

# Exploring the moral exemplarity of Greta Thunberg

## Abstract

Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory has gained traction in recent years as a valid approach to moral education. Insufficient attention has so far been paid to questions about who we should count among exemplary people to be emulated. In this paper, we make the case for considering the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg as one moral exemplar for the contemporary world. Since Thunberg is a controversial figure, we not only argue in positive terms why Thunberg would make a good exemplar, but also respond to a number of objections that could be made to her exemplarity based on popular discussions. Our argument is however not limited to showing why Thunberg should be considered a moral exemplar. Through our discussion, we also exemplify the kind of critical discussions that in our view should be part of how exemplarism is utilized as a theory of moral education.

Exemplarist moral theory, Greta Thunberg, Moral education, environmental virtues

## Introduction

*I don't want your hope.  
I don't want you to be hopeful.  
I want you to panic.  
I want you to feel the fear I feel every day.  
And then I want you to act.  
I want you to act as you would in a crisis.  
I want you to act as if our house is on fire.  
Because it is.*

Greta Thunberg, Speaking at the World Economic Forum,  
Davos, January 25th 2019

During the past decade, there has been increasing interest in exemplarist moral theory as an approach to moral education (see Nielsen 2019; Osman, 2019; Szutta, 2019; Tachibana, 2019; Watson, 2019; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019; Henderson, 2022). Although the central ideas of exemplarism extend as far back as Aristotle, its recent revival builds on the work of Linda Zagzebski (2010, 2017). For Zagzebski, exemplarism is a moral theory that aims at explaining the important grounds of morality as well as the motivation of acting morally. The core of Zagzebski's theory is her take on Putnam's and Kripke's theory of direct reference -

she argues that morally exemplary individuals form a non-conceptual foundation for our understanding of morality (2010). Just like we can identify water as water simply by pointing at it, we can identify morally exemplary individuals by the admirability of their moral conduct, and therefore act morally by emulating such individuals.

It is not surprising that Zagzebski's theory has gained the attention of moral educators since moral and character education based on role models suggest that exemplarist virtue ethics deals with educationally important issues (Kristjánsson 2006). The combination of the key concepts of moral exemplar, admiration and emulation makes it easy to understand how morality works and how it could be learned. Furthermore, when discussing the practical applications of her theory, Zagzebski (2017, p. 129) suggests that exemplarism can be applied to moral education. That being said, as noted by Watson (2019, p. 304) Zagzebski does not point to an overall pedagogical strategy for exemplarist moral education, although others have built on her ideas to develop pedagogical approaches (see e.g. Croce, 2019; Brooks, Coates & Gulliford, 2021). This is understandable — after all, Zagzebski is a philosopher, not a theorist of education — yet, as a result, key questions about the pedagogical significance of exemplars remain open (see Kristjánsson 2020).

First, what kind of relationship between a student and an exemplar is pedagogically the most fruitful? Following the basic structure of Zagzebski's theory, a sort of consensus has emerged that emulation involves a combination of imitation - or *mimesis* (see Moisiso 2017; Taussig, 1993) - and critical reflection (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 140; see also Croce, 2020; DeCaroli, 2020; Kidd, 2019; Korsgaard, 2020; Osman, 2019; Watson, 2019). Emulation starts off from a feeling of admiration, which is then subjected to critical attention in the form of reflection. Emulation thus involves thinking about what is morally acceptable and what is not, as well as reflecting on our own actions with reference to those of the exemplary person (see Kristjánsson 2020). Building on this understanding, we suggest that the role of exemplars in moral education could be thought of as 'cases' that provide food for moral thought, so to speak. To us, emulation involves acting 'as if' one were the exemplary person, whether these actions are real or imagined. This in turn provides material for asking questions about what makes a particular action morally good and how that action could be enacted in one's own life.

While the question about the relationship between the student and the exemplar has already been extensively debated, less attention has been given to determining whom we should consider to be good exemplars (although see Carr, 2018). This is an educational question *par excellence*. Education necessarily relies on goals and ideals, which entails that a crucial component of educational theorizing is therefore a critical evaluation of what these goals and ideals should be. In designing any curriculum, a central question is the contents—which knowledge should be included and which excluded (Biesta, 2014). In the case of exemplarism, this translates into the question of which exemplars to include (Kristjánsson 2020). Szutta (2019), for example, questions Zagzebski's selection of exemplars, criticizing it as too narrow and suggesting that Zagzebski overlooks the possible exemplarity of mundane moral agents.

In this paper, we try to explore both of the above issues. Our aim is to argue, first, that the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg is a moral exemplar for our times. Second, through our critical discussion of Thunberg's exemplarity, we hope to exemplify the reflective work of discussing with others whether and why we think that a certain person is admirable and whether we ought to act like them. There are certainly good reasons for considering Thunberg to be potentially admirable. She has shown how tenacious advocacy for important issues and encouraging others to participate can create a global movement for the climate. She has inspired young people in particular to join the demand for more ambitious climate policies across the globe. Thunberg's school strike for the climate has become world-famous, which is the reason why she has been invited as a speaker in many of the world's most prominent arenas. Within academia, it has been argued that Thunberg has much to teach to decision-makers (Zhanda, Dzvimbo & Chitongo 2021) as well as educators (Kvamme, 2019; Jandric et al. 2021, p. 9). Further, Times Magazine named her the person of the year in December 2019 and she was nominated for the Nobel peace prize.

