

# Admiration, Moral Knowledge and Transformative Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the role played by the emotion of admiration in formulating moral judgments. First, I discuss whether and when admiration is a reliable source of moral knowledge, or, on the contrary, it misleads the subject, leaving her prey to forms of uncritical devotion to unworthy objects of admiration. To do so, I try to elucidate which underlying theory of emotions best allows one to characterize admiration as a reliable source of moral knowledge. Second, I introduce the notion of transformative moral experience, understood as a subclass of transformative experiences (cf. Paul 2014), and I argue that it is precisely admiration that ensures the rationality of the choices made in such experiences. Finally, in light of this analysis, I show how admiration—together with the constellation of positive and negative emotions connected to the perception of moral exemplarity—acts as a central element for the maintenance of moral integrity. I defend, in particular, the idea that integrity should not be understood as mere coherence, nor as a static maintenance of the moral status quo, but as being firmly rooted in one’s own identity yet open to novelty (see Rees and Webber 2014; Cox, La Caze, and Levine 2014, 2017) and especially to the novelty represented by transformative moral experiences.

## 1. Admiration and moral knowledge

In recent times, admiration studies have been a particularly fertile research field, to the point that this might be said to be the “admiration moment.” A quick glance at the available moral-psychological literature on admiration confirms that the emotion is gaining popularity, with an increasing number of studies aimed at addressing it (e.g., Haidt 2003; Algoe and Haidt 2009; Immordino-Yang et al. 2009; van de Ven-Zeelenberg 2009; Immordino-Yang and Sylvan, 2010; van de Ven et al. 2011; Schindler et al. 2013; van de Ven et al. 2015). As

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largely shown by empirical studies on appraisal patterns of admiration, admiration is a response to the event of witnessing another's excellence (see Schindler et al. 2013, 95), accompanied by a causal attribution of such excellence to the other's intention.<sup>1</sup> From a philosophical perspective, Linda Zagzebski (2010, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) has been among the first to favor a restoration of admiration after a long neglect. In her recent works, Zagzebski argues against Aristotle's portrait of *zelos* in the *Rhetoric*,<sup>2</sup> where admiration is a pleasant other-praising emotion directed toward moral excellence, with contempt as its opposite. Following Kristjánsson (2006), she distinguishes between pleasant admiration, admiring envy, and spiteful envy. Pleasant admiration is defined as "a positive feeling that leads to emulation"; admiring envy is "a negative (painful) feeling that leads to emulation." Spiteful envy, finally, is taken to be "a negative (painful) feeling that leads to attempting to deprive the admired person of his admired features." By adopting such a distinction, Zagzebski challenges Haidt's (2003) distinction between elevation (directed toward non-self-beneficial moral excellence), gratitude (directed toward self-beneficial moral excellence), and admiration (directed toward natural talent). Also, she distinguishes between talent-oriented admiration and virtue-oriented admiration. The former, according to Zagzebski, targets natural talents, such as inborn intellectual or artistic excellence or physical strength (Zagzebski 2017, 38), and sees its object as non-imitable; the latter, on the other hand, is elicited by acquired excellences (i.e., by moral traits or other

<sup>1</sup> Admiration studies increasingly tend to characterize admiration as a globalist attitude—that is, as an attitude activated by a person as such, rather than by her actions. Like all affective attitudes, admiration can be seen as a "form of regard" or a "mode of seeing as" (Allais 2008; Mason 2003) whose intentional object is "somewhat more general than that of their corresponding emotion" (Ben-Ze'ev 2000, 82). However, unlike other affective attitudes, globalist attitudes, including admiration, "take whole persons as their object" (Bell 2011, 451). Thus, they are person-focused, rather than act-focused—that is, they "present the target, qua person, in a certain light" (Bell 2011, 452).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle never explicitly took admiration into account; however, in his *Rhetoric*, he analyzed *zelos*, emulation, which Zagzebski associates with admiration, and claimed that it is "a kind of distress at the apparent presence among others like him by nature, of things honored and possible for a person to acquire, [with the distress arising] not from the fact that another has them but that the emulator does not (thus emulation is a good thing and characteristic of good people, while envy is bad and characteristic of the bad; for the former [person], through emulation, is making an effort to attain good things for himself, while the latter, through envy, tries to prevent his neighbor from having them)" (Aristotle 2007, 146 [1388a29–38]).

