

“*Sana quippe ratio etiam exemplis anteponenda est:*” *Exempla, ratio*, and reforming moral education in Seneca the Younger and Augustine of Hippo

In book 1 of *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine drastically reinterprets three of the most well-known Roman *exempla*: Lucretia, Cato, and Regulus. By thus engaging — even subverting — an established interpretation tradition of Roman *exempla*, Augustine draws the role of *exempla* in moral education into question. Do *exempla* of themselves suffice to bring about right emulation? How should an *exemplum* be interpreted to inspire its hearers toward proper understanding and action?

Augustine does not merely propound a rereading of prominent Roman *exempla*, however. Both in his choice of *exempla* and his discussion of suicide, Augustine engages the thought of Seneca the Younger, countering Seneca’s own teachings even as he adopts an approach to *exempla* which is similar to Seneca’s Stoic exemplary method. In the cases of Regulus and Cato, Augustine inverts *exempla* which are especially beloved by Seneca; in his critique of Lucretia’s suicide, Augustine gives a response to one of Seneca’s signature interests. While the moral lessons to be drawn from these well-known *exempla* might seem already settled, Augustine’s ordering of *ratio* and *exempla* allows him to fundamentally re-evaluate the *exempla* and their moral use for his Christian audience.

For Seneca, there is a link between *exempla* and *praecepta* or *admonitio*. In each case, a specific instance of virtue “*advertit...excitat...memoriam continet nec patitur elabi*” (*epist.* 92.25). Good *exempla* are like *praecepta* because both direct the beholder to virtue: “*aeque praecepta bona, si saepe tecum sint, profutura quam bona exempla*” (*epist.* 94.42). What sets *exempla* apart, however, is the immediacy of the impression in moral formation they provide — “*longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla*” (*epist.* 6.5). Like *praecepta*, which “*sic quomodo iurisconsultorum valent responsa, etiam si ratio non redditur*” (*epist.* 94.27), *exempla* offer their observers a path towards virtue which is evident, even without calculation.

Or is it so evident — and can this path lead astray? In Augustine’s view, “*sana quippe ratio etiam exemplis anteponenda est*” (*civ. Dei* 1.19). Augustine orders *ratio* before *exempla*: the moral commendations inherent in *exempla* cannot merely be taken at face value. The *exempla* themselves, then, must instead be subjected to calculation and reasoning before being admitted as stimuli to proper action.

Through this ordering, Augustine appropriates Seneca’s theory of *exempla* in moral education to undermine Seneca’s thoughts on those very same *exempla*. Seneca’s use of exemplarity replaced the opinions of “the crowd” or the larger Roman community with the “Stoic ‘good man’” as the “source of the gaze” which evaluates the actions of the *proficiens*, thus allowing an *exemplum* to serve as a “*praeceptor*” who guides toward virtue by offering itself as a rule (Roller 2018). Augustine, however, places *ratio* as a rule to which *exempla* must conform if they are to prove profitable for moral education.

Thus the role of a Senecan *praeceptor* who judges the worthiness of *exempla* to be emulated can instead be fulfilled by *ratio*, which deems examples from the past “*tanto digniora...imitatione quanto excellentiora pietate*” (*civ. Dei* 1.19). This *ratio* does not stand alone, but is instead also tied to an understanding of God as a judge of actions and *praeceptor*. For Augustine, truly virtuous people — who Seneca claims were “*nati...in exemplar*” (*De prov.* 6.1) — do not seek to display “*ad oculos hominum testem mentis*” like Lucretia, but rather have a “*testimonium conscientiae...coram oculis Dei sui*” (*civ. Dei* 1.19).

“Roman exemplarity is both more open than one might suppose to interpretation and initiative from its audience and more profound in its moral purchase” (Langlands 2018). Both Seneca and Augustine demonstrate the breadth of the reinterpretation which Roman *exempla* are able to undergo in how they relate *exempla* to moral education. By ordering *ratio* and *exempla*, Augustine sets up a framework to provide a critique of Seneca’s ethics by addressing and reinterpreting Cato and Regulus and by reframing the *exemplum* of Lucretia. This treatment of *exempla* retains their capacity to swiftly inspire *proficientes* toward virtue by providing immediately

apprehensible models of right action, yet ultimately reshapes their status and use in moral education by placing *ratio* before them.

Works Cited

Langlands, Rebecca. *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Roller, Matthew B. *Models from the Past in Roman Culture: A World of Exempla*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2018.