

# The Self and Its Models

*by Juliette Chemillier*

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**We construct ourselves through the models that we choose for ourselves or those that are constantly produced by society. Nassim El Kabli's book unpacks the various dimensions of the relationship with the other by which the singular self comes into being.**

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*A review of: Nassim El Kabli, *Soi-même par un autre, Figures d'exemplarité, figures d'exemple*, Paris, Éditions Mimésis, 2021, 220 p., 18 €.*

Nassim El Kabli's book proposes a "desmology," a term borrowed from Dimitri El Murr's work on Plato's notion of the bond (*desmos*), or more simply, a theory of subjectivity whereby the subject is conceived from the perspective of its links to others. Against the classical conception of the subject which obscures the role of the other in the construction of identity, against the mythology of the self-made man, and against a liberal conception that considers the subject through the notion of individuality, El Kabli defends the thesis that our identity is constructed through others that serve as our models: "There is no self except through the other" (p. 23). We internalize the other, it makes us act, we seek to be like it."

The analysis is built around two modalities of the relationship with the other: socially established "*exemplary models*," on the one hand, and "*role models*" chosen subjectively without any social pressure, on the other. Can these figures be situated in the field of morality? The author aims to show that although some role model relationships are alienating—as in the case of the lookalike who loves his model narcissistically while renouncing his own identity—and although some exemplary models are overwhelming—such as the worker Stakhanov, who was hailed as a hero

in the Soviet mines to increase economic output by 10% at the cost of making his colleagues feel guilty—not all models are to be rejected.

The book is not intended as a contribution to the history of philosophy, but as an exploration of our ordinary experiences that invites us to rethink the categories of self and other. From the outset, the author distances himself from the interactionism of Erwin Goffman, for whom the subject defines itself in relation *with* another. According to El Kabli, interactionism contents itself with tracing how the subject adapts to others, which presupposes that the subject is already constituted in its identity. He proposes instead to examine how the subject defines itself *through* the other.

## From *Mimesis* to *Homoiôsis*

The recourse to imitation is not self-evident in moral matters. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant dismisses this possibility out of hand: Morality cannot be derived from examples. As El Kabli points out, in Kantian logic, morality lies in intention. Models for action are not, strictly speaking, models of morality, since an action may well conform with duty outwardly while being intentionally immoral. What is more, for Kant, to imitate the other is to defer to him in deciding what is good; it is to remain heteronomous, whereas morality is a matter of autonomy.

Yet, what exactly is meant by the notions of exemplary models and role models?

To act in an exemplary manner is to act in a way that is morally or socially expected: it does not usually involve a single action, but a set of actions, and it seldom entails an exceptional action, which is, by definition, inimitable. The author presents several cases of *exemplary models* while stressing the difficulty of providing a unified concept. The model child, who displays adult seriousness at an early age, meets society's expectations, but this conception implies that the child is an incomplete being. The relationship between master and disciple might seem more enlightening; however, not all masters are consensually regarded as exemplary—Socrates, for instance, was accused by Athens of corrupting the young. Lastly, the leader stands out as the ultimate exemplary model, yet this is not a moral model since the leader's exemplarity relies on his charisma and ability to command.

To be a model for others is to be worthy of imitation. *Role models* are a matter of choice. Models must by definition be surpassed, and we choose them for the qualities we lack in order to become like others. There is necessarily an asymmetry since one

sees a model in the other, though the gap is reduced when one comes closer to it. The role model is nevertheless within our reach, unlike the hero whose supererogatory actions are beyond our capabilities—such as Aristides Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese consul in Bordeaux in 1940, who refused to apply Circular 14 of November 11, 1939 (forbidding diplomats from granting visas to Jews), and who lost his career and his health because of his actions. Role models can even be banal. Kim Kardashian is described by the author as a modern Bovary; she is passive and mediocre and yet she is taken as a model.

