

# The Vice of Admiration

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## Abstract

Moral exemplars are often held up as objects to be admired. Such admiration is thought beneficial to the admirer, inducing him or her to emulate virtuous conduct, and deemed flattering to the admired. This paper offers a critical examination of admiration from a broadly Kantian perspective, arguing that admiration – even of genuine moral exemplars – violates the duty of self-respect. It also provides an explanation for the fact that moral exemplars themselves typically shun admiration. Lastly, it questions the assumption that admiration leads to emulation on the basis of scientific findings that indicate that admiration induces passivity in the admirer rather than an incentive to self-improvement.

## 1. Introduction

Admiration is an attitude that many consider largely unproblematic, whilst some tend to see it favourably. It feels good, is flattering to the person who is admired and, so it is often claimed, it may incite the less virtuous to imitate the virtues of the object of their admiration. Certainly, hardly anyone believes that admiration is unconditionally good. When persons are mistakenly attributed lofty qualities, then admiration can be misdirected. Similarly, persons may be admired for qualities they do possess, but which are inappropriate grounds for admiration; the admiration some people apparently feel for Stalin's ruthless political savviness may be an example.

Yet when it is not based on such unworthy qualities or false beliefs, and a person truly displays outstanding character traits or has an exemplary moral track record, then it seems to be fairly generally accepted that admiration is an appropriate attitude to adopt towards such a person. When it comes to people who have performed admirably, then surely admiration is the appropriate response, for the admirable must be admired, or so the thought seems to go. Viewed from this perspective, refusing to adopt an admiring attitude when confronted with a genuine moral exemplar would be tantamount to withholding moral exemplars something they deserve and could even be taken to signify a begrudging, resentful character trait.

Some go further and believe that admiration should serve as the foundation of a theory of all of morality.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I offer a more critical evaluation of admiration, arguing that admiration, insofar as it is directed at other persons for their moral accomplishments, is not a morally innocuous attitude. Indeed, I contend that there is something inherently objectionable about admiration, so that one should *never* admire other persons, not even moral exemplars. An important first indicator that there might be something amiss with admiration can be found in the perspective of those persons who are the object of such admiration. If admiration were the appropriate attitude to adopt when faced with a person with a morally exemplary character, then one would also expect that these moral exemplars would welcome being admired and regard it as nothing other than their proper due. This, however, is at odds with the widespread intuition that wanting to be admired – the ‘appetite for applause’ as it is traditionally also called – counts amongst the lowest of human character traits<sup>2</sup> and hence is something that we would not find in morally exemplary persons. Indeed, moral exemplars are typically described as shunning admiration, regarding their exemplary deeds as no more than a matter of doing what had to be done.

Given their exemplary status, it would seem that we should take the viewpoint adopted by the moral exemplars seriously. Hence, part of the purpose of this paper is to offer an explanation for the morally exemplary persons’ disdain for admiration and to explain why they would have no reason to value being admired. The lack of value that moral exemplars attach to admiration is, I believe, only a symptom of a deeper problem with admiration, however, namely that it is incompatible with self-respect.

My analysis takes place within a broadly Kantian framework. After delineating this framework in the next section, I establish my main

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. a series of papers by Linda Zagzebski: ‘The Admirable and the Desirable Life’ in: T. Chappell (ed.) *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53–66; ‘Exemplarist Virtue Theory’, *Metaphilosophy* **41** (2010), 41–57; ‘Moral Exemplars in Theory and Practice’, *Theory and Research in Education* **11** (2013), 193–206; ‘Admiration and the Admirable’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXXIX* (2015), 205–221; ‘Exemplarism and Admiration’ in: C. Miller, R. Furr, A. Knobel & W. Fleeson (eds) *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 251–268.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. David Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

objection to admiration in Section 3. I argue that in order to admire another person for their moral accomplishments (whether these are thought of as character traits or in terms of their moral track record) a person must adopt something akin to a double standard. This allows the admirer to continue to feel good about himself whilst acknowledging the superior performance of the object of his admiration. In doing so, however, I argue that the admiring person can be said to be purchasing his moral self-esteem at the price of his self-respect. In Section 4, I then show how this enables us to explain the disdain that moral exemplars are typically thought to have for admiration. Lastly (Section 5), I briefly discuss some recent findings in moral psychology related to admiration which suggests that even the consequentialist argument that admiration leads to emulation may well be mistaken.

### **2. Contextual Remarks: Moral Admiration, Self-Respect and Moral Exemplars**

Before continuing to my analysis of the objectionable nature of admiration, I wish to delineate the scope of my analysis. First of all, I am only concerned with what one could call ‘moral admiration’: admiration that is based on someone’s outstanding moral track record or character, that is, admiration directed towards persons as moral agents. I am not concerned with admiration as an aesthetic response to objects (or even towards persons in so far as it may be appropriate to relate to them in a way that is akin to the way we relate to objects, for instance in relating to a person’s special practical or artistic skills, or to their aesthetic qualities such as gracefulness, elegance, or even sheer physical beauty). Second, I am solely interested in admiration as an attitude adopted by full moral agents (roughly: adult human persons). It may well be that it is common for human children and adolescents to go through a period in which admiration is an ordinary and possibly even healthy part of growing up (the stereotypical teenager admiration for pop-stars or sports heroes may be examples), just as small children may go through a period of fascination with cruelty towards insects and other small animals. However, that such attitudes may be normal during certain phases of growing up says nothing about their appropriateness for adults.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I am not

<sup>3</sup> If it is the case that admiration is normal for teenagers or adolescents, another way of putting my point is that admiration would be a sign of moral immaturity.

addressing cases where admiration is not meant literally but merely figuratively, hyperbolically, or worse, disingenuously.

