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Why a True Account of Human Development Requires Exemplar Research

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Abstract

This chapter uses moral psychology to illustrate why exemplar methods are essential for building a valid, complete understanding of key domains of human development. Social psychological, economic, and biological-evolutionary paradigms for studying morality rely on samples drawn from the general population. This research reveals a bleak picture of morality, highlighting its irrational, self-interested, externally controlled aspects. If the subjects in these studies are confused, pliable, or profit-maximizing, these studies conclude that people in general are morally irrational and self-interested. In contrast, studies that investigate morally exceptional individuals reveal a more thoughtful, ideal-driven, self-reflective, creative version of moral functioning. Any account that neglects this high-functioning segment of the range is seriously misleading and cannot provide the basis for aspiration or education. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

The validity of any finding in the behavioral sciences hinges on how well the study's investigatory procedures represent the topic of interest—or, in the term that most students learn in graduate school, how well the central constructs are *operationalized*. If the ways that the main constructs under investigation have been operationalized are weak, or even vigorously contested, the study's findings and implications become seriously suspect. One well-known example is provided by studies of intelligence as they have evolved over the past century.

The concept of intelligence covers an enormous range of mental capacities, including logic and other types of reasoning, practical and theoretical knowledge, critical and creative thinking, aesthetic sensibilities, common sense, street smarts, and so on. For this reason, Piaget defined intelligence as the many diverse mental functions that promote adaptation (Piaget, 1970), and Howard Gardner coined the phrase “multiple intelligences” to capture this diversity (Gardner, 1983, 2006). Nevertheless, social scientists have made sweeping claims about the nature and roots of human intelligence based only on people's responses to one or another version of the IQ test. Many researchers have used IQ as a proxy for human mental capacity *in general*, actually referred to as “g”—for general—in some incarnations of the test. (Indeed, an oft-quoted tribute to the powerful role of operational definitions in science had it that intelligence is simply what an IQ test measures.) Still, although IQ testing has yielded highly replicable findings related to the particular skills that such tests examine, many critics have doubted that these findings capture the nature and sources of intelligence more broadly understood. These critics point out that people's responses to IQ tests do not come close to representing the range of mental abilities that have created humanity's scientific, civic, business, spiritual, and artistic achievements, sometimes through feats of soaring genius (Gardner, 2011).

One index of a well-operationalized study is proper measurement. Another index, equally important, is the sample of subjects that the study examines and explains. For example, no account of human intelligence would be complete without a look at people who have been endowed with genius, as rare and unrepresentative as such people may be, because higher order intellectual functioning is a very consequential phenomenon and may have qualitatively different characteristics than ordinary mental processes. For a sensible sample design, measurement and sample selection must be coordinated. If a study is to capture what is special about how genius works, it may need to rely on different instruments and procedures than those designed to capture the contours of routine mental processes. Thus a sample of high-performing *exemplars* and a specially designed *exemplar methodology* are both required for a complete view of human intelligence.

To generalize from the study of intelligence, we argue that a reason to include exemplar samples in any scientific examination is to provide a complete account that applies to the full variety of human functioning. But this is only one part of our justification for exemplar research; we will also

make another, stronger claim: An exemplar approach is necessary for providing an *accurate, nondistorted* account of any psychological phenomenon under investigation. Next we advance this claim with reference to the phenomenon of human morality, the topic of our own research programs over the past four decades.

The Nature and Sources of Morality

Social psychology textbooks, which mainly cover experimental research conducted with normative samples, generally paint a bleak picture of morality. Now-classic studies from social psychology have documented people's tendencies to shirk moral responsibility, conform to immoral demands, and act in inhumane ways when placed in challenging or tempting situations. Hartshorne and May (1928) showed that children will cheat when given the chance; Latane and Darley (1969) showed that bystanders will ignore screams for help; Milgram (1974) showed that people will subject others to painful levels of electric shock when instructed by an authority figure in a white coat to do so; Zimbardo (2007) showed that college students will abuse fellow students when placed in charge of them; and so on, down a litany of ignoble responses to experimental conditions.