The interest of El Kabli's analysis lies in the centrality it gives to a singular form of imitation, *homoiôsis*, a Greek term that literally means image or similitude. In certain cases, the chosen model can be unsurpassable: The role model relationship then pertains less to mimetic logic than to *homoiôsis*. The latter notion led Plato to develop a reflection (Laws, 716c)—later taken up by the Neoplatonists until Marsilio Ficino—on the need to make oneself as similar as possible to God (*homoiôsis theô*), for it is He who is the measure of all things, not man as Protagoras maintained. God can be a model, not in the sense that one would strive to equal Him, which is impossible, but because man is essentially man by virtue of his soul and because there is a divine part in man, notably the intellect. The idea of a similarity between man and God is also found in Aristotle's writings, but it is not linked to the prospect of the soul's salvation as it is in Plato's (imitation of the divine is therefore not a prerequisite for access to eternal life). For Aristotle, man must immortalize himself through contemplation, and he must avoid thinking only human thoughts (*Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7, 1177b-1179a). To make ourselves similar to the divinity is to live in accordance with the best in us, to be virtuous (which God does not have to do). According to El Kabli's interpretation, this accomplishment of man's divine part cannot occur in isolation, since participation in the city is essential to man (which further differentiates him from God). Yet, this accomplishment presupposes an exemplary life in the city: It is through collective practice that man immortalizes himself.

*Homoiôsis* is not *mimesis*, a reproduction of the same; it makes us act by virtue of an internal and not an external principle. This concept, which is exploited throughout the book, allows to broaden the scope of imitation in moral matters (we can imitate heroes whose actions are beyond our reach) and to think of a form of imitation that does not alienate subjectivity (we can imitate others while remaining ourselves). The author provides multiple examples. Thus, the ancient sage can take another sage as his model, but he does not seek to imitate him *stricto sensu*; rather, he wonders what the other would do in his place. Similarly, when Pascal exhorts his reader to relive what

happened to Christ, he is not promoting imitation of the divine, which is unthinkable; rather, he is advocating a life away from concupiscence, a life under the guidance of Christ. This, observes El Kabli, constitutes *homoiôsis*.

## Imitation as Emancipation

Who should be taken as a model, for what purpose, and when? Under what conditions can a model play a positive role in the field of morality?

A heroic deed is moral: it aims for the good and produces the good spontaneously (from this perspective, firemen or policemen who act on orders in accordance with their training are not heroes). It cannot be performed by an ordinary man, which is what gives it visibility: this was the case, for instance, with the rescue of a child hanging from a balcony by Mamadou Gassana, an undocumented Malian migrant, who, listening only to his heart, climbed the building on May 26, 2018. Literature and art are full of stories of heroic deeds that produce identification effects and contribute to our moral development. By identifying with the hero, the ordinary man does not necessarily claim to reproduce his action, but to espouse his state of mind. Faced with such examples, he wonders what he would do on such and such an occasion. This indeed is *homoiôsis*.

In *The two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson develops a conception of the hero that accounts for the internalization of morality through contact with great men who inspire the desire to be like them. Bergson distinguishes between “social morality,” on the one hand, and “absolute morality,” a higher form of morality based on aspiration, on the other. Absolute morality is less restrictive than social morality, which is dependent on a group; it is also more effective because it is embodied in a hero who inspires us. Every man is driven to follow the impetus of the Bergsonian hero, who provides an exemplary model for those he inspires. According to El Kabli, Bergson’s originality lies in showing that moral action is never *causa sui*: in the case of the hero, action is impelled by a vital impetus, while in the case of the ordinary man, it is inspired by the imitated model.