dispositions whose possession requires effort and practice). Thus, she claims, virtue-oriented admiration, unlike talent-oriented admiration, considers its object as “imitably attractive.”<sup>3</sup>

These initial remarks should show that admiration is a multifaceted, commonly experienced emotion. We can equally admire a wide range of people at the same time. However, it is not the same to admire a sports hero, our favorite songwriter, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, or one of our friends’ courage, generosity, humility, or compassion. While the first two objects of admiration are admired for their natural talent or their acquired nonmoral skills, both the Nobel laureate and our virtuous friend are likely to elicit our *moral admiration*. In this paper, I will focus only on the latter kind of admiration in order to investigate its epistemic role. Unlike moral emotions that address violations of the moral order, such as disgust, guilt, or shame, admiration’s peculiar nature is to put a subject in touch with positive moral values per se. But how can we consider admiration as a reliable source of moral knowledge? Can we really trust it?

The first standard way to defend admiration as a reliable source of moral knowledge is via a perceptual theory of emotions (cf. Schroeter 2015).<sup>4</sup> Proposers of this kind of theory claim that to feel, for example, fear and sadness, one does not need to grasp the concepts of danger and loss in advance. The intentionality of the emotions cannot be reduced to a form of evaluative judgment that requires that one possess the relevant concepts in order to represent their content. Accordingly, admiration does not require any previous characterization of what a value is in order to be elicited by an exemplification of value. Its epistemic potential lies precisely in the fact that it grants the experiencing subject access to value without being in need of any previous knowledge of what a value is. From this perspective, a couple of advantages follow. First, it helps in making sense of the intentionality of emotions without neglecting their nature of being felt; second, and more importantly, perceptual theories can easily account for the idea that emotions can provide reasons for action or play a justificatory role and therefore be epistemically crucial.

<sup>3</sup> Zagzebski’s pioneering work, as well as her objections to Aristotle and Haidt, are admittedly in need of further theoretical and empirical support. Seminal studies addressing—directly or indirectly—her classifications have been recently appearing. See Immordino-Yang and Sylvan, 2010; Van de Ven et al., 2011; Schindler et al. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than a single unitary theory, perceptual theories represent a quite diverse family sharing a common idea that emotions can be assimilated to direct or indirect perceptions of values (De Sousa 1987; Goldie 2000; Tappolet 2000, 2016; Zagzebski 2003; Prinz 2004).

However, perceptual theories display several weaknesses that make them vulnerable to a fatal objection. By conflating emotions and perceptions, the perceptual analogy fails to make sense of a blatant phenomenological difference between the two, one that potentially undermines emotions' epistemic justificatory role. More specifically, emotions depend in important ways on their cognitive bases, such as perceptions, memory, imagination, and similar cognitive states, while perceptions are relatively independent in affording epistemic access to their objects. In short, while perceptions afford reasons, emotions require them; we are less disposed to ask someone, "Why do you see the table?" than to ask the same person, "Why are you angry?" This simple phenomenological difference, if taken seriously, easily shows that trusting emotions is more problematic than epistemically leaning on perceptions.

A good reply coming from a perceptualist perspective is represented by Zagzebski's account of conscientious self-reflection, developed in her 2012 *Epistemic Authority* and specifically applied to the case of admiration in her 2017 *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (144). There she defends the view that emotions, despite being in need of reasons, can be reasons in an important way, insofar as they survive a specific kind of reflection. According to her account, conscientiously reflecting on admiration implies evaluating it against two main standards: (i) the emotions of others one trusts; (ii) its consistency with other emotions one experiences and beliefs one holds.

At first glance, this is a promising line of defense. After all, it is rather intuitive that it could have been possible, for example, for admirers of Hitler in Nazi Germany to reflect on their admiration's inconsistency with some of their other emotions (e.g., admiration for other rival figures, compassion for the weak, anger about injustice) or with moral beliefs they held. However, this strategy leads to a conundrum. If the criterion against which conscientious reflection should evaluate the emotion of admiration itself has an emotional nature, the problem of verifying the emotion is merely postponed, rather than solved. If, on the other hand, reflection should measure admiration against non-emotional cognitive states, such as beliefs or previous non-emotionally grounded judgments, both the analogy between emotion and perception and emotions' justificatory role are seriously undermined. The notion of conscientious reflection, therefore, does not seem to offer adequate support to the crucial epistemic role perceptual theories wish to assign to emotions in general and to admiration in particular. Accordingly, a purely perceptual theory should be

dismissed in favor of an apparently weaker account of the emotions' justificatory role, which can nonetheless be better argued for.