It should also be noted that the term ‘admiration’ can be used to refer to a number of distinct attitudes in everyday language. As Keltner and Haidt note, up to roughly a century ago admiration was virtually synonymous with awe.<sup>4</sup> I will not use admiration in this way, as an experience of overpowering vastness – a defining feature of awe – plays no role in my analysis and the association of admiration with awe does not seem to be one that is current anymore. At the other extreme, we find usages of the term ‘admiration’ or its derivatives where it is used more or less as a full synonym of mere approval or (high) appreciation. This appears to be especially the case for the adjective ‘admirable’ – perhaps because ‘appreciable’ has a very different meaning in contemporary English. In philosophical terminology, this attitude is also known as appraisal respect.<sup>5</sup> This, too, is not the sense of admiration that I am primarily concerned with here. Indeed, I believe it is essential to distinguish between appraisal respect on the one hand and another sense of admiration on the other, precisely because it is so easy to conflate them. In this third sense of admiration, admiration can be summarily described as an attitude of ‘wonder combined with approbation’. Etymologically this seems to be its purest meaning (both in Latin [*ad-mirari*] and in Germanic languages [German: *bewundern*; Dutch: *bewonderen*] the link to wonder and marvel is quite explicit) and unlike the first two senses of admiration, as far as I know, this sense of admiration does not have an exact synonym available. It is the moral appropriateness of this attitude that I seek to analyse in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Dacher Keltner & Jonathan Haidt ‘Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual and Aesthetic Emotion’, *Cognition and Emotion* **17** (2003), 297–314: 302.

<sup>5</sup> On appraisal respect, see Stephen Darwall ‘Two Kinds of Respect’ in: Robin S. Dillon (ed.) *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect* (Routledge, 1995), 181–197.

<sup>6</sup> This third attitude seems to be the core meaning of admiration according to *The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, Deluxe Encyclopedic Edition* (1996), though some other well-regarded dictionaries may place more emphasis on the second meaning of admiration outlined. As far as I can tell, there is little value in arguing about which of these different usages captures its ‘true’ or ‘real’ meaning best; depending on context, all these three usages can be perfectly acceptable in themselves (though perhaps the first is now outmoded). I do believe, however, that it is essential to distinguish especially the last two attitudes, admiration as equivalent to mere high approval or appraisal respect

Detailed analyses of admiration are relatively rare in moral philosophy, and those there are tend to take place within a largely virtue-ethical framework.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, my analysis takes place within a broadly Kantian framework.<sup>8</sup> Its main focus is on the way that the attitude of admiration distorts the proper relation between moral agents. The adoption of a broadly Kantian framework means I accept the ought-implies-can principle and that I rely on a conception of self-respect that equates it to a correct practical understanding of one's fundamental status as a moral being rather than on a notion of self-respect as self-esteem (i.e. having a high opinion of oneself). Moreover, I assume that we have a categorical duty to such self-respect.<sup>9</sup>

Thus understood self-respect equates to respect for one's own dignity. In other work<sup>10</sup> I propounded a specific Kantian account of dignity as lawgiving status, but the complete details of how dignity, and by implication self-respect, are to be understood need not bother us here. Within Kantianism the following features of self-respect are fairly uncontroversial, and they are the only ones that are crucial to the analysis to follow. First, self-respect implies that one regards oneself equal to every other moral agent in dignity and standing. Second, this equality follows from our position under the moral law: we are all bound in the same way by morality. This both elevates us in importance over all non-moral creatures

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vs. admiration as approbation mixed with wonder. Whereas it is perfectly appropriate to have appraisal respect for a moral exemplar, the attitude of 'approbation mixed with wonder' has, I argue, morally objectionable features that are easily overlooked. This distinction is all the more noteworthy in light of the fact that it often remains unclear which of these meanings are meant when the term admiration appears in moral-philosophical texts. Indeed, it often seems the two are simply conflated.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Zagzebski, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> For this reason I will not engage in detail any existing accounts that are deeply embedded in a virtue-ethical framework.

<sup>9</sup> For a collection of papers on self-respect and self-esteem from a variety of philosophical perspectives, see Dillon (ed.) *op. cit.*; for a single-essay overview that gives a good impression of the many facets of self-respect see Robin S. Dillon 'How to Lose Your Self-Respect', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992), 125–139.

<sup>10</sup> 'Inherent Dignity, Contingent Dignity and Human Rights: Solving the Puzzle of the Protection of Dignity', *Erkenntnis* (forthcoming); and *The Importance of Assent: A Theory of Dignity and Coercion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

and creates a basic equality in moral significance among us vis-à-vis each other. Third, having self-respect requires that one take one's equal position under the moral law seriously and therefore commits to performing one's duty as one sees it. Lastly, it requires a certain honesty about oneself and the state of the world; a willingness to face up to facts as they are whether they be pleasant or not.<sup>11</sup>

The adoption of a Kantian framework also has implications for the potential objects of admiration. For notational ease I use the terms 'moral exemplar' or 'morally exemplary person' to refer to the persons who are admired. Of these persons it is assumed that they indeed possess the exemplary character traits or moral track record

<sup>11</sup> I should stress that my analysis is *Kantian* in the sense of using a framework that is influenced by the Kantian tradition; I do not directly engage with Kant's own texts. This is for various reasons. First, my concern is with the rightness or wrongness of a particular attitude; it is not a historical analysis. Second, to analyze what Kant himself would have held of admiration of moral exemplars would require a significant amount of interpretation – which will unavoidably be highly controversial. As mentioned, in Kant's day admiration was taken to be virtually synonymous with awe,\* so it is not possible to directly transpose anything he says about admiration to the attitude under analysis here. Moreover, such an analysis would have to cover Kant's moral works as well as his works on aesthetics, religion and psychology. Such an analysis would therefore take us too far afield from the practical question this paper seeks to address – not to mention the fact that some of Kant's views on these matters (e.g. his psychology) are likely to be somewhat dated now.