In addition to admiration, Thunberg has also met with severe opposition to the point that we should affirm Aaltola's (2021) observation that her message has invited feelings of shame. Overt reactions that bely this background affect include the suggestion that perhaps her actions are not examples of personal moral and epistemological reflection of our present situation, but rather the result of manipulation on the part of powerful adults who use Thunberg to advance their own — financial or political — agendas. Moreover, her right to participate in public discourse has been questioned on the basis of her age and gender as well as her diagnosis with Asperger's syndrome (ASD), which Thunberg has been open about. (Skafle, Gabarron, Dechsling & Nordahl-Hansen 2021.)

Considering whether Thunberg is a suitable moral exemplar thus connects with the timely question of whether we can consider controversial people as exemplars. Particularly in the present era when the various ecological crises point to a need for swift transformation of our habitual ways of life, education is not only socialization into existing values but should also be critical of the values we have. Therefore, exemplarist moral education cannot rely solely on exemplars that are already recognized as such. This entails that our take on exemplarism is critical of hegemonic values. While Aristotelian virtue ethics could also be seen as conservative, we contend that it can be used for emancipatory, critical, and even radical purposes depending on which virtues are emphasized. Instead of emphasizing conservative virtues, we claim moral exemplars often challenge accepted systems or conventions. As Kaftanski (2022) suggests, admiration as a collective emotion may lead to regarding mediocre or complacent individuals as exemplars, which may indicate that we are better off considering as exemplary people who evoke admiration in some and more negative emotions in others. We thus see Thunberg's controversiality and radical action to be an argument *in favor* of her exemplarity rather than against it.

We build our argument by exploring the debates and controversies surrounding Thunberg. We first introduce the key concepts of Zagzebski's theory and then employ them to outline what makes Thunberg a moral exemplar. We then proceed to the main section of our argument, where we analyze the various objections made to Thunberg's actions in public discussions and present counter arguments to each. Our discussion here has two purposes.

On the one hand, we strengthen our argument for considering Thunberg a moral exemplar, in effect suggesting that she would be an important part of the *dramatis personae* of any exemplarist moral education. On the other hand, by considering the justifications for and against taking Thunberg to be a moral exemplar, we exemplify the kind of critical reflection that might be part of classroom work on a moral exemplar.

## Exemplarist Moral Theory and Greta Thunberg

Moral theories aim to simplify, systematize and justify moral beliefs and practices (Zagzebski, 2010, p. 42). Exemplarist moral theory considers exemplary individuals to be a sort of anchor around which this systematization and justification can occur (Zagzebski 2010, 2017). For Zagzebski (2010, 49), exemplary persons are foundational to moral action. However, we do not view her theory as a foundational one. We utilize Zagzebski's theory in a more directly educational sense. For us, the admiration one feels for an exemplar is a starting point for working out what moral conduct is and what grounds it could have. The educational practice of studying moral exemplars has a key role to play in this reflective work. This interpretation resolves the problem of circularity Szutta (2019) sees in Zagzebski's theory. As for Thunberg, she has certainly inspired millions of activists, provoked countless debates and forced politicians and other figures to respond to her message. Her actions are therefore a potentially fruitful case for considering what moral conduct is and how moral positions might be grounded - a fruitful case for studying moral conduct.

Interpreting Zagzebski's theory in this way implies a particular take on what it means to judge someone as good. A foundationalist reading would rely on the empirical fact of admiration as the criterion for judging whether a person is morally exemplary or not. While this point cannot be developed fully here, we propose to follow Linda Zerilli's (2019) work as a non-foundational theory of judgment. Zerilli's main argument is that judgment is an inherently shared process, built on dialogue and persuasion, rather than a process where existing criteria are applied to individual cases. Analogously, judging whether Thunberg is morally exemplary is not a matter of deciding whether she fits some criteria for an exemplary person but rather a matter of persuading others - through critical discussion and reflection - that this is indeed the case.

Zagzebski (2017, 21 and *passim*) suggests that exemplary persons who are worthy of admiration are virtuous. They act on good motives, they aim at good ends, they live admirable and desirable lives, their acts are right acts in the right circumstances, and they understand and respond to their duties and demand that others fulfill their duties as well. An exemplary person need not have all the virtues, that is, be exemplary in all spheres of life. It is possible for us, for example, to admire a professor of moral philosophy as an epistemic exemplar even when we believe them to be morally average. For Zagzebski, the virtues are not *a priori*, but rather concepts that help us understand why we feel admiration for certain persons. The feeling of admiration and the desire to emulate come first. Emulating an exemplar is a process with an emotional beginning where we feel that someone is simply admirable, and then through reflection we begin to understand why we feel that way. The

emotional tone of admiration is present throughout the process of reflection and the reflection may intensify it.