Perceptual theories, as mentioned, have the advantage of highlighting that emotions allow us to access evaluative properties; however, it is perfectly possible to hold fast to this idea while at the same time accepting that they are non-self-justifying states. After all, the same holds true for perceptions too. Even in this case, perceptions are not sufficient in answering why-questions: it is always possible to ask someone why she thinks something is red, and we should take as unacceptable an answer to the effect that "it is red because I see it." However, this does not undermine the fact that, as Deonna and Teroni claim, "perceptual experiences provide defeasible justification for perceptual judgements" (2012, 57); accordingly, it is perfectly legitimate to maintain that "an emotion justifies the corresponding evaluative judgement in the absence of reasons to think it is incorrect" (*ibid.*).

A promising rival account is offered by the attitudinal theory of emotions. Within this perspective, "a justified emotion is based on (real or apparent) awareness of properties that, in the circumstances, [would] constitute an instance of the relevant evaluative property" (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 71). That is to say that, in Deonna and Teroni's words, "when one emotionally responds to these properties absent any reason to think the response is incorrect, one seems to be in a position to justifiably judge that these properties are exemplified and so to justifiably pass the corresponding evaluative judgement." To sum up: Being based on awareness of the relevant features of a given situation, emotions are *prima facie* reliable states. However, they are not sufficient as a source of justification for attributing evaluative properties to that situation. At the same time, in ordinary cases we have no good reasons to doubt the epistemic access emotions provide. On the one hand, as the perceptualist approach claims, a given emotion gives us a firsthand reason to attribute certain evaluative properties to the situation; on the other hand, as stressed by the attitudinal theory, emotions depend on their cognitive bases and thus their correctness and justification conditions can be controlled via reflection.

In what follows, I will propose to apply this view—slightly modified—to an analysis of the specific role of admiration in disclosing positive moral values, and I will defend admiration's relative sufficiency for providing good reasons to hold evaluative judgments. This will become particularly relevant when looking at those cases in which the awareness of the evaluative properties and the

corresponding emotional reaction(s) are all we have, as in the case of undergoing transformative experiences.

## 2. Admiration, prima facie normative reasons, and pro tanto moral judgments

The conclusion I draw from the discussion of perceptualism and attitudinal theory outlined so far is that moral emotions, although always capable of being controlled on the basis of their correctness with respect to their cognitive bases, in an important sense precede the evaluative and moral judgment and anticipate it emotionally. Therefore, I maintain that moral emotions not only serve as a motivating element (i.e., they not only provide *motivating-explanatory reasons*<sup>5</sup>) but afford prima facie *normative reasons* that ground pro tanto *moral judgments*. When encountering a manifestation of value, there is a first emotional appreciation that is legitimate to trust, as an evaluative attitude toward a specific intentional object, whose correctness at least initially there is no reason to doubt. To such appreciation, if necessary—for example, if demanded by others—the verification of the cognitive bases can follow, as, finally, can the proper moral judgment.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in the justificatory phase, it is not possible, I argue, to avoid making reference to non-emotional reasons; and yet the role of prima facie reasons for the moral judgment played by moral emotions does not lose its strength.

We can see this tripartite dynamic in what follows:

F1. I feel the emotion E for S. → I have a good prima facie reason to trust its being correct and justified.

F2. Non-emotional verification of the cognitive bases:

<sup>5</sup> For a distinction between motivating and normative reasons, I rely mainly on Dancy (2000).

<sup>6</sup> An obvious assumption of this paper is that the cognitive potentialities of emotions depend on some form of objectivism about evaluative properties. Many stances can be taken on the way evaluative properties are related to the natural ones, as well as on the naturalness and reality of moral properties. As for the relationship between evaluative and natural properties, the account I adopt here depicts it in terms of supervenience, claiming that evaluative properties supervene on the natural ones, while being *sui generis* and distinct from them (see Deonna and Teroni 2012, 50).