Adding to this disheartening portrait of moral behavior are recent findings that have been interpreted as showing that people have little or no control over their responses to social situations, since we are mostly driven by our preprogrammed biological impulses. Among the advocates of this biological determinism is Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, who cites evidence such as the far higher tendency of judges to grant parole right after they have had lunch (Kahneman, 2011). Underlining the biological determinism of this position, a *New York Times* review of Kahneman's thesis was entitled "The amygdala made me do it" (Atlas, 2012).

Another proponent of the view that "morality is grounded in our biology" is former Harvard professor Marc Hauser, whose widely-quoted book *Moral Minds* promoted the view that moral behavior is instinctual, nonconscious, and outside our control. Hauser claims that "we evolved a moral instinct . . . designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right or wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action" (Hauser, 2006, p. xvii). Hauser bases his claims on evidence from experiments in which subjects are asked to respond to hypothetical dilemmas such as a runaway trolley car that has lost its brakes while heading toward hikers on the tracks. If the conductor lets the train stay on its course, five hikers will be run down. But if, instead, he steers the train in another direction, it will run down only one hiker who happens to be walking on a side track. The choice is whether to actively steer the train so as to kill one person intentionally or to passively allow the train to kill five times that number. When confronted with this dilemma, subjects decide quickly which choice they prefer, and magnetic images of their neural processes while they make their choices reveal

patterns of activity in areas of their brains identified with moral emotion. Of course, this is an unlikely situation that poorly matches the experiences of real people. Yet, findings from this experiment have been used to make broad claims about morality, asserting that the moral response is dictated by biological dispositions. This biological determinism relegates the roles of judgment, belief, faith, conscience, and other forms of reflection and conscious choice to what is known in psychology as “epiphenomena”—that is, meaningless exercises in after-the-fact rationalization that play no part in actually determining behavior.

Another method of study in this biological paradigm is to trigger feelings of disgust by asking subjects to think about abhorrent activities such as incest between a brother and a sister or sex with dead chickens. In these scenarios, the investigator tries to rule out any rational basis for moral objections, asking respondents to assume, for example, that the amorous siblings will use birth control, will experience no psychological ill effects, and will keep their activities private. When subjects nevertheless recoil from such thoughts, a response Haidt calls “moral dumbfounding,” their reactions are taken as evidence that morality is ruled by unconscious inborn emotions rather than by principled choice. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes that evidence of widespread moral dumbfounding shows “the importance of inborn moral intuitions [and] the socially functional (rather than truth-seeking) nature of moral thinking” (Haidt, 2007, p. 998).

Experimental studies from the discipline of economics also have contributed to the view that human behavior is determined by forces beyond our moral control. In the economic view, individual choices are determined by implicit calculations of risk and gain and the maximization of “utilities,” which represent various aspects of the individual’s self-interest. Experimental studies of behavior in economic games do sometimes grant the existence of altruism and preferences for solutions that are seen as fair. But such concerns are understood to be anomalies that only minimally affect the overall picture of the human condition as a collection of self-interested actors pursuing their own preferences or utilities (Kolm & Ythier, 2006).

Each of these research paradigms—the social psychological, biological, and economic—relies on samples of subjects drawn from the general population. The investigators have not been particularly concerned with the nature of these samples, which are considered to be representative of all people. If subjects in these studies are confused about the morality of contrived and improbable situations, pliable in carrying out nefarious commands from authoritative investigators, or profit-maximizing in economic games played with strangers, the conclusion in each case is that *people* are morally irrational, blindly obedient to authority, and fundamentally self-interested.

But the normative data from such samples fail to tell the whole story of morality. Some people do better than that, and most people can learn to do better. For example, studies using highly educated samples show very

low levels of what Haidt has called “moral dumbfounding.” It is primarily the less-educated participants who say that disgusting actions are *morally* wrong even if they cause no harm (Haidt & Joseph, 2007), perhaps revealing a kind of confusion that is mitigated by the analytic reasoning fostered by higher education. Likewise, every implementation of the Milgram experiment has found at least a few subjects who refuse to shock (Blass, 1999). Other subjects who do succumb and act badly later regret their actions, triggering a positive change in their moral orientations that outlasts the experimental situation. Any claims about the nature of morality must take these people into account. The behavior of random or representative samples in experimental situations might not be shared by people whose moral understanding and characters are more fully developed—nor by people who are more open to learning. For this reason, inferences based on the limits of typical responses will lead to a distorted view of morality. This is the second, and most important, of the reasons behind our assertion that the study of human development needs exemplar samples.