\* Kant's famous opening lines of the conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason* 'Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht [...]: der bestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir.' (5:161) are illustrative. There are various ways in which 'Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht' can (and have been) translated, including 'wonder and awe', 'admiration and awe', and 'awe and reverence'. Moreover, under at least one traditionalist reading of Kant, the question of whether one would ever be allowed to admire other persons (including moral exemplars) is a non-starter, as only the moral law within them would be worthy of admiration/awe, not the person(s) in which it resides. Another Kant-interpretation could, however, put more emphasis on the individuality of the moral agent, stressing that for Kant moral lawgiving is always an act of *self*-legislation and subsequently point out that it is probably not a coincidence that Kant speaks of 'the moral law within *me*' (emphasis added), rather than 'the moral law in *us*', 'in *you*' or 'in *others*', or just the moral law simpliciter. Though the question what Kant's personal views exactly were, is undoubtedly interesting and worthy of scholarly attention, such a historical analysis falls well outside the purview of this paper.

that are ascribed to them, so that the admiration the admirer directs towards them cannot be dismissed on the grounds of faulty attribution of moral excellence. Characteristic of moral exemplars is, I take it, that they are exceptionally good at doing what morality requires. It is worth noting that in a Kantian framework moral-exemplarism is more a matter of moral sensitivity, steadfast commitment and strength of will than a matter of performing heroic or saintly acts, and that the relevance of supererogatory acts is thus very limited (perhaps even negligible).<sup>12</sup>

As this is likely to be a controversial implication to some, let me briefly expand on it. The class of the supererogatory is highly contested and it is a matter of debate if and how Kantianism can, or even should, accommodate such acts.<sup>13</sup> Though heroic acts can in extreme situations be required as a matter of duty, Kantians have – rightly, I believe – always been very wary of them. Acts that are commonly described as ‘beyond duty’, as impressive as they may be, often tend on closer examination to evidence subtle moral flaws rather than instantiate acts of high moral value. Though this cannot be argued in detail here, two common examples may serve to illustrate the point sufficiently for present purposes: heroic self-sacrifice and extreme selflessness. Heroic acts of self-sacrifice may be stupendous, but they are in tension with the Kantian insistence that one must always properly value one’s own person. Similarly, extreme selflessness all too often manifests a vice akin to servility, an undervaluing of the importance of one’s own projects and life.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Although the question of what attitude(s) are appropriate to adopt towards moral exemplars can be approached from any theoretical perspective within moral philosophy, such as consequentialism, deontology/Kantianism, or virtue ethics, it should be kept in mind that their different viewpoints will not only lead them to different views on the relevant benefits and drawbacks of admiration for the admirer and the admired, but that they will also hold different views about who counts as an exemplar.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Marcia Baron, ‘Kantian Ethics and Supererogation’, *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987), 237–262; Daniel Guevara, ‘The Impossibility of Supererogation in Kant’s Moral Theory’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999), 593–624; D. Heyd, ‘Beyond the Call of Duty in Kant’s Ethics’, *Kant-Studien* 71 (1980), 308–324; Thomas E. Hill Jr., ‘Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation’, *Kant-Studien* 62 (1971), 55–76; Richard McCarty, ‘The Limits of Kantian Duty, and Beyond’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989), 43–52.

<sup>14</sup> On servility, see Thomas E. Hill Jr. ‘Servility and Self-Respect’, and ‘Self-Respect Reconsidered’ in Dillon (ed.) op. cit., 76–92, 117–124.

This wariness towards the supererogatory is typical for the Kantian view of looking at morality, but there is another reason not to put too much emphasis on the supererogatory, too. Even if one were to take a positive view on heroic acts, they are clearly neither necessary nor sufficient for moral-exemplary status. When it comes to someone's moral track record or character, the impact of singular acts is by definition limited. There is no reason to deny that a person who lives in quite ordinary circumstances and is lucky enough to never find herself in a situation that requires dramatic heroic acts but simply shows her moral sensitivity and commitment consistently in everyday actions can be a moral exemplar, whilst some persons who performed heroic acts fall well short of being moral exemplars.<sup>15</sup>

I thus assume that moral-exemplarism is fully captured by the way a person performs her duties, including duties of virtue as well as of right. I also assume that moral exemplars have a clear and accurate self-understanding, consistently adopt morally appropriate attitudes towards other persons, themselves and things of value, and that they are aware of their excellent moral track record or character. In sum, moral exemplars have a keen understanding of what morality requires of them and more or less consciously act accordingly. In that sense they are exemplary moral agents.

### **3. Admiration and Self-Respect**

Having described the contours of the analytical framework and specified the type of admiration that is at issue, we can now turn to the (in)appropriateness of admiring moral exemplars. As admiration involves wonder mixed with approbation, to adopt the attitude of admiration to someone in response to something they did requires two things. On the one hand, one has to recognise that the feat is worthy of very high approbation. In other words, there has to be some standard by which to qualify the act performed and the admirer has to have some level of access to this standard. At the same time, we have to account for the wonder admiration involves.

