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Résumé de l'article

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# *The Hazards of Role Modelling for the Education of Moral and/or Virtuous Character*

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*In contrast to both behaviourist and cognitive approaches to moral development, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has had recent fairly distinctive impact on thought about the practice of moral education. On this view, insofar as moral development is a matter of the cultivation of moral virtues, and virtues are basically qualities of character conducive to good or admirable conduct, virtue formation is reducible neither to behaviour training nor to (mere) intellectual acquaintance with knowledge or principles, and requires essentially* practical *initiation into the distinctive (Aristotelian) moral wisdom of* phronesis. *In turn, such focus on the cultivation of practical wisdom has led to large emphasis on the contribution of moral exemplars and role modelling for the moral education of (particularly) young people. This paper argues that such emphasis is seriously overstated, if not wholly misplaced, and that role modelling and exemplification can have only a secondary place at best in any reputable moral educational project or program.*

**Keywords**: virtue; moral character; practical wisdom; role modelling; exemplification.

## Virtue Ethics, Moral Character and Role Modelling

It is likely that moral education or instruction of young people – some initiation into locally if not more generally acceptable forms of personal and interpersonal human association and conduct – has ever been a major concern and priority to all human societies and cultures. From earliest times, such moral formation will have taken the form of basic (doubtless often coercive) behavioural discipline as well as of more "cognitive" exposure to the morally or spiritually inspired religious or other myths, legends, and narratives of human communities. Indeed, the emergence of various literary forms in earlier (notably Greek and Roman) and later (European and wider) human civilization undoubtedly contributed to the significant cultivation of moral sensibilities, initially of literate classes and later – with wider access to common schooling – of the general public. To be sure, the modern Western European invention of the serious fictional novel is especially significant here, since – while long a source of popular entertainment before the advent of cinema, television, and information technology – it has ever been a potent source of largely secular insight into the moral and spiritual human condition, and bygone literature from the eighteenth century onwards is still much esteemed for this purpose. To be sure, much valuable academic work has been devoted in recent years to exploring the moral educational value and potential of past and present fiction and other literature, as well as of such other art forms as cinema, painting, and music. (While the literature is extensive, see, for example, Murdoch 1959; Nussbaum 1990; McDonough 1995; Carr 2005, 2022; Carr and Harrison 2015; Carroll 2020.)

That said, over the course of the last century, reflection on moral education clearly turned in a more theoretical or, more precisely, "scientific" direction. In the early twentieth century, so-called learning theorists (such as J. B. Watson, E. L. Thorndike, and B. F. Skinner) supposed that empirical study of (largely) habituated human and non-human behaviour showed the way to efficient behavioural

conditioning of moral or other desirable conduct, without much regard to any "inner" or cognitive determinants of such behaviour. This perspective was generally resisted in later attention by cognitive psychologists to the rational constitution and structure of human agency, which in due course led to the development of (essentially deontological) accounts of moral conduct as (at least ideally) respect for and observance of universal principles of mutual regard and respect (see, notably, Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1984). All the same, while cognitive theories of moral development held sway for much of the second half of the century, these were in turn resisted in the name of a (largely North American) turn towards character education for which such development of rational principles seemed insufficient (and perhaps not even necessary) for the actual practice of moral conduct (see, for example, Lickona 1991, 2004; Ryan and Bohlin 2003). However, in the light of a significant late-twentieth-century revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, a new perspective on moral education as essentially the practical cultivation of good character has lately emerged as a professedly more promising theoretical underpinning for moral education (see, for example, Carr 2012; Carr and Steutel 1999; Kristjansson 2007, 2015; Harrison and Walker 2018).

In brief, while virtue-ethical moral educationalists reject the basically deontological account of moral reasoning of postwar cognitive psychologists, they regard the later (American) conception of moral character deficient by virtue of its failure to provide an alternative satisfactory account of the all-important role of reason in genuine moral life. For this, they turn to the more psychologically complex capacity for context-sensitive deliberation provided by Aristotle's *phronesis*, or practical wisdom: for virtue ethicists, *phronesis* is the rational lynchpin – though crucially implicated in the refinement of affect – of good or virtuous character. That said, virtue ethics seems closer to psychological character education in taking moral life as better appreciated by closer empirical attention to the actual practical consequences of human association and conduct – to what people actually do in the name of good conduct – than from the philosophical armchair. (Indeed, this may have been the core of Aristotle's objection to the moral theory of Plato.) In this light, virtue-ethical moral educationalists have sought greater rapprochement or collaboration with (especially "positive") psychologists and other social scientists (on this, see Kristjansson 2013) for greater clarity concerning "what works" (as it were) with regard to the actual practical cultivation of qualities of good character in such everyday contexts of human association and conduct as professional ethics – especially in such fields as medicine and nursing, law, policing, school-teaching and commerce – as well as moral education in general (see, for example, contributions to Snow 2014; Walker 2009; Carr 2018).