F2a. Does S really possess the moral property P that E attributes to her, or does she rather pretend to possess it? Does S really possess the nonmoral properties P supervenes upon? (*correctness*)

F2b. Do I have good reasons to think S is P? (justification)

F3. Justified moral judgment: S is or is not P.

Let us apply this general framework to a case in which admiration is elicited. We may imagine two colleagues, M and T, who are both applying for a prestigious grant, which would change the course of their careers. The chances of winning are extremely low. The deadline is about to expire when T meets M in the hallway of the department and realizes she is really worried about her application. So, he offers to send her his own project, so as to help her finish the draft. S is extremely touched by this offer, and this immediate appreciation takes the form of a feeling of admiration and gratitude, which she can (but not necessarily does) explicitly formulate:

F1. T is generous.

Later on, once back home, we may imagine that M talks about the episode with her best friend or partner, or that she starts thinking back to it, and begins to doubt the reliability of her admiration. It is only at this point that M embarks in a (non-emotional) verification of the cognitive bases of her own admiration, and asks herself:

F2. Is T really generous?

F2a. Does T really possess the generosity my admiration attributes to him, or does he rather pretend to possess it—for example, to show off? Does T really possess the nonmoral properties generosity supervenes upon, or does his action not justify the attribution of generosity (e.g., because he sent on purpose a wrong version of the project)? (*correctness*)

F2b. Do I have good reasons, given my knowledge of T, to think he is acting generously? (*justification*)

Once this verification is accomplished, S reaches the justified moral judgment:

F3. T is generous.

It should be noted, first, that the process that leads M to this judgment is started and motivated by her admiration; and second, that in the absence of elements that may cast doubt on it, the *prima facie* judgment supported by admiration, be it implicit or explicit, is held true and there is no reason to treat it suspiciously. Therefore, admiration proves to be an epistemically economic response since, although neither infallible nor self-founded, it provides quick access to value. Like any moral emotion, although always susceptible to being controlled on the basis of its correctness with respect to its cognitive bases, in an important sense it precedes the judgment, anticipating it emotionally.

In sum, we cannot take admiration or any other moral emotion as capable of autonomously justifying moral judgment without falling prey to the weaknesses and circularity of perceptual theories. Nevertheless, it is fair to claim that moral emotions provide *prima facie* reasons that enable one to get immediate access to the sphere of morality, trusting which is safe, as well as epistemically economic, until proven otherwise. In the case of admiration, such immediate access implies a positive attribution of a moral property, which is disclosed by the experience of being emotionally moved. Unlike other moral emotions, which signal the violation of a moral rule, admiration puts one in direct contact with positive values, or it even helps one realize something is a value in the first place. Thus, it can afford good reasons to believe that something one did not consider a value is in fact valuable. In what follows, I will argue that, in some cases, admiration may even prove to be the only available source of moral reasons of this kind.

### 3. The case of transformative experiences

Before proceeding with my argument and arguing that in some cases, as well as being a precious way to access moral knowledge, admiration turns out to be the only available one, I would like to note incidentally that, in this framework, admiration is not to be seen as isolated, but as linked to a broader and varied constellation of excellence-related emotions that can play a primary or supporting role in the discovery of value. Gratitude, as we have seen in the M-and-T example above, is the other-praising positive emotion that is likely to accompany admiration in cases when the admired action is beneficial to the



observer.<sup>7</sup> But negative emotions too—such as envy of the moral excellence of others, or guilt and shame—if properly understood, can represent a “negative path” to morality, putting the subject in contact with a moral standard in reference to which she feels inadequate. Setting the numerous instrumental arguments supporting this thesis aside, it is possible to defend the role of negative emotions related to the appreciation of moral excellence in an intrinsic way by claiming that, like the positive ones, they allow epistemic access to value. Envy, which in its malevolent degeneration would lead to the desire to deprive the other of the good that one lacks, can in itself represent a priceless incentive to perfect oneself (see, e.g., Ben-Ze’ev 1990, 2016; Protasi 2016, 2017); shame and guilt, if not experienced or inflicted as condemnations that humiliate the self or as attempts to conform it to a heteronomous morality, lead one to recognize and clarify one’s own value system (cf. Kekes 1988; Deonna, Rodogno and Teroni 2012; for a different view, see Fussi 2018). Experiencing shame or guilt can provide an immediate acknowledgment of having failed in an important area (see Vaccarezza and Niccoli 2018).