According to Sherry's analysis of wonder, wonder varies in degrees, ranging 'from mere puzzlement or curiosity to astonishment

<sup>15</sup> The standard example of moral heroism, that of the soldier throwing himself on a live grenade to save his fellows, is telling in this regard. Likely there have been members of the Waffen-SS who performed such acts of heroism in World War II, but that hardly makes them moral-exemplars in a Kantian sense.



and awe'.<sup>16</sup> The element of wonder that is at issue in admiration falls somewhere in-between these extremes, but Sherry's survey indicates it is probably closer to astonishment than to mere curiosity.<sup>17</sup> Essential to wonder is that there is something about the object of wonder that eludes the person's full grasp. To wonder about or at something, is to have sufficient apprehension of it to realise it is out of the ordinary and thereby have one's interest awakened, while at the same time to lack a complete understanding of it. This fits well with the idea that admiration is approbation mixed with wonder. To account for the element of approbation in admiration, we must assume that the admirer has a minimal grasp of the excellence of the object of his admiration, otherwise there would be no grounds for him to hold it in high regard. At the same time, in order to wonder about or at it, this cognizance can be only partial. As the famous stoic slogan *nil admirari* makes clear, as soon as one fully grasps the workings of things, wonder and admiration cease (and someone who understands everything will consequently not admire anything, nor anyone).<sup>18</sup> A truly complete understanding of something can lead one to or maintain high approval and appreciation, but eliminates wonder.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Sherry, 'The Varieties of Wonder', *Philosophical Investigations* 36 (2013), 340–354: 340.

<sup>17</sup> Sherry's focus of analysis is on wonder, not admiration, but the connection between wonder and admiration is mentioned at various points in his analysis.

<sup>18</sup> T. H. Irwin defends a different reading of the lack of admiration by the virtuous in his 'Nil Admirari? Uses and Abuses of Admiration', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXXIX* (2015), 223–248. He believes that this only means that the virtuous are not prone to admiration because they are not prone to false admiration (i.e. a misunderstanding of what is worthy of high praise). When confronted with the admirable, he contends, the virtuous will admire other virtuous persons. As that will only occur rarely, however, the virtuous will not admire very often. I believe a stronger reading of *nil admirari* is defensible and should, as a motto, be taken literally (though I make no claim to the correct reading of historical authors' views on admiration): it is not just that the vulgar will be more prone to admiration (cf. *ibid.* 239–40), it is that admiration is itself vulgar (at least when the object of admiration is another person). If my argument in this paper is correct, then admiration may still have a proper function, but its proper function will lie outside of ethics (for instance in aesthetics).

<sup>19</sup> A religious analogy may illustrate this even more clearly: God (if He exists) does not admire the saints for He does not look up to them and fully

To illustrate how this combination of wonder and approbation is possible, it is perhaps best to first turn to a non-moral example. Take the case of an art lover, *A*, who admires the skill and accomplishments of genius artist *B*. At one level, to admire *B*, *A* must realise that *B*'s skills and accomplishments are of very high quality, for admiration implies approval. We do not admire mediocrity or failures.<sup>20</sup> But high quality is not enough for admiration. If *A* were to believe that he could easily match *B*'s skill and work, he would not admire *B* either. We do not wonder or marvel at that which we know, or believe, we can readily bring about ourselves. Though an artist of equal or even greater skill may well recognise the very high quality of the work his colleague produces (indeed, he may well be even better positioned than most of us to fully appreciate its quality), if he knows it is within his skills to reproduce or match it, he would not do more than acknowledge and approve of the quality of the work. Admiration of other persons is always aimed upwards, it is directed at those who show us that things are possible that we cannot fully account for.<sup>21</sup>

This is a merely illustrative and highly simplified example, which does not, and is not intended to, do justice to the full complexities of admiration in the aesthetic realm, for I am no aesthetician. It is helpful, though, because it illustrates the combination of understanding and elusiveness that admiration entails. Moreover, at least superficially, it is not too difficult to come up with a possible explanation of how this combination is possible. We may have sufficient mastery over aesthetic standards by which we can judge the result of the artist's skills and recognise *that*, according to these standards, it ranks very highly, without fully grasping the how and why. Having sufficient mastery over aesthetic standards to judge the completed work does not imply we also have the mastery required to bring such things about ourselves. Indeed, we typically lack such abilities, and that allows the gifted artist to surprise and astound us. She can confront us with something we never realised was possible – and even presented with definite proof of its possibility we still cannot

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grasps how they managed to do what they accomplished – though He does, of course, have a full appreciation of their very high merits.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sherry, *op. cit.*, 348.

<sup>21</sup> One could, I suppose, marvel at one's own accomplishments if one is genuinely surprised at what one has done – 'How did I manage to produce *that!*?' – but that seems a rather atypical case, and I doubt it would warrant what one could call self-admiration.

fully grasp how it is possible, or even fully explain why it is so beautiful. Wonder and approbation are thus relatively easily compatible in the aesthetic realm. The question is, however, if we can straightforwardly transpose this explanation to the moral realm.

When we turn to moral admiration, the question is whether we can as easily account for the combination of understanding and elusiveness. As in aesthetics, morality too has its standards by which we can judge the quality of a person's moral track record or character traits, and mastery over these standards does not imply that one also lives up to them. Certain weak-willed persons, like Harry Frankfurt's famous unwilling addict,<sup>22</sup> may provide initial examples. Prima facie at least, it thus seems that a similar type of explanation of moral admiration would be possible. Let us explore, however, if this is indeed the case, or if moral admiration is in important respects different from non-moral admiration.