There is a developmental point here as well. To say that conscious moral choice is not always—or even not usually—involved in behavior should not imply that it is never involved. Many routine moral habits have been worked out during childhood and require no further thought: Ordinary people do not need to consider whether to grab a slice of pizza off someone else’s plate when its owner steps out of the room momentarily, though they may have needed to pause and think about this a bit at age 2. Certain situations, though, place people under pressures that routine habits cannot so easily resolve. In those situations, ordinary people may be morally confused or act in ways that are biased by self-interest. But these limitations can be addressed educationally. Phil Zimbardo (who demonstrated a conscious moral judgment of his own by stopping his experiment when it became apparent that it was provoking cruel behavior) has since launched a “Heroic Imagination Project” dedicated to building the capacity of individuals to resist the demands of situations that pressure people to act immorally. This new work relies on the promise of education to help people learn to do better, and it draws on the promise of human development to enable people to grow beyond their base biological inheritance.

The social psychological, biological, and economic lines of work that we have discussed cannot capture the complex reality of moral behavior in its full human sense, in part because of the methodological limitations of such work, and in part because of its impoverished theoretical vision. The deterministic vision of these studies discounts beliefs, choices, and ideals that have moved highly developed people to moral action throughout recorded history. Many who have been moved by elevated moral ideals have sacrificed their own interests, thrown themselves into the breach during battles, transcended their desire for revenge to make peace with their enemies, and handed over large shares of their wealth to others. Many have dedicated extended periods of their lives to pursuing moral purposes centered

on peace, justice, love for humanity, and the well-being of others. Research paradigms that fail to examine and account for people like this are extrapolating from the limitations of ordinary people to the nature of morality itself. This false inference is like concluding that there is no such thing as rigorous analytical thinking on the grounds that most people exhibit fallacious reasoning in studies of systematic cognitive bias (Tversky, 1974). To show how one might correct for the sampling biases that lead to such a distorted view, we turn to the exemplar methodology.

Moral Formation in Exemplary 20th Century Leaders

For the past 40 years, the two authors of this chapter have been trying to understand a mysterious, sometimes fragile, but undeniably central part of human development—the moral commitment of people who dedicate their lives to goals that represent moral principles. Our present work explores the lives of seven exemplary leaders from the 20th century: Jane Addams, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Heschel, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, and Eleanor Roosevelt. In this study, we are investigating the roles that humility, truth, and faith play in the moral formation and functioning of these exceptional moral leaders. Each of the seven withstood situational pressures, actively questioned and responded to unjust or inhumane cultural norms, reflected on and reshaped their own base impulses and weaknesses of character, and tried to live in the light of transcendent ideals that ennoble the frail human condition. By looking at their lives and their own understandings of their challenges and aspirations, we are attempting to describe the dynamics of moral courage, commitment, and leadership.

For example, former South African president Nelson Mandela not only survived unbroken 27 years of brutal confinement in South African prisons, he also found ways to pursue human rights and social justice even during his confinement. Toward the end of his imprisonment, Mandela had become such a powerful international symbol of justice and courage that the South African authorities wanted to release him to stanch the negative world attention he was drawing to them. But even after decades of suffering, Mandela refused the offer of release unless his conditions were met, conditions that included the freedom to pursue his political agenda in whatever ways he believed were needed and the release of other prisoners who were being held without legitimate cause. This refusal was costly, and he remained in prison for several years on the basis of his principled stand. Eventually, Mandela was able to negotiate a release on his own terms and, once released, stunned the world with his generosity of spirit and his commitment to reconciliation with his oppressors. Mandela understood that hatred and revenge would undermine the possibilities for national harmony, as well as for justice and liberation of the oppressed. His total commitment to justice for all, not just his own people, and to the need for harmony and

inclusiveness in his deeply divided country, enabled him to bring people together at a time when that seemed virtually impossible.

When Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first post-apartheid president, his capacity to forgive and his desire to heal his nation led to truly exceptional moral creativity. In the face of horrific offenses against his people, Mandela instituted a strategy for national healing that was original, counterintuitive, risky, and controversial. To resolve the legacy of grievances committed under decades of apartheid rule, President Mandela worked with his long-term colleague and friend, Bishop Desmond Tutu, to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that departed radically from the Nuremberg model that the Allies used to prosecute Nazi war crimes after World War II. The purpose of the TRC was to allow perpetrators on all sides of the conflict to acknowledge and take responsibility for past wrongdoing. To this end, the forum was opened to accused and accusers alike, and amnesty was liberally used to elicit frank confessions. Although its de-emphasis on criminal prosecutions was understandably controversial among apartheid's victims and their families, the TRC has been widely recognized for bringing out the full scope of human rights violations that had occurred under the previous regime. It led to confessions, apologies, and statements of regret by perpetrators that made possible the beginnings of productive dialogues, a large step toward national healing and the eventual national unity. The TRC model has been adopted in over 20 countries since its use in South Africa during the 1990s.

Mandela is but one recent shining example in history's pantheon of moral leaders. Every society honors those who have shown courage, commitment, integrity, and moral imagination in service to the common good. Another of our 20th century exemplars is Eleanor Roosevelt, who was for many years the most widely admired woman in the world. The child of a privileged, politically prominent American family, Roosevelt spent her life working to bring about greater justice for working people, women, minorities, and the poor. She pursued this agenda relentlessly, before, during, and after the 12 years she spent as First Lady during the presidency of her husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Like the other six people we are studying, Roosevelt's moral leadership was based on a commitment to noble purposes transcending her own self-interests. A glimpse into this aspect of Roosevelt's character has been provided by Mary Ann Glendon, who noted, "In an era conspicuous for the self-interest of both nations and individuals, she has become more and more widely recognized as a person of towering unselfishness . . . Mrs. Roosevelt never cares if there is nothing in it for herself. She has absolutely no pride of station and no personal ambition. [To many], she is the personification of the American conscience" (Glendon, 2001, p. 206).

Ordinary people, too, sometimes show such elevated qualities, even if in less heroic and celebrated ways. People the world over love and care for others, both within their own families and well beyond. They dedicate

themselves to their work and try to do it in ways that are socially responsible. They help people in need without expecting recognition or reward. Some even risk their lives to rescue strangers. This kind of vital moral force cannot be explained by a science that reduces morality to biological impulses, situational pressures, or economic self-interest.

In our earlier study of 23 living moral exemplars, we found strong degrees of integration between self and moral concerns (Colby & Damon, 1992), and we concluded from this that moral commitment involves a “uniting of self and morality”: As we wrote at the time, “People who define themselves in terms of their moral goals are likely to see moral problems in everyday events, and they are also likely to see themselves as necessarily implicated in these problems. From there, it is but a small step to taking responsibility for the solution” (Colby & Damon, 1992, p. 307). People differ in the degree to which they define themselves in terms of moral concerns and aims. In one study, Walker and his colleagues found that “morality had differing degrees of centrality in people’s identities: For some, moral considerations and issues were pervasive in their experience because morality was rooted in the heart of their being; for others, moral issues seemed remote, and moral values and standards were not basic to their self-concept” (Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995, p. 398).

Our present study builds on our previous work to investigate more fully the phenomenon of moral leadership, including the relationships between moral commitment and moral ideals, self-reflection and intentional management of morally ambiguous personal qualities, and the ways that moral ideas and reflection shape moral emotions. Among other things, our case studies show how most of these moral leaders began adulthood not only with positive moral impulses, but also with moral impulses and emotions that had a darker side. For example, Nelson Mandela as a young man was fearless in defying authorities and prone to uncontrolled anger and recklessness that not only undermined constructive action, but also placed him and others at serious risk. As Mandela worked to advance his moral goals in the face of almost overwhelming challenges while in prison, he learned to modulate and harness his emotions so that his exceptional courage and power served a consistently disciplined purposefulness (Meredith, 1997).