Having outlined the contours of admiration and its conditions of correctness and justification and having also briefly mentioned the role played by other positive and negative emotions, I would now like to show the decisive role that admiration can play in the very special case of so-called transformative experiences, which make it necessary to make “transformative choices.” L. A. Paul defines personally (rather than only epistemically) “transformative” as the experiences and choices that “change the experience of who one is” (Paul 2014, 17). An experience, that is, is transformative when it “teaches something new, which could not have been known before having the experience itself, and at the same time changes the person that one is” (ibid.). Such experiences and the choices they bring about, as Paul notes, pose serious problems for decision theory. In cases of standard choice, the best choice for a normatively rational agent is to perform the act with the highest expected value in light of the agent’s value attributions of the expected outcomes. But when there are transformative experiences at stake, attributing this value becomes impossible, and this in turn makes it impossible to be rationally justified in making the choice itself: how could someone attribute value to states of things that will have changed the self and its reasons in important ways? In these situations, the agent finds herself in a position of epistemic poverty, in which she knows little or nothing about what

<sup>7</sup> Unless one follows Haidt in conflating admiration for self-beneficial actions and gratitude.

her future self will be like, what her preferences will be, and what values she will assign to each.

Paul gives the paradigmatic (and paradoxical) example of a subject who is given the choice to become a vampire. This subject could count, we imagine, on the testimony of other people she esteems who have made this choice and strongly recommend it. But how can she know whether the reasons she as a vampire will assume conform to her moral self, and will reflect what she is today, considering that this choice will have transformed her own reasons from human reasons into vampire reasons? How can she, in this case, make a rational choice? A less paradoxical example is the choice of whether to become a parent—more specifically, how to choose without knowing firsthand how the transformative experience to which this choice will give rise will modify the set of reasons at one's disposal.

As can be seen, the problem posed by transformative experiences and transformative choices, which results from the epistemic poverty and the apparent absence of rational standards on the basis of which to make the choices, is that they seem to undermine the moral integrity of the subject. How can one make choices, in these contexts, without damaging one's own moral identity and failing to remain faithful to the core of one's moral self?

To address this issue more properly, it is useful to introduce a distinction within the class of transformative experiences. In Paul's account, it is a transformative choice (choosing to become a vampire or choosing to become a parent) that gives rise to a transformative experience. According to other accounts, such as Chang's, however, we should distinguish between *choice-based* and *event-based* transformative experiences, depending on whether the transformative choice causes or is caused by the transformative experience (Chang 2007). A subclass of the second class, I suggest, is what is relevant in the case of admiration and what I will analyze in what follows. My intuition is that in morally relevant event-based transformative choices, where an experience or event displaying moral values precedes the transformation, this very experience or event, by eliciting admiration and related moral emotions, offers a new, competing set of reasons, which replaces the former not at once, but in a gradual way. The fact that a moral transformative experience precedes the choice and elicits moral admiration provides the subject with *bridge-reasons*, meaning that admiration-based *prima facie* reasons bridge the gap between the agent's previous and following set of reasons for action. Contrary to cases of choice-based transformative experiences, in event-based moral transformative

experiences, experiencing admiration provides the agent with *prima facie* reasons to judge her target's actions as admirable and to act accordingly. Thus, moving from one set of reasons for action to another<sup>8</sup> is not a leap in the dark. As we have seen, fitting admiration, in synergy with other positive and negative moral emotions elicited by a transformative event or experience, provides good reasons to consider its object morally admirable, and therefore anticipates to the subject a new set of reasons on the basis of which to make the transformative choice. This, I argue, is precisely what preserves the moral integrity of the agent and her epistemic reasonableness in the absence of a conclusive and already well-defined normative standard.