In the following I will argue that moral admiration is indeed different and that the reason this is so, is to be found in the inherent incompatibility between the element of wonder that is part and parcel of admiration and seeing something as required by duty, which, in a Kantian framework, is determined by reason.<sup>23</sup>

It is often noticed that moral exemplars themselves tend to be rather reticent in boasting about their accomplishments. As it is frequently put, they tend to think that they 'were only doing their duty'. Some may want to take this modesty as further evidence of their exemplary character, but it would be false humility if they did not mean it. Moreover, it certainly is not the case that moral exemplars fail to recognise the great merit of their deeds, or that they cannot feel a sense of pride for having lived up to their commitments. What moral exemplars deny when they claim that they were only doing their duty is therefore not the merit of their actions, I would suggest, but that what they did is reason for marvel. They recognised what needed to be done, and they did it. This may be (very) difficult

<sup>22</sup> Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the will and the concept of a person' in: *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11–25.

<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning that the problem with admiration, as I see it, is therefore not one of excess, as is for instance the case for the uncontroversially objectionable attitudes of adulation and worship. Admirers are not (necessarily) afflicted by the kind of blindness that worshipers or adulators typically suffer from or mis-assess the virtues of the object of their admiration. Rather, as I argue in this paper, the problem with admiration is that it is a *wrong kind* of response to a (possibly) accurate assessment of moral excellence.

in certain cases, and it may be true that many others would have failed to act thus in similar circumstances, but it is certainly not something that eludes the understanding.

The admirer of the moral exemplar, however, appears to think differently. Though he must recognise the moral standards that the moral exemplar lived up to as valid in order to be able to regard the moral exemplar as worthy of very high approval and her actions as thus falling within what duty demands of the exemplar, he must also believe there is something wondrous about the moral exemplar's living up to these standards (or living up to them with unwavering consistency). The admirer not only approves of the object of his admiration, he puts her on a different plane. In order to account for the element of marvel that is part of admiration, the admirer must assume that the admired's deeds are more than what one may reasonably expect from an ordinary moral agent. Thus, it seems that in the eyes of the admirer, there is one set of standards that are binding on the admired person, and another that applies to merely ordinary persons (I elaborate on this below). If the admiring person deems the standards that the moral exemplar has lived up to merely to be the ordinary moral standards that bind us all, there would, after all, not be anything wondrous about them being met. One would approve of the person living up to them, but nothing more. There is nothing wondrous about doing one's duty.

Note that admiration is thus different from merely realising that someone has lived up to standards that one would fail to live up to oneself. One may very well acknowledge the validity of certain standards, understand them completely and yet know that one would in all likelihood fail to meet them. If one is then confronted with someone who does meet them, that would be a (probably painful) reminder of one's own deficiencies, but that would not in itself be a reason to be bemused by other persons meeting them. The unwilling addict may admire his former classmates who were strong enough to withstand the peer pressure that led him to become an addict, but he certainly does not have to. He can also see their better sense as fairly average and his own failure to do the same as decidedly substandard performance. In order to regard them with wonder, one needs to take the admired person's accomplishment to be beyond what can simply be demanded from everyone.

This begins to show the problematic nature of admiration. Confronted with a moral exemplar, there are roughly two stances to take. One is to recognise that the moral standards the moral exemplar has lived up to are the ones that bind us all. In this case, there is no reason for wonder, and hence also none for admiration. We may

well doubt that we ourselves *would* live up to these standards in the situations in which the exemplar has met them, but that is more a reason for humility on our side than for admiration towards the moral exemplar. Even when we (rightly) feel that there are valid reasons to excuse us for failing to live up to those standards, the proper response to that is one of humbleness – for having to be excused is always humbling – rather than a reason to deny the validity of these standards or their obligatory nature. To put it bluntly: my shortcomings and deficiencies simply do not make your lack of them grounds for wonder.

This, I believe, is the way an imperfect but self-respecting person would respond to being confronted with a moral exemplar. He would recognise the merit of the moral exemplar's deeds and appraise them highly, but rather than marvel how such accomplishments are possible, he would take his lack of faith that he himself would be able to match the exemplar's accomplishment (for instance because he doubts his own willpower) as an indication for a deficiency on his part; he would acknowledge his own shortcomings in this regard – however painful this may be.<sup>24</sup> The self-respecting person would adopt an attitude of 'I ought to be able to do the same' in the full realisation that morality demands the same of him as it does from all others, including the moral exemplar.

The admiring person relates to the moral exemplar in a different fashion. Confronted with the accomplishments of the moral exemplar, the admirer adopts an attitude of 'I could never do that!' and marvels at the fact that someone else apparently could. However, in the moral realm this is a problem (even if, as an empirical matter, the belief might be accurate). Let me try to explain why. Where the flawed but self-respecting person takes the moral exemplar as the norm (or rather as giving evidence of the norms that we are all bound by) and as a result sees nothing wondrous in the moral exemplar's achievements – however highly he regards them – the admirer takes himself to be the norm (or more precisely: the norms and demands he applies to himself) and from this perspective the moral exemplar's accomplishments are indeed extraordinary. According to the norms that the admirer uses to determine what morality demands of him, the exemplar's deeds are quite literally off the scale.

