist friend) have in her theory.

On the other hand, we should perhaps not put *too* strong an emphasis on friendship. The sources for the second person perspective Zagzebski rightly valorises are not limited to primary exemplars on the one hand and our wise intimate friends on the other. Thus a further question that arises is this: What is the significance of the fact that we sometimes deliberately seek out advice from persons who are *not* our friends? Consider the importance of the professional therapist or counsellor in contemporary western culture, to say nothing of the priest or pastor who may not know me intimately, but to whom I might go for advice because of rather than despite this. The range of potential exemplars is wide indeed.

In sum, this is a bold and ambitious book that will provide food for thought for philosophers of religion and ethicists with a broad range of interests. It deserves a wide readership.

NOTES

1. James Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of "Schopenhauer as Educator"' in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's prelude to Philosophy's Future*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For my discussion of Cavell and Conant on exemplarity, see John Lippitt *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Palgrave, 2000), chap. 3. This includes a discussion of the difference between an exemplar and a type that is relevant to Zagzebski's discussion of 'incommunicability' (a central criterion of personhood).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), § 162.

3. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. Francis Bacon, 'Of Friendship,' in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), p. 205.