Of particular present concern, however, is that such general virtue-ethical emphasis on the practical has revived attention to some traditional focus on role modelling – of parents, teachers, and others – as a key mechanism for moral learning or education, and to advocation of such personal exemplification as a deliberate moral educational strategy. To be sure, much in line with common experience, we need not here doubt that parents and teachers have often been successful in the morally beneficial formation of young people via some character example and that children are likely to be (and often are) the worse for its absence. Still, irrespective of this, it might be asked: first, whether we *should* endorse any efforts towards such moral influence as a matter, as it were, of *deliberate* educational principle or policy; and second, whether the true interests of moral education are best served by this means. Indeed, these questions are pressing insofar as such moral exemplification now seems to be a major item on the agenda of latter-day neo-Aristotelian virtue educationalists (for example, Kristjansson 2006; Sanderse 2013; Vos 2018; Croce 2019; Osman 2019). Moreover, this virtue-ethical trend has also been reinforced by a recent wider philosophical focus (on which, more later) on "admiration" (see, especially, Zagzebski 2010, 3013) as a crucial psychological mechanism of human moral influence and formation. On this view, it would seem that the main means by which we may come to learn what is morally significant in human affairs is via the good example of those we have come to admire, precisely for their impressive qualities of character. Still, it is the main purpose of this paper to examine and return negative answers to both of the above questions.

## Problems of virtuous character exemplification

To be sure, recent ethical attention to good or virtuous character in contexts of professional or general education may seem to make much sound practical sense. First, if we want to improve the moral practice and conduct of doctors, nurses, teachers, business managers, or police officers – and one has only to turn to the daily news to appreciate that some moral reform in these professional directions would not go amiss – it might seem that assisting such agents to a more effective cultivation and exercise of such character traits as wisdom, temperance, courage, and fair dealing offers a promising route to such progress. Second, if such professional practices are – no less than wider moral association and conduct – fields of complex personal and interpersonal agency of serious potential for the health and welfare of others, then they might precisely call for that context-sensitive deliberation and judgement associated with the Aristotelian practical wisdom of *phronesis*. Indeed, it is a fairly common virtue-ethical complaint about traditional codes of professional ethics that they all too often take the form of highly abstract or general codes of conduct that effectively preclude and/or discourage the exercise of discriminating professional initiative and judgement in those all-too-frequent cases to which abstract or general rules do not clearly apply or fit. (On this, see various contributions to Carr 2018.) However, it is also said in favour of virtue-ethical approaches to practice – with particular reference to such fields as school teaching, religious ministry, and/or civic leadership – that such public services have some responsibility for improving or educating the characters of those they aim to serve. On this view, the cultivation of good or virtuous character is of prime importance in some occupations not only because it serves to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of professional practitioners themselves, but because it appears to be a significant responsibility of good schoolteachers, religious clergy, and/or political leaders to set a guiding moral *example* to those they teach, minister, or otherwise serve.

Of course, any such case for professional example is liable to be contested or, at any rate, to seem more plausible in some contexts than others. It may seem compelling enough in the case of priests or other religious ministers, insofar as moral lapses (such as sexual misconduct, alcohol abuse, or financial dishonesty) on the part of members of the clergy are evidently at odds with religious doctrine and practising what is preached. That said, one might also expect the general run of churchgoers to profess some prior commitment to church teaching and to be thereby already resistant to the potential influence of this or that bad pastoral apple. On the other hand, a case for moral exemplification on the part of schoolteachers – perhaps especially in faith schools – seems fairly compelling, though a large consideration might here be the age of pupils being taught. Generally, indeed, efforts by teachers to influence pupil conduct for greater moral good might be more effective – and perhaps more justified – at the earlier stages of primary and (pre-16) secondary schooling than at the later (especially post-16) stages of preparation for vocational or university education. (On this, see Carr 2017.) Moreover, while some might say that such moral or character formation ought never to be any part of the business of teachers – which should be strictly confined to instruction in this or that academic or practical discipline – it seems hard to deny that some moral character shaping by teachers, as by parents, *is* required at earlier years of upbringing in the school or home. What, then, of civic or political leadership? Again, one might here anticipate some general resistance to any claim that politicians, not least in liberal democracies, could or should assume the role of character educators of their (largely adult) constituents. Still, from evidence of past and more recent history, such influence is clearly something that past political leaders and demagogues have all too often sought to exercise, with some success, albeit no less often with lamentable consequences.