That there is something problematic about this point of view is clear, however, from the fact that the admirer does *judge* the moral accomplishments of the exemplar. He could not regard the exemplar as

<sup>24</sup> I will return to this point in Section 5 when it comes to Van de Ven et al.'s distinction between admiration and what they call benign envy.

worthy of approbation otherwise. Thus he must believe there is some moral standard (and one that he regards as having validity) by which the moral exemplar's actions can be judged. They may be off his scale, but they are not beyond adjudication as such. In other words, the admirer implicitly acknowledges two sets of moral demands: one set of moral demands that is binding for the extraordinary beings he admires, and another set of demands that is binding for mere mortals like himself. The admiring person does not see his own shortcomings as problematic in the same way the self-respecting person does. Rather than saying 'I ought to be able to do the same', the admiring person says 'that is simply extraordinary!' and the extraordinary cannot be demanded from an ordinary being. Thus, where the self-respecting person takes the exemplar's deeds as a reminder of and admonition for his own shortcomings the admiring person responds by putting the exemplar on a pedestal. The admiring person may *wish* he were like the person he admires, but he does not believe that it can be demanded of him that he be like that, for he does not see how he could achieve that (cf. the element of wonder that is part of admiration) – and what is not regarded as achievable cannot be deemed required.<sup>25</sup>

By admitting that the same moral standards apply to himself as they do to the moral exemplar, the self-respecting, but flawed, moral agent is able to continue to relate to the moral exemplar as an equal, a fellow moral agent with equal dignity and standing under the moral law – painful as the highlighting of his own deficiencies that the confrontation with the moral exemplar brings may be. The admiring person on the other hand responds to the exemplar not by fully acknowledging his inadequacies as something that he must improve, but by elevating the admired person to another plane – the plane of the special or the extraordinary. In adopting an attitude of admiration the admirer thus effectively condones his own shortcomings, thereby insulating his moral self-esteem, because according to the (less demanding) standards he applies to himself, he may still do pretty well. In the process of doing so, however, the person who engages in moral admiration violates the demands of self-respect, for in doing so he implicitly validates the existence of two distinct moral standards and thereby implicitly acknowledges two classes of moral agents. By putting himself in the lower and the exemplar in the higher he will never be able to relate to the object of his admiration

<sup>25</sup> One could also characterise this as the admirer engaging in a somewhat perverse (and probably subconscious) application of the ought-implies-can principle.

as an equal. To admire another person thus constitutes a violation of one's own dignity and standing.

The admirer may continue to think of himself as 'good enough', and believe his admiration constitutes a great compliment to the object of his admiration, but neither is the case. Admiring allows persons to feel good about themselves (see also Section 5) and think it is generous to acknowledge the moral superiority of others, but in reality moral admiration is a low and deeply self-serving attitude – it is, in a very real sense, taking the easy way out in a situation where maintaining self-respect is uncomfortable and often painful.

### 4. Admiration and the admired

As just stated, admirers often believe that they are bestowing a compliment on the objects of their admiration by adopting and/or expressing this attitude towards them. After all, what could be more flattering than having someone sincerely believing you to be extraordinary or, in a very literal sense, *wonderful* or *marvellous*? If admiration were an appropriate response to moral exemplars, we would also expect moral exemplars to welcome being admired. That does not seem to be the case, however. Moral exemplars tend to deny, as stated, that their deeds are extraordinary (though they will not deny the merit in their deeds), while we tend to think that people who want to be admired thereby betray a serious character flaw.

To illustrate this, just imagine a person with a truly exemplary moral track record (give her all the character traits you believe necessary for her to be a moral exemplar) but who does not receive any admiration from others. Now imagine this person admonishing one of these people with a lesser moral track-record for failing to admire her: 'Kindly admire me, for you really ought to!' To me, this seems incongruous. Someone who demands the admiration of others simply cannot be a moral exemplar. Moreover, this is not just because we might think that a moral exemplar would deal with such unfairnesses in a more dignified, stoic manner. If others do not give you your due, it is not always virtuous to demand it. I suspect however, that the undignified nature of *expressing* such thoughts is not the real issue here. The firm (but unexpressed) belief '*They ought to admire me!*' would already be one that a moral exemplar would not entertain. Wanting to be admired, wanting others to relate to you in that fashion, is at least as low as admiring is. But if admiration were an unproblematic and appropriate way to

respond to moral exemplars as many seem to believe, why would that be the case?

Let us therefore explore why moral exemplars might fail to value being admired and often seem to feel embarrassed around their admirers. Admiration is a form of praise, so we should first turn our attention to what makes praise worthwhile, and what may undermine its value. One thing that may make praise unwelcome is when one knows that one did not perform the act for which one is being praised, when it is disproportional, or where one is aware that one does not possess the character trait that is being praised. In such cases praise is simply misdirected and knowing this will normally void it of its meaning for the praised person. This, however, does not apply in the case of moral exemplars, who by assumption do possess the qualities for which they are being praised.<sup>26</sup> The problem with admiration is not, I would suggest, that it is an excessive form of praise or that it must be misdirected praise. Rather, I contend, we should look at where the praise is coming from.

Praise is a form of recognition. In our case, we are dealing with recognition of moral excellence. There can be little doubt that we often seek recognition, that it is very important to us and when we do not get the recognition we believe we are due we tend to be quite offended. But we do not just simply seek recognition in general. When it comes to the value of recognition, it matters a great deal from whom we get the recognition. Take the example of the aforementioned artist. If she receives praise from a small child who thinks the work she produced is wonderful, she will (hopefully) accept the compliment graciously and appreciate the spirit with which it is given, but in terms of recognition it will mean little to her. If a world-renowned art critic whom she greatly respects praises the work in similar terms, however, things are very different. Recognition is important to us, but its value to us is highly dependent on our assessment of the status of the person who expresses it. We seek recognition from the people whom we believe are at least on an

<sup>26</sup> Another reason why moral exemplars might feel uncomfortable about being admired is that they feel this may create expectations that they feel unsure they will be able to live up to in the future. Again, however, it is not clear why a moral exemplar (who has a stable and virtuous character) would feel so insecure. Moreover, though such expectations may create some unease they would not affect the intrinsic value of the praise received.



equal standing with ourselves.<sup>27</sup> The child simply lacks the mastery of aesthetic standards for her praising judgment to mean much, whereas the judgment of the art critic is something the artist has reason to value. Hence the recognition of her excellence by the critic has a meaning that the kind sentiment expressed by the child lacks.