Haidt and his colleagues (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2007) acknowledge that innate impulses and concerns are initially unformed to a significant extent and are shaped through experience. They stress the importance of cultural narratives as especially powerful in shaping individuals’ moral reactions, with the implication that adult morality results from the ways that people’s cultural and individual contexts mold their inborn moral intuitions or inclinations. But these essentially deterministic and relativist frameworks do not adequately take into account the degree to which individuals actively process the narratives they encounter. Exemplar samples are especially valuable for illuminating the ways that thoughtful and creative individuals analyze and evaluate their culture’s dominant narratives

and question the assumptions of narratives that reinforce injustice. Mandela not only saw through and opposed the dominant narrative of White superiority in South Africa, but he also abandoned the opposing Africanist narrative in favor of a multiracial approach.

For Mandela, this process began in childhood and adolescence and continued into and beyond middle age. Mandela grew up in a country that consciously and severely disempowered Black Africans, subjecting them to constant humiliation and injustice. But he also grew up aware that his family was descended from a line of tribal chieftains and, as a boy, he was fascinated by stories of native freedom fighters, whose powerful spirit he admired and tried to emulate. Mandela's sense of dignity and noble heritage, evident from adolescence onward, strengthened his capacity to resist White domination but also led him to take potentially disastrous risks.

A turning point for the young Mandela came when he took part in a protest while a student at the South African Native College at Fort Hare. Graduation from this elite institution assured success in any career then open to Africans. But Mandela gave up this secure future by refusing to back away from the protest when threatened with expulsion. Instead, Mandela and another student ran away to Johannesburg with no money, credentials, or contacts. This might have been a tale of dramatic downward mobility, but through extraordinary resourcefulness the young Mandela worked his way into a law practice through which he managed to complete his undergraduate and legal studies.

At that point, Mandela again chose not to pursue a relatively comfortable life as one of the country's few Black professionals, turning instead to legal and political resistance to apartheid. At each of the major turning points in his astonishing life, Mandela made choices that were driven by his developing ideals. Even when he didn't seem to be relying on deductive or calculative thinking to reach moral conclusions, the driving forces of his life were his particular formulations of the moral ideals of human dignity, freedom, fairness, social harmony, and individual responsibility. Mandela had begun to develop these ideals in adolescence and continued to refine them as his experience expanded, further deepening his understanding and commitment.

Others in our sample of seven moral leaders also showed early signs of promise, combined with notable turning points, which were driven to a great extent by their own reflection on and redefinition of their ideals. Eleanor Roosevelt's parents had both died when she was very young and she grew up a timid child, entirely lacking in self-confidence. After living for a while with a harsh grandmother who further undermined her confidence, Eleanor was sent to boarding school in the United Kingdom. This was a critical juncture for her. When the school's highly committed, thoughtful, and sophisticated headmistress, Madame Marie Souvestre, took her new student under her wing, Eleanor's transformation into one of the great feminist leaders of the 20th century began to unfold. Souvestre's confidence in Eleanor,

combined with the intellectual and moral guidance she provided, was critical in setting the adolescent girl on a new and, ultimately, remarkable life path.

Both formal and informal educational experiences were influential for the young Jane Addams as well, another in our group of seven moral leaders. When Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, she was known the world over for her pioneering social reform efforts at a time that the United States was undergoing massive industrialization and struggling to incorporate huge numbers of immigrants. She was a leader in campaigns to improve conditions for workers, protect free speech and other civil liberties, secure the rights of women, and foster world peace. Addams was a central figure in the great wave of social reforms that transformed American life during the first decades of the 20th century, a period that became known as the Progressive Era. She was co-founder of the best-known and most influential settlement house in American history, Hull House, and was also involved in the founding of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and several other important human rights organizations in the United States. Addams was a prolific writer, especially in the emerging field of applied sociology, and her work influenced and drew together many prominent intellectuals of her time, including John Dewey, the great educational philosopher.

Growing up in a family for which moral duty was a central value, Jane was a serious child and adolescent. She was a voracious reader, devouring books about moral heroism, women's history, religion, and moral philosophy. She also immersed herself in Charles Dickens's vividly humane portrayals of society's outcasts, acquiring from them her lasting desire to live among the poor and find ways to relieve their suffering. At college, Addams was inspired by a humanities teacher, Caroline Potter, whose courses she took in every one of her four years. According to Addams's biographer, Louise Knight, "Potter's entire curriculum was an intense and lengthy seminar on the heroic, and Jane was entranced" (Knight, 2010, p. 23).