Zagzebski's (2017) approach can be fallibilist and context-sensitive. Our emotions may miss the mark, and we may admire the wrong person, and we can also strongly disagree about who to admire. Thus we need to reflect and discuss with others whether and why we think that a certain person is admirable and whether we ought to act like them. Regarding 'case Thunberg', this article is both a result of such reflection by the authors and our contribution to the discussion of what this might entail in education. The broad context of the reflection consists of the global environmental crises and the inability of current institutional and political arrangements to respond to these crises effectively. Many environmental and climate ethicists have turned to virtue ethics as an attractive moral theory for our predicament. Old virtues have been reinterpreted through an environmental lens (see Sandler 2013), and new virtues have been put forward (Jamieson 2014; Gambrel & Cafaro 2010; Treanor 2014). We suggest that exemplarist moral education of the reflective bent could provide an institutional context for, on the one hand, evaluating the import of different virtues for moral conduct in the present age and, on the other hand, for contextualizing these virtues in the lives of young people.

Zagzebski notes the importance of character and shared narratives for understanding exemplars and making them possible objects of emulation (Zagzebski, 2010). Thus, the idea of narrative is a key component in exemplarist moral theory (see Carr, 2018). Characters in cultural narratives are an object of our admiration and emulation. We shape our own stories and the stories shape us. (Zagzebski 2010, MacIntyre 2007, 253-256.) The narratives of exemplarist characters change over time, but some character features also stay the same to some extent. The cultural narrative of Greta Thunberg as a moral exemplar is told over and over again in the media, and it has sparked admiration, but also patronizing and sexist narratives. Thunberg does not easily fit into the old cultural narratives of a heroic champion of social change. This however, may be one of the reasons she makes a good exemplar for our times - such narratives are complicit in the social system that has produced the ecological crisis.

There are different views on what should be counted as environmental virtues but the need for such virtues is rather clear (Sandler 2013; Hursthouse, 2007; Jordan & Kristjánsson 2017). Even people who don't agree with Thunberg's environmental virtuosity may agree that her example contributes to the set of virtues available for moral consideration. At the very least Thunberg's actions can be seen to reflect moral commitment (Damon & Colby 2015). Some have gone much further and argued that Thunberg's actions are entirely in line with fundamental ethical values (Kvamme, 2019). Our argument is more modest and practice-oriented: we claim that Thunberg is potentially an exemplar of environmental virtues in that she inspires admiration. By reflecting on and potentially following her example, we can gain a better grasp on what her virtuosity consists in. This is not to say that reflecting on her actions would help us provide a list of environmental virtues, but rather give us practical wisdom as to how to act virtuously in the present era. That is, we do not claim that Thunberg's actions are tantamount to a list of environmental virtues, but that reflecting on

Thunberg's example and emulating parts from her that suits one's own character and life can help us *develop virtuosity through* moral education.

While Thunberg is a vegan and refuses to fly - thus embodying some of the key environmental virtues discussed in the literature (Jamieson 2014; Treanor 2018; Alvaro 2017) - her life is intensely public and political. She opposes destructive social structures which require unwavering conviction, courage, persistence, and determination exemplified in her school strike which became a global phenomena. On 15th of March 2019, tens of thousands of young people in 125 countries held a global strike for climate under Thunberg's banner Fridays for Future. Far from being isolated incidents, these political actions have developed into a global climate movement that has gained support from established institutions and political agents (de Moor 2020).

Thunberg inspires many kinds of emotions, but it seems to be an empirical fact that many people around the globe, the authors of this paper included, feel admiration towards her—which is one of the first criteria for being considered admirable (see Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 141). She lives environmentally in the common-sensical manner of ecological consumption, but this is less relevant—although not trivial—compared to her political activist work. There is a widespread recognition that climate change is a deeply political and systemic problem that cannot be solved through individual consumptive choices alone. Yet, many environmental ethicists have advocated virtues and discussed exemplars that seem to be mainly about limiting individual consumption. Treanor (2014, 85-86) for example, discusses Thoreau both as an example and a theorist of simplicity as an environmental virtue. Jamieson (2014, 8) suggests that virtues provide “motivation to act in our various roles from consumers to citizens, in order to reduce our own impact on the planet and to some extent ameliorate the effects of others”, but he does not really discuss the environmental virtues of citizens, let alone political activists. All in all, the picture of the good, flourishing life is often supposed to be one of simple harmony with local ecosystems rather than intense political struggle.

One interesting feature of Thunberg's exemplarist character is her focus on good life, which could be of help in relieving the current consumerist narrative. Before her school strikes, Thunberg was depressed partly through difficulties in adapting to the school environment as a neurodivergent person, but also because the future she was studying for was under threat (Ernman & Thunberg 2020). Participating in activism and providing an example for others empowered her, which, in turn, improved her mental well-being. This is an example of the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia: living a good (virtuous) life is synonymous with good action that is an end in itself (Arendt, 2018, pp. 192-193). By leading a good life (eudaimonia) as an environmental activist while denying herself many of the modern conveniences, Thunberg shows that there is inherent value in doing the right thing. Thunberg can thus help to reorient our lifestyle of material welfare to something that is also morally meaningful. It is important to note, however, that in Thunberg's case, the ecological lifestyle is not a question of private consumption, but a part of public activity together with her political activism.