Reading Montaigne allows us to get to the heart of the *role model relationship* that unites the subject with the models it chooses for itself. Montaigne describes his friendship with La Boétie as a fulfillment achieved through the other, beyond all rationality (“Because it was him, because it was me,” *The Essays*, I, 28). The proximity between this fusional friendship, in which each partner can only be truly himself through the other, and the role model relationship enables El Kabli to highlight

significant differences between these two types of bonds. First, we can take as role models people whom we have never met—for instance, celebrities. Likewise, the model can continue to produce its effects even after it has ceased to exist, whereas for Montaigne the death of his friend results in a symbolic death. The friends' temporalities merge into a common temporality, that of exchange; Montaigne and La Boétie form a single soul with two bodies. By contrast, in the role model relationship, the model appears to the imitator as a constituted, distinct, and higher figure that ought to be reached, without this leading to the formation of a third element. The role model relationship can thus be characterized as a program, which the author sums up in the following phrase: "Because it is him, it will be me" (p. 164).

## Education Through Imitation: Nature as a Model

How can one define the conditions for good practice of imitation? One might be surprised to find in the book a reference to Rousseau, with whom the author claims an affinity, considering how much Rousseau distrusted models.

El Kabli highlights this distrust: Rousseau repeatedly countered social conformism with the conformity of each individual to his own nature. Thus, in *Emile or On Education*, Rousseau advises the tutor in charge of little Emile's education not to impose anything external on him. The child must develop at his own pace, and the experience of things must take precedence over that of language and theoretical learning. The tutor is not the one who instructs the child, but the one who guides him. He sets the course and ensures that learning takes place at the right moment. In this case, exemplarity takes on a radically new meaning: The tutor is no more exemplary than Emile, there are as many models as there are individuals, and to be exemplary is to coincide with oneself.

Yet, while Rousseau generally rejects imitation as a cloak that produces bad habits (such as the comedian's habit of not being oneself) or enables one to "deceive others" (p. 188), he recognizes that it has virtues: "At an age when the heart does not yet feel anything, you must make children copy the deeds you wish to grow into habits" (*Emile or On Education*, quoted on p. 178). The intention to imitate must come from the child and only that which is natural is worthy of imitation, provided that the effects of the action are good (imitation is not mere reproduction, as Rousseau illustrates with the example of metallurgy, an imitation of the natural phenomenon of

the volcano, which is far more common). In *Emile*, Rousseau offers a subtle analysis of the mastery of educational time. Thus, it takes time for the child to understand the meaning of the gift; at first, he only gives things he does not need or for which he expects something in return. At that stage, notes Rousseau, he is not doing evil, but he is not, strictly speaking, doing good; encouraging him to imitate adults would be factitious. However, it is useful to lead by example, to let him observe how to conduct oneself without asking him to reproduce the action immediately. El Kabli identifies in Rousseau a “maieutics of virtue” (p. 175), an “aesthetics of the moral gesture in which clumsiness prevails over perfect execution” (p. 188). The beauty of the moral act comes from feelings and not from the perfection of imitation, which is limited to the exterior and is therefore but a cloak.

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau invites his readers to compare themselves with him, challenging them to examine whether they consider themselves better than him, while at the same time claiming that his singularity makes him inimitable: Here, the conception of exemplarity is taken to the limit, as El Kabli makes clear. Exemplarity no longer has mimetic value; it is a celebration of authenticity. It is because he is inimitable that Rousseau is exemplary. It follows from this that preserving the child’s authenticity is precisely what the educator must have in mind.

*Exemplary models* and *role models* nourish our inner life: we identify with others, we want to be like them, and such imitation shapes our identity. It is true that exemplarity can be oppressive, as in the case of the Chinese social rating system that punishes bad behavior. It is also true that role models can be alienating, as in the case of influencers. Recourse to one or more *role models* nevertheless allows the subject to be born anew, since choosing a model other than the parental model makes it possible to abstract oneself from a family enclave that fosters determinisms.

While the title of El Kabli’s work is inspired by Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another*, no reference to the philosopher can be found in the book. Nevertheless, El Kabli’s reflection echoes the notion of narrative identity developed by Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, whereby each individual is constituted through a constantly renewed self-narrative in which role models and exemplary models have their rightful place.

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