At all events, if morality is largely if not wholly the cultivation of virtue – and virtue in turn is a matter of good character as displayed in various practical contexts and circumstances – then it might seem to follow that the most effective means of initiation into moral life and conduct is via attention to the good (public) example of others. In that case, it would appear that those charged with responsibility for the conduct of others should try to do as they would have others do, in the hope that others will do likewise. However, such argument is questionable and certainly requires some distinctions. In the first place, even if these often coincide (and they may not), it seems advisable to distinguish genuine moral virtue from good conduct performed for the proper execution of this or that professional role, such as

teaching. (For some useful exploration of the distinction between what he calls "existential" and "role" moral exemplification, see Vos 2018.) To be sure, any and all efforts to ensure (as far as possible) that young people are placed in the parental, professional, or pedagogical charge of those of good or reliable character are evidently unexceptionable insofar as the predictably beneficial care of such persons is clearly an inherently desirable feature of any and all positive human life and association. However, as perhaps the next best thing, it may also be safe to place young people in the care of reputable teachers or other carers who – while perhaps less than morally virtuous in other aspects of their personal lives – are known to be quite trustworthy in their observance of the ethical duties of their professional role. What seems more morally questionable, however, is any official or other requirement or prescription of personal or professional character or conduct for the deliberate – but more secondary or instrumental – purpose of forming the characters of others for some envisaged better. Thus, while we may reasonably hope that young people might in due course desire to become more like those who are morally exemplary than those who are not, any genuine virtuous character can only ever be a consequence of free personal choice rather than the deliberate shaping, manipulation, or coercion of some by others in line with this or that official or other externally imposed policy.

To be clear, this is *not at all* to deny that young people need, as a crucial part of a decent upbringing, to be disciplined by constraints of socially acceptable or civilized behaviour; but while such training need not be at all inconsistent with responsible adult moral sensibility and conduct, it should not be confused with moral education. Here, indeed, it is likely that many of the unfortunate muddles of latter-day neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical or other philosophical and psychological thought about character education are implicated in more widespread popular failures to distinguish between the social engineering aims of schooling and the personal (moral or other) emancipatory purposes of education. Fundamentally, schools are social or public institutions or agencies purposely designed to promote order, discipline, and some capacity for effective adult functioning on the part of children and young people. In this regard, they have much in common with such other public agencies and institutions as (at one level) basic parenting and (at another) judiciary and law enforcement. So conceived, leaving aside for the moment any and all other quite legitimate educational concerns, the effective practical functioning of schools depends much on the imposition of and obedience to basic rules. Thus, most if not all school discipline, in both earlier and later stages of pupil development, focuses upon ensuring that pupils do not speak out of turn, put their hands up to ask questions, are respectful of common or other personal property, are reasonably courteous towards or tolerant of others, do not violently interact in the classroom or playground, and so forth. Insofar as such rules are clearly directed towards the promotion of good or desirable human conduct, it might be supposed that moral or character education amounts to little more than such discipline – and, indeed, the powerful theoretical influence of twentieth-century behaviourist or reflex psychology has no doubt done much to reinforce this common view. Clearly, however, moral and/or character education is hardly reducible to such training – as, more generally, education is not reducible to schooling. That said, even if such basic discipline cannot be all there is to, or sufficient for, moral or character education, might it not yet be a necessary ingredient of such education? For an adequate response to this question, however, we should also perhaps ask whether the projects of character and moral education are quite or at all the same thing.