From the point of view of Aristotelian theories of character education - of which Zagzebski's theory is undoubtedly one prominent example (for a broader discussion see Kristjánsson,

2020) - a number of classical objections could be made to considering Greta Thunberg as a moral exemplar. Following Kristjansson's (2020, 138-141) succinct account, these 'classic' objections are: hero worship, moral inertia and moral overstretching. As these objections depend mainly on the distance that necessarily exists between a student and a morally exceptional individual, they could potentially apply to Thunberg as well. The danger with hero worship is that the student would mindlessly copy everything that the exemplar does, which would leave no space for their own identity to develop. According to Kristjansson, "contemporary (Aristotelian) character educationists agree" (2020, p. 139) the motivation to emulate an exemplary individual eventually must come from the admirable qualities that the exemplar exemplifies. Concurring with this, we take Thunberg in a pedagogical situation as a fruitful case of a *potentially* exemplary person where moral education does not so much take place in modeling students' actions after Thunberg's but in the critical reflective work that can be done in the classroom when her exemplarity is a case to be investigated.

The danger with moral inertia is that because Thunberg has achieved as much as she has, a student emulating her would rather inspire in students feelings of inadequacy and apathy since their own capabilities would appear so meager in comparison to Thunberg's. The inverse side of this is moral overstretching where the danger would be that students are inspired to act as Thunberg does but fail in their efforts because they lack the relevant competences and dispositions. (Kristjansson, 2020; p. 140.) What is assumed here is an enormous distance between Thunberg and those emulating her. Yet this is factually not the case with Thunberg. In reality, her actions have not been exceptional in the sense of requiring exceptional competence - even her school strike is potentially something that everyone could do, although we are not suggesting that this is desirable. Moreover, it is important to note that emulation always involves a sort of translation where the admirable qualities of a person are re-interpreted and re-contextualized into the life of the one emulating. This is again something that can be done in classrooms through the critical reflective work on why Thunberg should or should not be considered an exemplar.

In line with this, we propose to think exemplars as 'cases' for critical reflection on moral actions. What we mean by this is that we see Thunberg as potentially admirable, which is demonstrated by the empirical fact that many people do admire her *as well as* the controversy she causes in others. Thus, both positive and negative emotions play a role in highlighting a person as potentially exemplary (cf. Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019). However, to evaluate whether she actually is admirable, this admiration should become the object of critical reflection. Hence, both at the level of research as well as classroom work, moral education should involve discussion whether people are admirable or not. Following Zerilli's non-foundational theory of judgment, such a discussion is not an activity of deciding whether a person fits criteria for admirability but rather a dialogue where persuasion relies on making our point of view available to others. This makes it possible to not only explore what justification there is for considering a particular person exemplary but also help translate this admirability to the contexts of the students' own lives. In the context of moral education, we see the role of exemplars to be precisely that they prompt and provide material for such considerations (see Kristjansson 2020).

## Potential Objections to Thunberg's Exemplarism

In this section, we discuss some possible objections to the idea of Thunberg being an exemplar. Unlike the 'classic' objections above, the objections in this section are derived from the public discussion surrounding Thunberg. By responding to these objections, we strengthen our argument for considering Thunberg a moral exemplar for our times, but also exemplify the kind of critical reflective work we see to be the most fruitful approach to emulation in classroom contexts. We focus on two key aspects of exemplarism: (1) whether Thunberg is worthy of admiration, and (2) whether it is possible to emulate her.

### Is Thunberg worthy of *admiration*?

The objections to Thunberg's admirability try to question her position as a morally credible character or an actor, highlighting the interconnectedness of moral exemplarism and the world of narratives. It is possible to identify three main lines of critique. Following loosely Pantic's (2017) typology of the components of agency, we call these (1) the argument from autonomy, where Thunberg is criticized for being under outside influence; (2) the argument from purpose, where Thunberg is criticized for having hidden motivations that contradict her explicit agenda; (3) the argument from competence, where Thunberg is criticized for being epistemically naive.

Generally speaking, the arguments are of an *ad hominem* type. In the context of moral exemplarism, this is not a sufficient reason for dismissing them. When discussing whether a person is admirable, i.e., exemplary, we are bound to discuss their character. However, we should distinguish the actions of a person that stem from admirable dispositions from the attributes of the person that are accidental to those acts. For example, we are concerned with features of Thunberg's person, such as her diagnosis with ASD, only to the extent that these make Thunberg a person that can or cannot be admired and emulated by others. Our focus is therefore in establishing whether these objections make it impossible to interpret her actions as indicative of moral exemplarity.

### **Autonomy**

The general point of critique for the argument from autonomy is Thunberg's status as a 16-year-old teenager. Thunberg has become active in politics, which is perceived to be a place where children should not be. Childhood is seen to be a world without political concerns: a child should be allowed to be a child (Stone 2021). The main task of children is pictured to be to learn and to grow. The time for changing the world comes only after a prolonged period of getting acquainted with it. Thus, it is suggested that Thunberg cannot be considered a moral exemplar, because she is not ready to have political agency.