I believe that this also allows us to explain why admiration is something that moral exemplars do not have reason to value. If my analysis in the previous section is roughly accurate, then the praise that admiration entails is praise expressed by someone who implicitly denies his equal standing. The admirer implicitly declares himself the lesser in relation to the admired person, and in doing so voids the praise of its worth. In fact, the admirer puts the admired in a very awkward position, being asked simultaneously to accept the admirer's judgment as valid and thereby accept her superior moral status, and to regard the praise as worthwhile, which implies recognising the admirer as an equal. As this involves an inconsistency this is not possible, even for moral exemplars. Moreover, in cases where they are confronted with their admirers, moral exemplars will be painfully aware of the role they unwillingly play in what could be called an unwitting form of self-debasement on the part of the admirer, which would account for the mild sense of embarrassment moral exemplars seem to display in such situations.

This explains, I believe, why moral exemplars shun admiration. Moral exemplars will want to relate to other moral agents as equals, and only equals can give them the recognition that is worth having. What moral exemplars will welcome, therefore, is the proper acknowledgment of their meritorious deeds by fellow self-respecting members of the moral community. What they have reason to value is a form of appraisal respect from beings who confidently affirm their own standing to make such judgments. Admiration, on the other hand, is premised on a relation of inequality, it is the praise by a lesser of a higher being. It is a form of praise, for sure, but a perverse form of praise and seeking such a perverted form of praise is as immature as is a tendency to give it. Those who would welcome admiration want to be recognised as *better* than others, whereas what moral exemplars would welcome is merely the recognition of what they did as *good*.

<sup>27</sup> An exception would be when we seek praise or admiration for purely instrumental reasons (the stereotypical Machiavellian prince may be an example) but here we are concerned with valuing praise intrinsically.

## 5. Admiration in moral psychology

Though it is still a relatively small literature, a number of recent papers in (moral) psychology have appeared on what have been called ‘the other-praising emotions’, amongst which psychologists also count admiration. Though of an empirical and not a normative nature this literature could be relevant to the moral assessment of admiration because apart from the intrinsic argument that admiration is an appropriate response to moral excellence, advocates of admiration also point to an instrumental reason to value admiration. This is the expectation that admiration will lead to imitation and emulation, thereby improving the deeds and (in the long run) the character of the admirer. Although I am personally sceptical of the strategy of justifying things that are inherently objectionable on the basis of beneficial consequences, let us, for the sake of argument, briefly explore what the scientific results show.

The psychological work most often invoked in relation to admiration<sup>28</sup> is that of Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators on the ‘other-praising emotions’.<sup>29</sup> A closer look at these works shows, however, that they cannot be straightforwardly invoked either for or against the practice of moral admiration. Algoe and Haidt, for instance, recognise that admiration is a possible response to exemplary moral virtue, but they explicitly stress that their analysis of admiration does not cover such cases and that they only look at non-moral admiration.<sup>30</sup> When it comes to perceived virtue they are interested in another emotion, one which they call ‘elevation’.<sup>31</sup> Elevation, as they define it, seems to be a different response than admiration for it lacks any link to wonder and marvel. Moreover, Algoe and Haidt

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Zagzebski, ‘Moral Exemplars in Theory and Practice’, ‘Admiration and the Admirable’, and ‘Exemplarism and Admiration’.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Jonathan Haidt, ‘Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality’ in: C. Keyes (ed.) *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003), 275–289; Keltner & Haidt op. cit.; Sara Algoe & Jonathan Haidt ‘Witnessing Excellence in Action: the “Other-Praising” Emotions of Elevation, Gratitude, and Admiration’, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4 (2009), 105–127; Michelangelo Vianello, Elisa Maria Galliani & Jonathan Haidt ‘Elevation at Work: The Effects of Leaders’, *Moral Excellence*, *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 5 (2010), 390–411.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit., 107.

<sup>31</sup> On elevation, see also Haidt op. cit., Keltner & Haidt op. cit., Vianello et al. op. cit.

claim that elevation and admiration trigger different responses, and that both have to be differentiated from gratitude.

As these works thus say very little directly on moral admiration, let us turn to another psychological study on admiration by Niels van de Ven et al.<sup>32</sup> This work presumably does cover moral admiration, for it describes admiration as ‘a feeling of delighted approval of the accomplishment *or character* of another person’.<sup>33,34</sup> This work paints a rather different picture than advocates of admiration typically do, for Van de Ven et al.’s findings show that admiration does *not* lead to emulation. Distinguishing admiration from ‘benign envy’, they found that benign envy leads to self-improvement, but that admiration does not.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, when subjects believe that self-improvement is hard, they tend to admire more but do less. This would be in line with my analysis. The more difficult something is deemed to be, the more it becomes something to marvel about, whereas when you perceive something as attainable for yourself, you will not (unless you are an egomaniac) wonder about the fact that others have achieved it already. The (benignly) envious person recognises another’s excellence as an admonishment he needs to react to by improving himself, but the admiring person regards self-improvement as unattainable (or too difficult) and therefore simply sits down in delighted marvel.

<sup>32</sup> Niels van de Ven, Marcel Zeelenberg & Rik Pieters ‘Why Envy Outperforms Admiration’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* **37** (2011), 784–795.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. 784, emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Some caution is advised, though, because Van de Ven et al. make no distinction between moral and non-moral admiration for the bulk of their paper, and the descriptions of the experiments on which their paper is based do not show a concern with specifically moral exemplars. Moreover, in the discussion of the results they mention that further research might show moral admiration to be different in certain respects from non-moral admiration (op. cit., 790).