It might first be observed that while education – the rational initiation of students into various forms of scientific knowledge, technology, art, or skill – is the main concern of schools and other educational institutions, the imposition of rules of discipline is not. On the contrary, such rules and discipline are but means to the smooth or efficient daily running of schools as institutional agencies or vehicles for education, and such order would be required even if there was absolutely no inclination on the part of students to shirk or resist such discipline. However, insofar as education is the prime aim of schools, it is also common and proper for good teachers to attempt to counter any pupil misbehaviour or other disorder by encouraging offenders to *understand* just why their conduct is inappropriate or wrong: "What if everyone did that?," "Would you like it if she did that to you?," "Isn't it fairer for you as well as others if we take proper turns here?" and so on. However, if such appeals fall on deaf ears, teachers will need to fall back upon restraining miscreants by such punishments as detention or loss of privileges – just as police and courts of law have to restrain unrepentant criminals by fines or imprisonment. Still,

someone might say, even if school rules are not precisely *educational* aims of schooling, might such discipline not yet serve to influence or shape young character to moral or otherwise humanly beneficial ends? However, even conceding that the imposition of rules or other discipline is as likely as any other external influence to have some impact on human sensibility or conduct, it is much less clear that this might form character in any helpfully *predictable* way. Thus, the same submission to rules or discipline – say, of pupils in the same class or cohort – may lead one pupil to become a habitual rule follower, another to become someone who follows rules only when she cannot otherwise avoid them, and turn yet another into the kind of contrarian who resists any and all rules whenever possible: in short, the same common class discipline might well produce very different – conformist, devious, and/or contrarian and rebellious – personalities or characters.

Much the same is also true, of course, of the moral instruction through which conscientious teachers might aim to persuade miscreants to see the error of their ways. Thus, one and the same demonstration or explanation of the normative grounds, or evidence for this form of (good) conduct or against that form of (bad) conduct, may lead to moral conversion on the part of one pupil, indifference on the part of another, or contrarian resistance on the part of yet another, so that there is here again no clear or predictable route from such common instruction to this or that character type. In that case, what sort of instruction or influence might have a more predictable effect on individual human character? To be sure, the rather wayward popular usage of the term "character" is itself less than helpful at this point. Leaving aside more trivial uses of the term to refer to a letter in the alphabet or to a fictional person in a novel or drama, it is also evidently used to refer to a wide range of personal qualities, habits, or dispositions whereby one human agent might be distinguished from another. These can range from eccentric habits – such as persistent or irrational attachments to particular routines – to such personality traits as corny humour or to more principled commitments such as unswerving loyalty towards friends. To be sure, character educationalists will usually aim to distinguish character from personality by confining this term to such stable *moral* dispositions or virtues as wisdom (whatever that is), self-control, persistence, and fair play. (Thus, as "the Wolf" in *Pulp Fiction* says to Raquel: just because you *are* a character does not mean that you *have* character.") That said, this may not always be easily done: when or how, for example, might persistence be distinguished as a virtue from a neurotic personal compulsion, or virtuous love from local emotional attachment? Of course, virtue ethicists or character educationalists will likely respond that persistence and/or love are clearly virtues when guided by moral reasons or principles. Unfortunately, however, this answer can be little more than question-begging for all those who would claim that such moral reasons or principles need to be inferred from the readily observable data of human psychology or conduct: who, as it were, put the empirical cart before the normative horse.

Be that as it may, we may presently concede that the virtue-ethical sense of moral character is not just that of blind habit or neurotic compulsion and closer to that of dispositions to conduct guided by (practically wise) beliefs to the effect that this or that agency is humanly good or beneficial – so that the task of the character educator is to promote or instil these beliefs, or to eliminate and/or replace any immoral or less desirable beliefs with more morally desirable ones. So, having seen that there is no direct or predictable route from the imposition of school discipline or from rational moral instruction to desirable character formation, might there not now be a more direct route via the inculcation of (in this case morally preferred) beliefs or the replacement of undesirable beliefs by desirable ones? And it seems that this question has an affirmative answer. In the course of a long and fraught human history, it has been shown time and again that it is fairly easy to accomplish this end: totalitarian political regimes and religious cults – no doubt nowadays much informed by the techniques of modern stimulus-response psychology – do this all the time with frightening effectiveness. The trouble now, however, is that this more reliable route to character shaping or reform seems rather more accurately described as *indoctrination* or "brainwashing" than "education." To be clear, the present point is not to accuse character educationalists – at any rate, those of virtue-ethical persuasion – of such devious or diabolical practice: it seems reasonably clear that there is little in the way of such direct and coercive psychological intervention or manipulation in what most character advocates are mostly up to (though some latter-day flirtations with empirical psychology may sound alarm bells in this direction). The present point is more that if there *were* to be any conception of character education interestingly or substantially distinct from time-