A similar argument is often heard from critics of contemporary education. According to these conservative views (for a sophisticated example, see Arendt, 1993) children should not be exposed to politics before they have reached a suitable level of maturity, with "suitable" often

referring to the limit of adulthood (18 years of age in Sweden). However, there is extensive research within the field of the 'sociology of childhood' on the possibilities of children's agency (see e.g. Oswell, 2013). Moreover, it has been suggested that if education is not up to the task of allowing the voices of young people to be heard, education should change (Skilbeck, 2020). It is certainly true that for younger children this does not mean political agency in the sense of participating in deliberations about the affairs of the state. Nevertheless, the general idea that education involves a boundary that needs to be crossed before children can become political agents is fundamentally mistaken (Biesta 2015). Thus, while not children of every age *can* be political agents, there is nothing inherently wrong with children taking initiative in shaping the conditions of their existence.

As part of the critique of Thunberg's youth, her ability to make the choices guiding her actions has been questioned. This has led many to assume that Thunberg might be manipulated by powers that remain in the background (Mkono, Hughes & Enchentille 2020, 2089-2090). In addition to the usual suspects of transnational corporations, Thunberg's parents have been blamed for manipulating her to represent their desired ideology (Laud 2019). Relatedly, there have been concerns that Thunberg's parents allow her to become a puppet of the global environmental protection industry. These objections imagine Thunberg as a marionette at the mercy of more powerful social actors (cf. Park, Lieu & Kaye 2021).

Whether Thunberg's actions are based on her own ideas or those of a hidden mastermind is an empirical question that cannot be fully addressed here. However, it should be noted that Thunberg herself has responded to such criticism with the repeated affirmation of her own role in making the final decisions about her activities, and her parents have corroborated this (Ernman & Thunberg 2020). While we have to take Thunberg at her word in the empirical question, the accusations themselves reveal that Thunberg has managed to reach a level of influence that is atypical of a young person. Paradoxically, the most convincing evidence of Thunberg's autonomy is that even the most powerful world leaders feel the need to downplay her autonomy. When the President of the United States (Trump, before he was banned from Twitter) tweets that Thunberg's selection of the Time magazines' person of the year is "so ridiculous", it already admits what he wishes to deny - her autonomy (Smith 2019).

The key aspect of Thunberg's exemplarity here is precisely the fact that she has expanded the conventional social role of a 16-year-old teenager. Thunberg is not satisfied with the political influence her everyday choices as a teenager afford her and proceeds to seek ways to move beyond what is expected of her. However, the means she uses to do so are not outside the reach of a normal teenager. Teenagers are well known for their ability to skip school and, although the details of climate science might be beyond the grasp of a typical teenager, the general guidelines are not. In Thunberg's case, these mundane capabilities of a teenager connect with an exceptional moral vision, situating her to the liminal space between something that anyone can relate to and an exemplary individual.

## **Purpose**

Thunberg's critics persistently attack her motives. It is typically argued that after Thunberg became famous, her parents' business developed, earning them considerable amounts of money (Silverman 2019). A corollary to this argument is that Thunberg has connections to brands and trademarks whose revenue depends on her being a visible activist. Similarly, it is argued that the purpose of her actions might be to seek attention rather than fight for the environment. The core of these arguments is the same: since there are additional benefits that result from Thunberg's actions, such as money and attention, the purpose of her actions is the acquisition of those benefits instead of the aims of environmental ethics she speaks about.

These arguments fail for two reasons. First, earning money is an inescapable necessity of all people in the modern monetary economy. Criticizing Thunberg for getting paid for her work tries to situate her outside the realm of everyday needs. Of course, this still leaves the objection that she might be getting more money than most, thus benefiting from her supposedly benevolent work beyond normal means of subsistence. Second, even if Thunberg were getting revenue from activist work - we have no way of ascertaining whether or not this is the case - it would not justify the conclusion that money is her main source of motivation. Indeed, Kvamme (2019) has suggested that a certain cosmopolitan ethos underlies the movements Thunberg has inspired, which implies that Thunberg is - at least to some extent - committed to pursuing non-economic modes of being a subject. Similarly Thunberg's personal history points to her need to seek well-being in other modes of life than the perpetuation of ecologically harmful practices. Although she has earned money for her actions, those same actions reflect the values many people could admire: her determination with problem solving and her persistence with which she approaches the issue. Finally, reading her actions as a claim for fame and fortune makes it difficult to explain why she has, on numerous occasions, re-directed substantial monetary prizes into charity.

It is noteworthy that in these objections, Thunberg is criticized for being part of the existing system, which is perceived as undermining her capacity to act as a moral authority. Thunberg's credibility as a moral exemplar has been undermined also from the opposite direction. She has been posited as someone who acts in favor of a good cause, but is out of touch with reality (Caldwell 2019). She lives in a world that does not take into account the realities of life; in other words, she is outside our system. This version of the argument offers new possibilities for the denialist: what Thunberg does would be nice in principle, but we cannot go down that path since we are the responsible adults who need to respect the realities of life - ergo, economy (Pulkki 2022a). The exemplar loses their admirability by being too far removed from everyday life. While Thunberg may not be as far removed from reality as her critics claim - see the next section - the argument shows the connection between exemplarity and narratives (Zagzebski, 2010; MacIntyre 2007, 253-256). To appear as a credible character of a story, a moral exemplar needs to be a bit outside the system so as to be able to offer a credible critique but not too far out to become unrelatable.