<sup>35</sup> Envy is the emotion that arises when one notices a gap between oneself and others due to their possession of something that one lacks (or only has to a lesser degree) and which one deems important. Closing the gap can be done in two ways: moving oneself up or bringing down the other. The latter Van de Ven et al. call malign envy, the former benign envy. As admiration, malign and benign envy are not mutually exclusive and may even be correlated, this could also explain why studies which do not control for (benign) envy may have a tendency to show false positives (cf. op. cit., 788).

Van de Ven et al. explain the lack of motivating force from the ‘feel good’ feature of admiration. Though admiring people report *feeling* inspired, they do not act on this inspiration. Borrowing terminology from Kierkegaard but applying it somewhat differently, they associate admiration with ‘happy self-surrender’<sup>36</sup> and benign envy with ‘unhappy self-assertion’ (which seems close to the attitude adopted by the self-respecting flawed person I described above). Admiration equates to admitting defeat:<sup>37</sup> someone who sees a way to match the exemplar’s achievements will feel benign envy and do something about it, whereas someone who sees no way (or according to Van de Ven et al., no easy way) to do so can either continue to feel bad about himself, or sublimate his feelings of frustration into admiration. This will allow him to feel good about himself and to eliminate the (psychological) need to do something about the difference between him and the exemplar.<sup>38</sup> If this is correct, then admiration can again be characterised as taking the easy way out in a situation where self-improvement is hard. In the moral case, however, this would constitute a clear example of violating self-respect (cf. Section 3).

<sup>36</sup> Op. cit., 789.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 790.

<sup>38</sup> Van de Ven et al. stress that this is not the only way admiration may arise and that it remains possible that admiration has other beneficial effects generally associated with positive emotions than incentivizing emulation. Thus, they speculate that admiration may arise spontaneously in areas that are not important to the person (and thus do not constitute a psychological threat to the person’s self-image). They also conjecture that moral admiration might be different, as they believe that envy is unlikely to arise when witnessing virtue. They offer no further evidence to support these claims though, suggesting they should be tested in future research (op. cit. 790). However, though perhaps plausible for malicious envy, I see no reason to expect this to be the case for benign envy. Unless one is a total moral wretch, one typically cares about one’s moral character or track-record and being confronted with others who remind one of one’s shortcomings on that score is anything but psychologically pleasant. Moreover, Van de Ven et al. emphasize that benign envy is typically triggered by differences that are perceived as merited, which would be the case with moral exemplars. Moral exemplars therefore seem to be ideal candidates to elicit benign envy. (Experimental design may be tricky for moral admiration, though, as it seems likely that people will be inclined to give what they perceive as the socially desirable response to questions that query their attitude to moral exemplars – who would want to admit, even to him- or herself, that (s)he feels envious towards a moral exemplar?)

All in all, I do not believe that the results in moral psychology on admiration are currently sufficiently strong to draw any confident conclusions one way or the other. The psychologists discussed here all seem to treat moral admiration as possibly different from non-moral admiration, but there is no research that explicitly addresses moral admiration yet (or none that I know of). Moreover, as stated, I have my doubts that empirical results on the possibly beneficial results of admiration would have any bearing on its inherently objectionable nature. If, however, even the instrumental argument in favour of admiration is false – and the research discussed here indicates that it may well be on very shaky ground – then there seems to be very little to speak in favour of admiration beyond the hedonistic argument that it feels pleasant (to the morally immature).

### 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that admiring persons for their moral track record or character, is highly problematic from the moral point of view. I contended that the attitude of admiration (wonder mixed with approbation) is premised on the implicit adoption of something like a double standard. The moral exemplars have lived up to certain standards that the admirer must in one sense regard as binding, for otherwise we cannot account for the approval that is part and parcel of admiration, but that he also regards as not demanded of himself, for only in that way can we account for the element of marvel or wonder that is also part of admiration. This means that the admirer cannot relate to the admired as an equal.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> My analysis only concerns moral admiration and has no bearing on how admiration features in other fields, such as aesthetics. Nonetheless, a question that is likely to be raised is in what way moral admiration is different from non-moral admiration. Surely, there can be little amiss with admiring a piece of art and expressing both delight in and wonder at what one is experiencing. To this I can only offer some tentative thoughts. The main reason that admiration is unproblematic when it comes to objects is that it does not create a relation of inequality between the admired object and the admiring subject in the way that admiration of moral exemplars does. Hence, there is no perversion of the bases of moral interaction between persons in that case. All it gives is a wondrous experience, and there need be little wrong with that. When it comes to admiring the skills or aesthetic properties of other persons – e.g. when one admires the artist rather than the work of art – it becomes more suspicious. It is all too easy for persons who admire others for their special skills to slip into moral admiration too.

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This in turn, I argued, is not only incompatible with the demands of self-respect but also voids the praise that the admirer seeks to express of any value to the admired. Admiration undermines the ability of the admired and the admirer to relate to each other on an equal footing. Both admiration and a desire to be admired are to be classed as morally objectionable, and a disposition to either constitutes a vice.<sup>40</sup>

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Nonetheless, it may be that such non-moral admiration of persons is in itself indeed less problematic. One reason why this may be so is that though non-moral admiration, too, creates a form of inequality, it does not directly affect the basic equality between human persons. Admiring an artist for her artistic skills does imply downgrading one's own artistic skills and abilities, but there is no unconditional requirement to develop those skills and abilities. Since we cannot develop all our skills, we may freely choose which of them to develop. Thus, developing one's artistic skills is optional and there is no categorical duty to live up to artistic standards. The hobby painter may well apply one set of standards to judge his own work and use another when it comes to the works of professional artists. Morality, however, does not allow for such double standards for amateurs and professionals. It categorically binds us all alike.

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