honoured moral education (in the sense of teaching people to tell right from wrong), it would have to be something close to this sort of belief change or behaviour modification. Thus, insofar as it may claim to be innocent of any such direct psychological manipulation or mind change, contemporary so-called character education could hardly involve much more than moral education as traditionally or conventionally conceived – with its aforesaid uncertain and unpredictable consequences for character change. In short, any and all claims to any conception of character education that is much distinct from more traditionally familiar approaches to moral instruction would seem to be largely empty or redundant.

Again, of course, virtue-ethical resistance to this point is predictable. It will be protested that insofar as what is educable with regard to moral virtue – primarily the distinctive deliberation and judgement of Aristotle's practical wisdom – is precisely inseparable from other aspects (affective, volitional, social, and so forth) of human psychology from which character is constructed, there can be no cultivation of one without the other. This, together with the claim that such other psychological features of human character also provide some sort of naturally objective bedrock or foundation for virtuous reason and judgement (perhaps via the notion of *eudaimonia* or flourishing), is what is likely to be held to distinguish virtue ethics from such other ethics of abstract principle as deontology and consequentialism. On this view, virtue ethics is a distinctive ethics of character, and character is an (empirically) objective feature of human moral life. However, there also seems to be much slippage here between rather different senses of character, clearly belied by Aristotle himself (the all-time master of such equivocation), who quite clearly distinguishes between character of first and second nature. Thus, while character of first nature (such as natural bravado or kindness) may certainly be described as humanly good or beneficial, that of moral virtue is clearly held to require rational ordering of such natural sentiments and tendencies by the deliberations and judgements of *phronesis*. But, by Aristotle's own reckoning, since moral virtue requires the imposition of such rational deliberations on such natural inclinations, the former cannot be reduced to the latter: From whence, then, do the virtuous reasons, deliberations, and judgements by which human nature is governed derive? It seems that much moral mischief has followed in both ancient and modern virtue ethics by this fairly audacious sleight of hand or slippage between two radically different natural and not-so-natural senses of character as potential ingredients of or contributors to human moral life and conduct. Still, be this (again) as it may, the issue of more pressing concern is that of whether one particular claim about virtue-ethical moral education – that the teaching and/or learning of virtue is best, or perhaps only, achievable by the practical exemplification of virtuous qualities of character or conduct – is at all sustainable. Is it possible, as it were, to "read off" moral virtue from perceptible character alone?

## The Role Modelling of Virtuous Character

Let us here first consider the most basic efforts to influence or mould the conduct or behaviour of young people to some moral or other human benefit. This would be something like the simple imposition of rules or habits of appropriate conduct, as previously noted. While this is quite justifiable in the interests of good, family, school, or social order, it need not involve much in the way of witting engagement on the part of those subjected to such discipline and therefore falls well short of anything much worth calling moral education. That said, of the various means – including rewards and punishments – whereby such discipline might be imposed, one might well involve drawing the attention of young people to the good example of role models. Thus, for example, an adult might encourage a child to be brave – or not to make too much fuss over small accidents or discomforts such as injections – by assuming a bright or comic expression when taking first turn in the dentist's chair. Depending on the age of the child, this might require little more than unreflective imitation of the parent, or "doing as daddy does." However, as Kristjansson (2006) has argued in a typically insightful paper on this topic, such rather witless copying of a mentor's behaviour does not well capture the spirit or purpose of role modelling as an educationally significant or useful ploy. To this end, he turns to Aristotle's conception of *emulation* as a kind of positive *envy* which leads an agent to appreciate that a mentor or role model has admirable qualities that he or she lacks, to feel pain or distress at such deficit, and to be thereby inspired to acquire the qualities that remedy

such lack. In this light, while Kristjansson distinguishes more and less advanced or sophisticated varieties of such emulation – arguing that much of latter-day (notably North American) character education has rather lacked the attention to cognitive and affective aspects of character development that are more to the fore in virtue ethics – he plausibly claims that such emulation better captures the genuine educational purpose and value of role modelling. On his view, what we want of learners from good role models – precisely, moral exemplars – is not just mindless imitation of behaviour, but rationally and emotionally intelligent appreciation of and/or commitment to the human significance and value of the good qualities that the model exemplifies.