## **Competence**

Thunberg's moral admirability has been undermined also by claims about complexities of climate science, political realities, and economic systems (Gorbatenko 2019). From this

perspective, Thunberg's ideas have been deemed simplistic and unrealistic (Harsanyi 2019). In an analysis of German media coverage on Thunberg and the Fridays for Future youth movement more generally, Bergmann and Ossewaarde (2020, 282) show that a common image circulating in media reports on these young climate activists is that of "a dreamer". The image of the dreamer is "created by reporting on climate activists who are (too) young and did not think well about their claims or by reporting on their claims as being unwarranted and unrealistic" (ibid.). The "responsible adult" from before returns.

Thunberg's main arguments *do* acknowledge the complexities of eco-social and economic matters and can be summarized thus: 1) we need to take climate change seriously as a fundamental crisis, 2) we cannot continue as usual, and 3) we need to align our policies with the best available science. When she has spoken about specific policies, she has presented them as something that experts recommend (Thunberg 2019). Further, public analyses have found her epistemic qualifications quite sufficient (see FactBar 2019). Hence, we claim that Thunberg is well-aware of the political complexities of the situation.

It is difficult to think of an argument against Thunberg's main message that would not amount to some version of climate change denialism - a thoroughly discredited position. The scientific consensus about climate change and the severity of the problem is clear enough (IPCC 2018). There is however less consensus about how our political systems can and ought to address climate change. Furthermore, the scale of the changes required in our society presents several difficult issues of equity where correct solutions might be difficult to find.

Amidst such complexity, Thunberg's epistemic 'simplicity' is actually one of the things that makes her an exemplar. When dealing with complex questions such as the climate emergency, there is an unfortunate tendency to avoid thinking about it (Norgaard 2011). This makes it very difficult to remain humble with one's epistemic claims, since the only reliable way of escaping a problem is by solving it. It is thus exceptional that Thunberg only claims to know things that have a near unanimous support of the scientific community. When the discussion moves towards more contested issues, she correspondingly claims to know less, displaying an admirable amount of epistemic humility (Pulkki 2022b). Moreover, she emphasizes the need for "collective wisdom" and differing points of view if the required changes are to take place (Thunberg 2023). This combination of epistemic humility and clarity makes Thunberg an exemplary individual.

It has also been objected that since Thunberg could not herself have produced her knowledge of the ecological crisis, she has no right to use it as a justification for her claims. However, this objection relies on the absurd assumption that anyone could be epistemically self-sufficient (Zagzebski 2012). Any scientific enterprise necessarily relies on conceptual apparatuses and earlier research — both collective endeavors. Thus, the argument clearly fails in questioning Thunberg's exemplarism. Its appeal can be attributed to how subjects of knowledge are generally perceived. Narratives of the knower in the West are often made up of the ideals of an autonomous and independent individual capable of overcoming any and all possible difficulties by themselves (Gomes & Kanner 1995). From the point of view of such heroic individuals, any reliance on others is seen as a weakness (ibid). While Thunberg

does think for herself, her epistemic prowess is not based on sophisticated scientific reasoning but on the very simple principle of listening to those who dedicate their professional careers to seeking knowledge. Thunberg repeatedly affirms: “listen to the scientists”, not this or that scientist, not this or that study, but scientists in the plural — the scientific *community*.

## Can Thunberg be emulated?

Having drawn attention to the shortcomings of the objections to considering Thunberg a person worthy of admiration, we can now turn to the question of whether she is a person who *can* be emulated. Two strands of objections can be identified here. First, some have claimed that Thunberg’s admirability is a result of factors beyond her control, which suggests that even if a person found Thunberg admirable, they would be unable to emulate her. The second strand of objections is a mitigation of the first. Pointing towards Thunberg’s social position as a young person, as a female, as an inhabitant of a Nordic country, it is argued that while it might not be strictly speaking impossible to emulate Thunberg, it would nevertheless be exceedingly difficult to do so.

In light of the well-known moral principle ‘ought implies can’, the question whether or not she can be emulated is certainly crucial for Thunberg’s exemplarism. If Thunberg is exceptional in ways that cannot be learned, it makes little sense to consider her a moral exemplar (Zagzebski 2017, 37-40). Similarly, if emulating Thunberg is overly difficult, it might be better to choose a different person for emulation. Consequently, if it can be shown that Thunberg’s exemplary actions are the result of luck or personal features she was born with, or that her social positioning makes her difficult to emulate, the whole idea of considering her a moral exemplar for our times is brought into question.

## Neurodivergence

Considering Thunberg a moral exemplar makes her diagnosis with ASD an enticing target for critics. Here we immediately get to the heart of the problem of emulation: Starting from Thunberg’s neurodivergence, one might claim that neurotypical people cannot reach her character traits. Thunberg herself has apparently supported this view by calling her diagnosis “a superpower” in public (Rourke 2019). She has said to the media that she does not fall for lies ‘as easily as regular people, I can see through things’ (BBC 2019). Thus, neurotypical people might not have the ability to act like Thunberg’s moral example encourages. A crucial premise for this argument to succeed is the presumption that it is precisely ASD that makes it possible for Thunberg to act as she does.