Before arguing in favor of the possibility of maintaining integrity by virtue of the bridge-reasons offered by admiration, I would like to illustrate a case of moral transformative experience that I consider to be paradigmatic: moral conversion. I am thinking, in particular, about the moral conversion caused by encounters with exemplary individuals. In the encounter with holiness or moral exemplariness, admiration offers the subject a new series of *prima facie* reasons and beliefs that progressively replace the previous ones and ferry one from one set of reasons to another in a not-unreasonable and nontraumatic way. Let's imagine a rather simple example: S, who has always believed that career should come first, to the point of never seriously considering to entertain a stable love relationship or to engage too much in other activities in competition with work, has a certain disdain for M, a colleague of his who, once he has finished his working hours, instead of staying in the office overnight, goes home immediately. S considers M lazy, not ambitious—in a word, mediocre.

One night, however, S and M leave the office at the same time, and S discovers that, in fact, M does not go home, but to a shelter for minors, where he lends his help as a volunteer, making available for free his managerial skills to optimize the management of the organization. S, struck by an unexpected feeling of admiration, mixed with a vague shame and guilt for his completely selfish lifestyle, begins to spend more time with M, discovering with amazement how deeply their lifestyles diverge: M is part of a dense network of friends, to whom he is linked by intense, demanding, and supportive relationships; he has a family that he passionately dedicates himself to; and he spends much of his free

<sup>8</sup> I choose here not to take any stance on whether moral reasons can exist independently of any basis in a general principle, since deciding this issue lies well beyond the scope of the present paper. Thus, speaking of "set of reasons," as I am doing here, should be taken as neutral with respect to both options.

time in many volunteer activities without boasting, so much so that his colleagues completely ignore it. Gradually, S feels inclined to appreciate M's lifestyle and to look at it not only with admiration, shame, and guilt, but also with envy. Thoughts like the following begin to flash: "All in all, my life is lonely and a bit selfish"; "Looking at M's life, I feel alone"; "What will I do when I reach the pinnacle of success and I have no one with whom to share it?"

In such a situation, presenting a choice between self-absorption on the one hand and altruism and relational goods on the other, S's reasons for action undergo a progressive transformation. However, this is not to claim that suddenly a transformation occurs between (1) and (2):

- (1) "The fact that  $\varphi$ -ing maximizes S's career prospects is a reason for S to  $\varphi$ ."<sup>9</sup>
- (2) "The fact that  $\varphi$ -ing promotes altruism and meaningful relations is a reason for S to  $\varphi$ ."

Rather, S's admiration provides him with a bridge-normative reason intermediate between (1) and (2):

BNR: "The fact that M  $\varphi$ s and M is admirable is a pro tanto reason for S to  $\varphi$ ."

In other words, in the process of moving from the first to the second set of reasons, or of changing one's priorities so as to privilege the second over the first as a source of normative reasons<sup>10</sup>, there is a gap of rationality, which admiration is able to fill, albeit not in a definitive or self-founding way. The discovery of the non-emotional reasons that support the validity of this prima facie affective judgment represents a further step, in which S's set of reasons has already been transformed. If S tried to justify his admiration in this transformative phase, he would probably be incapable of producing conclusive arguments for or against it since he is in a transitional phase in which his non-emotionally formulated judgments and beliefs are contradictory. The affective judgment issued by admiration, however, is a good bridge, thanks to which S can transition from one set of reasons, judgments, and beliefs to another without falling into irrationality. This is not to say that even-based transformative experiences, and in particular those having moral significance, should be

<sup>9</sup> For the structure of reason-sentences, see Raz (1999, 21–33).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making me realize that both descriptions fit my example.

interpreted as always being gradual. Rather, what I argue is that, be it sudden or gradual, a change in endorsing one set of reasons over a competing one within a transformative scenario owes its rationality to the emotionally-provided *pro tanto* reasons which allow the change itself. There is a logical, rather than chronological, step to be taken in order to account for a transformation in one's source of normative reasons, which would be otherwise unjustified and devoid of rational support.

Therefore, there is at least one case, that of moral event-based transformative experiences, in which not only admiration but also other relevant moral emotions are all we have to progress morally in a non-irrational manner, as they provide the only set of reasons available. They are, it is true, *prima facie* reasons that will be tested on the basis of a verification currently unavailable and that will become available only when the transformation will be over. And yet they are all we have keeping us from falling prey to irrationality, on the one hand, and, on the other, to moral stasis, or the impossibility of any significant change.