Despite the inspiration she felt, Jane struggled to find her way. Like Eleanor Roosevelt, she had lost her mother when she was a child, and her father died when she was a young adult. Although she longed to do something worthwhile with her life, the death of her beloved father left Jane overcome with grief. Feeling weak and helpless, she despaired of ever finding something to which she could really commit herself, crying out, "How purposeless and without ambition I am!"

Jane saw no way out of her malaise, and the restrictive culture of her day offered no help. Women of her class were discouraged from pursuing careers or social causes beyond simple charity work. But, during a trip to Europe in which she was shocked by the squalor and suffering she saw, Jane came across a new approach to urban poverty in a settlement house in London called Toynbee Hall. This democratic Christian community, in which well educated people lived among the poor and worked to enhance

the lives of the poor and privileged alike, was the master idea that would lead her to the fruitful pathway that had so far eluded her, giving her a purpose and direction from which she never deviated.

The result was a life of exceptional moral creativity. In her long career, Addams developed and practiced new approaches to democracy based in solidarity across class, gender, and ethnic lines. In doing so, she not only renounced the standard roles and attitudes of women of her privileged station in the early 20th century United States, but she also radically redefined previously unquestioned moral ideals. Although Addams had grown up in a family that was dedicated to the ideal of benevolence, she came to see benevolence as a condescending, selfish, arrogant, anti-democratic ethic that needed to be set aside in favor of truly democratic community building. This conceptual reformulation of Addams's central moral ideal informed and was informed by her long-term efforts to respond to the massive industrialization and immigration that were disrupting the country and to advance civil rights, woman suffrage, peace, and equitable conditions for workers.

Critics of theories that emphasize the role of cognition in moral development portray moral thinking as post-hoc rationalization, and they interpret the relative infrequency of deliberate analysis in decision making as evidence for an intuitionist theory of morality. But a close look at the lives of recognized moral leaders reveals a more subtle and bidirectional process of moral reflection as it interacts with moral conduct and experience over time. This is not intellectualizing in a vacuum. It is an active, ongoing process of reflection about one's life and experiences, drawing on ideas, stories, images, and critical capacities, and it can lead to the creation and refinement of the person's moral ideals and understandings. Moral reflection of this kind can establish foundational ideas that strongly influence the actual choices a person makes. Over time, these foundational ideas become so engrained in the individual's way of seeing the world that they appear to operate automatically, almost like intuitive responses, and thus affect individuals' choices even when they need to be made quickly and under duress.

This developmental process of reflection on and reformulation of ideals can be supported by educational efforts that are designed to foster moral learning. When teachers and other adults stimulate young people's reflections about the kinds of persons they want to be and the kinds of lives they want to live, young people can acquire the will and the capacity to bring their conscious moral judgments to bear on their behavioral choices. This kind of education begins with the assumption that students are not passive recipients of socialization. They can benefit from support and guidance, and with such guidance they are capable of making their own moral meaning and their own moral choices.

The stories of our seven moral leaders illustrate the sense in which the perspective on human development that emerges from studies with

exemplar samples is, above all, a hopeful view. It is surely true, as the biological, social psychological, and economic lenses on humanity suggest, that many people are morally confused or driven to a large extent by self-interest, especially under situational pressures. But exemplar studies begin from the assumption that social scientists need to include the most mature in their samples if they are to understand the true scope of morality. These studies are based in a belief that all can aspire to more elevated selves, and they document the fact that many people do achieve this goal. This developmentally grounded hope forms the basis for educational programs that support the growth of integrity, clarity of thought and judgment, and lives informed by a positive sense of purpose. A determinedly descriptive approach is not adequate for a scientific understanding of morality, or for a popular understanding of this critically important dimension of human life. And an exclusively descriptive approach is seriously deficient as the basis for education and human improvement. As Narvaez (2006) has argued, moral education requires us to stake normative claims about what we believe is right and worthy of being passed on. Without some sense of what constitutes a more worthy and inspiring ideal, we cannot even select an exemplar sample, let alone learn from exemplars' lives in order to improve our own.

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