However, there are two problems with the reasoning here. First, not all people with ASD act like her. Therefore, ASD cannot be considered to be *the cause* of Thunberg’s action. While it is possible, even likely, that being neurodivergent has helped her in accomplishing her goals, it is not her neurodivergence that determined her course of action. Furthermore, ASD might make it easier to see clearly in complex situations and to act courageously in the face of

power, but both are possible also for people without the ‘help’ of neurodivergence. Thus, ASD is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for Thunberg’s exemplarism.

Second, one need not be like Greta to emulate her, or, to be more precise, emulation is something quite different from being the same. In contradistinction to some existing work on exemplarism (e.g., Osman, 2019), emulation can more fruitfully be understood in terms of acting *as if* one were Thunberg. It is like asking the question, if Thunberg was me in this situation, what would she *do*? In other words, emulation cannot escape the element of alterity inherent in mimesis (see Taussig, 1993).

This has particularly weighty implications for how to understand emulation. Firstly, emulation does not depend on any specific competence or skill set. One need not have Thunberg’s skills to act as if one were her. Secondly, given the element of critical reflection that is always included in emulation, there is a necessary distance between the exemplar and the student in that the student does not simply blindly do as Greta would but rather interprets her admirability in their own way. Such an interpretation, and this is the third point, involves a translation where the admirability perceived in Thunberg is contextualized in the life of the one emulating her. The task for the kind of critical engagement with her potential admirability we pursue in the present paper - and suggest could be taken up in classrooms - is to help in making such interpretations and translations, to give direction to one’s moral acts.

Anyone can think of their own position and their own strengths (and weaknesses) and how to use them in the situation at hand *as if* one were Thunberg. This points to a possible way of reducing the distance between an admirable moral person and oneself that Szutta (2019) sees as a problematic aspect of Zagzebski’s theory. Thunberg’s diagnosis did not affect her too much: she turned the difficult situation to her advantage, a perceived neurodivergence into a “superpower”. There is no need to have the same abilities as Thunberg to draw inspiration from her moral dispositions - which should not be read as claiming that everyone is capable of everything.

## **Luck**

Drawing on the narrative of the autonomous world-conquering hero (f.e. Gomes & Kanner 1995; Friedman 2000), Thunberg’s exemplarism has also been objected to by an argument from luck. The claim is that Thunberg has become epistemically and morally admirable by virtue of luck. Luck has certainly played a role in her becoming interested in climate change and her ability to find good sources of information. Nevertheless, Thunberg has encountered plenty of climate denialist propaganda, and it is admirable that she has managed to get to the truth that matters. In *Our House Is on Fire* (2020, 102-103), Malena Ernman describes how Thunberg followed and calculated for several weeks how much newspapers reported on climate change (not much, 0,5-1,5%) whereas lifestyle issues that are problematic from the climate perspective (shopping, flying, driving) received many times more coverage. This, and other examples reported in the book suggest that Thunberg’s actions contributed to her epistemic prowess, which is well beyond her peers (See e.g. Nygren & Guath 2019 on the problems that Swedish teens have in evaluating digital news sources).

It might be claimed that others have done similar things, that Thunberg's rise to prominence has been merely a chance occurrence. This claim extends the accusation of luck to Thunberg's moral character — in none of its aspects is her situation of her own making, and she is therefore not worthy of it. It is certainly likely that fortune played a part in making Thunberg famous. However, it is considerably more difficult to make this premise support the conclusion that Thunberg is not exemplary. This can be made clear by considering her actions *after* she became famous. Her actions are in line with her espoused values, and she has been stating the same core arguments irrespective of the forum. Hence, while luck likely played a role in making her the knower and prominent figure she is, her own actions contributed to both significantly. It is therefore possible to emulate her, although the results of such emulation might not be the same as they were for her.

## **Situation**

Recent empirical research has shown that it is easier to emulate people who can be perceived as peers instead of extraordinary individuals (Han, Kim, Jeong & Cohen, 2017). This makes several objections to Thunberg's exemplarism possible. First, her school strike has made Thunberg famous. As a result, she leads a life that is noticeably different from most people. It can be argued that this makes emulating her very difficult for the great majority of people, who are not, for example, getting similar media attention. Against this, it should be remembered that Thunberg only became famous after she started her school strike for the climate. Thus, her being famous is not an objection but rather a further motivation for emulating her: from very humble origins and with mundane means, it is possible to have impact in the world.

Second, Thunberg's visible activism throughout the world is only one aspect of her emulability. Thunberg's example as an ordinary person living (admittedly) in a Nordic welfare state, is an example that everyday actions can induce changes. It is true that a person's situation affects their possibilities in making a difference. Yet emulation need not be comprehensive. Emulation always happens in a unique life situation where the person who emulates applies the moral learning to her particular context in the way they can.

Third, since Thunberg is still fairly young, it might be difficult for adults to see her as an exemplar. The social situation of, say, an adult with children, a job and a mortgage is not the same as Thunberg's. In addition to being far removed from the everyday lives of middle-aged people, there is the problem of the educational relationship. Typically, the older generations teach the younger ones. The more experienced are meant to guide the actions of the newcomers. Not only has Thunberg challenged this setup, she has blamed the older generation of betraying young people (Jandrić et al., 2021, p.12). This adds a further problem into an already challenging picture, in that her words might arouse feelings of shame and guilt in many older people (Aaltola, 2021).