#### 4. Admiration, integrity, and moral progress

We can ask at this point: what about the integrity of *S* in this transformation? First, it is good to define what I mean by integrity. Various authoritative readings conceive it in a purely formal way (see Williams 1981), such as self-integration (the possession of a coherent life plan that one's actual self rationally supports and that the future self would endorse; see Frankfurt 1987) or as the possession of principles to which one undertakes to give rational assent as one does to categorical imperatives (see, e.g., Korsgaard 2009). The view I support here, however, sees integrity as a virtuous cluster that includes the possibility of disintegration and change. According to a view of integrity as a virtuous cluster, the core that makes it recognizable is a commitment to "getting it morally right," or, better, to "take one's own life seriously," an attitude that brings the person of integrity to balance conservation and perfectibility by means of a constellation of connected traits oriented toward coherence with oneself and the maintenance of the commitments undertaken, but at the same time to balance, on the one hand, conservation and respect for one's previous attitudes, and, on the other hand, the acceptance of one's fallibility and perfectibility, acceptance that opens the door to their rational revision.

So understood, integrity implies the ability to respond to all the relevant moral reasons to which one has access and to take into account the decisions already taken in the past (cf. Rees and Webber 2014). This means, as

noted by Rees and Webber, having *prima facie* respect for our habitual attitudes, which are supposed to embody and convey past decisions, taken for good reasons and crystallized over time, and which protect us from the unrealistic scenario of having to deliberate at length upon every choice, to weigh every reason; at the same time, integrity requires a proper balance between this respect (which represents, so to speak, the pole of conservation), awareness of our fallibility and therefore of the impossibility of weighing our reasons in an exact manner, and considerations coming from the novelty of the present situation. Furthermore, it requires the honesty to assess whether one's own system of beliefs and attitudes is at least coherent and noncontradictory, and, if it is not, the willingness to correct it. Therefore, integrity may require, under certain circumstances, abandoning a moral commitment or a value considered to be profound and essential (the pole of progress): contrary to what is implicit in a merely formal view, the person of integrity is not the one that refuses to revise her deepest convictions, but the one that, on the contrary, is willing to do so if she suspects they are rooted in a moral error. In a word, as well summarized by Reese and Webber, integrity can require disintegration.

This is why I integrate in this vision the fundamental role, for integrity so understood, played by admiration in the case of moral transformative experiences, which are precisely a case in which the commitment to take one's own life seriously seems to require disintegration. As argued by Cox, La Caze, and Levine (2017), integrity is a "master virtue"—that is, a sort of cardinal, or main, virtue. It is a complex trait that mediates between different excesses: As one type of threat, there are traits and behaviors, such as unpredictability, weakness of will, self-deception, deliberate ignorance, hypocrisy, indifference, and falsehood, that make it impossible to identify stable values that give the self a solid structure. An opposite threat to integrity is represented by those traits that tend to maintain the status quo at any cost, such as arrogance, dogmatism, fanaticism, bigotry, and rigidity, even when a change would be morally necessary. They prevent the agent from being critical in the face of one's desires, commitments, goals, and moral values, and from admitting that, as circumstances change, one's behavior must also change. We may think for example of the arrogance of those who escape from a constructive debate on a particular question because they are excessively convinced of their own reasons, thus precluding themselves from seeing that they are overwhelmed by other, more stringent ones; or, again, we may think of certain forms of religious and dogmatic fanaticism, deafness to the demands of dialogue and to those of the

historical-cultural context that requires a revision. In similar cases, contrary to what a purely formal view would suggest, integrity is not guaranteed by the defense of the status quo, but by willingness to change and revise one's own beliefs.

If integrity, in the sense that I support, moves along the thin border between the need for fidelity to oneself and the equally pressing urgency to take one's own life seriously, it is easy to see that transformative experiences and choices are a decisive point for the integrity of the self. They seem to promise that virtuous disintegration that does not condemn the agent to moral stagnation or to mere coherence with herself. And we have seen how moral admiration, in this process, can act as the only, or sovereign, bridge that takes the agent from the old to the new self so that she remains at the mercy of neither stasis nor lack of reasons. Admiration, then, in inducing moral conversion, not only does not undermine integrity, but promotes it. It is, so to speak, its sovereign instrument.

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