Nevertheless, there does not seem to be a logical reason why young people could not be exemplars for adults as well. Rather, this is a problem of the rigidity of social conventions. This insight also leads to seeing a way out. The personal narrative of a young person continues into adulthood. Since the time before adolescence is already part of an adult's life

history, they can identify with, empathize and emulate a young person. Further, it might be beneficial for adults to develop a more open attitude towards the possibility of considering young people as exemplars. Through the process of becoming adults people may lose some morally admirable attributes and it might be morally beneficial to be reminded about them. This is not to say, of course, that the process is going to be easy, nor that we have a clear blueprint for executing it. However, perhaps the kind of engagement we have exemplified with the present discussion could be a start.

Furthermore, while exemplarist moral theory as developed by Zagzebski usually emphasizes positive feelings such as admiration, negative emotions such as shame are not necessarily obstacles for moral education. As Vacarezza and Niccoli (2018, 340) point out, feeling a certain form of shame, “worth-shame” when faced with someone’s exemplarity, can show the possibility of a more valuable life and “initiate the moral learner’s effort at making moral progress”. The realization of the discrepancy between one’s view of what a valuable life looks like and one’s own life may be even more poignant when the exemplar is someone who is much younger or otherwise a seemingly unlikely object of admiration.

## End remarks: Greta Thunberg as an exemplar of moral education

Self-improvement and cultivation of virtues via exemplars has often been neglected in moral education even though admiration and emulation are something people do regardless of whether this is an intentional educational occurrence (Croce & Vacarezza, 2017; Taussig, 1993; Kristjánsson, 2006). Morality, for us, includes a realm of social actions, emotions, judgements, and intentions conducive to flourishing of people, society and the world beyond the self, to somewhat rephrase the work of Damon & Colby (2015, xi). Given that emulation takes place no matter what, education’s commitment to the Good could be understood as leaving for moral educators the crucial task of carefully selecting the influences they offer as support for their pupils’ processes of moral growth.

We have established a positive case for why Greta Thunberg should be considered an exemplar as well as shown why the most prominent objections to this view fail. In particular, our discussion shows that Thunberg’s actions are admirable even after a careful reflection and that her moral and epistemic dispositions can be emulated, although this is certainly not an easy task. However, although we have provided substantial argumentation in support of her exemplarity, Thunberg is far from an uncontroversial figure. In our view, this makes her an even better ‘case’ for study since her controversiality provides for fruitful material for reflection on what possibly makes her an exemplary individual. The role modeling literature generally differentiates between exceptional examples of moral character and more ordinary ones (Vos, 2018; Han et. al. 2017). However, what we hope to have highlighted is that it is not easy to assign Thunberg to either category, since most of her actions are the kind ordinary people could follow, while simultaneously displaying extraordinary characteristics. As we see it, part of the teacher’s role in exemplarist moral education would be to show how exceptionality arises from ordinary actions that can be emulated.

The approach we have sought to exemplify in this paper can help move the discussion forward in some of the key issues of exemplarism. Our reliance on educational work as the ground of moral evaluations dispels the danger of circularity Szutta (2019) sees in Zagzebski's theory. Similarly, it can help respond to her call for giving more attention to mundane exemplars, as reflection can be used to draw out the exemplarity in such persons. Following broader discussions in character education, which have highlighted the importance of cognition for emulation (see Kristjansson, 2020, p. 140), our approach also illuminates the educational relationship peculiar to exemplarism by articulating the role of critical joint reflection in emulation.

Finally, our analysis adds some texture to the practical educational work that could be undertaken in relation to an exemplar. The students might be engaged in the kind of debate we have pursued in this paper. Getting to know Thunberg's thinking and actions provides possibilities for discussing and evaluating them in the varied contexts of students' lifeworlds. Young people are often passionate about changing the world, but this aspiration is not always channeled into concrete action. Students need ideas of how to go about changing the world by means of social and environmental activism, for example. In Thunberg's life we can notice a central virtue needed in the climate crisis: an aspiration to change the world for the better (see Damon & Colby 2015). When a teacher introduces Thunberg's actions and thoughts to students, she/he shows what kind of action can be taken and also inspires students to the aspiration for "green belief", the change needed in how we engage with nature (see Hursthouse 2007). Students can also engage in similar projects such as school strikes and demonstrations thus also drawing media attention to climate issues. In terms of intentional moral education, a teacher can give self-reflective assignments on why Thunberg evokes admiration and also disagreeable emotions. For moral growth it is vital also to acknowledge what negative emotions and mixed feelings might emerge from Thunberg's example.

To conclude, we consider Thunberg to be a moral exemplar for these troubling times. However, the value we see in her action's for exemplarist moral education is more centrally found in critical engagement with her controversiality and in a rational analysis of the feelings of admiration she arouses. Being admired by many - as well as opposed by many - Greta Thunberg and her actions are starting points worthy of serious consideration in the context of moral education.

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