But what precisely does such human appreciation and learning amount to or in what kind of terms should such learning be understood? Kristjansson certainly seems inclined to give a very large place to role modelling in the human comprehension of exemplified moral qualities. Indeed, following closely on Kristjansson's heels, Sanderse provides his own summary of the latter's position in the following words: "although virtues are morally justifiable independent of the role model, there is pedagogically *no way* to become virtuous than by emulating role models" (Sanderse 2013, 47; my italics). Moreover, while the words of these two authors are not precisely identical on the issue in question, they are close enough to prompt the question of what either here means exactly by "becoming virtuous." To be sure, if this only means acquiring the moral appreciation and commitment generally characteristic of virtue, any suggestion that this may not be possible in the absence of role modelling seems hardly compelling – since we have already noticed that one quite effective way of promoting such appreciation and commitment on the part of even quite young children need not require such modelling. Thus, even very young children can well appreciate the moral point and purpose of a simple adult explanation that such and such conduct is unfair because "you would not like it if everyone did that, or if someone did that to you" – and, indeed, become thereby committed to observing such fairness with much scrupulosity. Indeed, it is evident that both young and old often come to comprehend and/or acquire virtuous qualities in fairly diverse ways – including verbal or written moral explanations – that do not at all depend on role modelling or emulation of others. In this light, then, any claim that there can be no significant or true comprehension or practical acquisition of virtues or virtuous qualities without such exemplification or role modelling seems at the least overstated.

Moreover, even if the claim is taken to mean more that role modelling is a pedagogically or epistemically better, superior, or more effective way toward virtue, the question of why this is so and/or of how virtuous qualities may be more readily or easily discerned or "read off" from such modelling is still lacking any clear answer or explanation. At this point, indeed, the general question of the precise epistemic status of virtuous qualities or of the relation of virtue to knowledge seems pressing. To be sure, following Aristotle, virtue ethicists generally agree that the moral character that virtues of second nature promote requires the cultivation and exercise of human powers of rational discernment and could hardly be produced by the blind or mindless behavioural conditioning of reflex psychology, or even the strict discipline or "character training" of school, military, or prison. That said, there yet seems less clarity or agreement over the precise nature of such virtuous reason – not least concerning its epistemic status and the prospects of its precise formulation or articulation in the kind of terms required by or characteristic of traditional knowledge. On this point, indeed, Kristjansson is explicitly critical of a particular school of virtue-ethical "particularism" – of considerable latter-day influence upon educational philosophy and theory (see, especially, Dunne 1993; also W. Carr 2004) – which apparently denies both the value of general moral principles and the possibility or prospect of an epistemically objective and/or practically useful articulation or formulation of real-life moral deliberation and judgement. Precisely, Kristjansson insists that such particularism is seriously at odds with Aristotle's own fairly evident moral naturalism, according to which moral judgements can or do clearly count as (epistemically) correct by virtue of conformity to an empirically verifiable standard of human flourishing. Moreover, while it may be doubted that Aristotelian moral naturalism is ultimately sustainable (see Carr 2021), Aristotle's moral objectivism is hardly questionable – since he also clearly held, against any extreme particularism, that there are fairly exceptionless general moral principles (notably, moral prohibitions against such actions as murder or adultery). Still, there would here seem to be serious cross-purposes between friends and foes of

particularism – or, at least, some confusion – concerning the aims and goals of virtue-ethical deliberation and judgement, and (no doubt thereby) the place of role modelling with regard to such purposes.

The first point to notice is that while Aristotle evidently did hold that there were (perhaps diverse) objective grounds for moral judgement, he is no less clear that such (complete) objectivity is beyond the scope of the virtuous deliberations and judgements of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom: indeed, he quite clearly insists that we need to *deliberate* with respect to matters of practical concern, just because we cannot here expect the precise epistemic objectivity of (scientific or other) knowledge. Indeed, to put the finest possible point on this, it is evident from the potentially conflicting nature of many moral virtues – construed as dispositions variably conducive to human good or benefit – that there may be *no* (epistemically) clear answer to the question of what a virtuous agent should do in circumstances in which there may be equally pressing moral imperatives to be (say) honest and compassionate, and in which it is also not (logically) possible to be honest without some lack of compassion or compassionate without some dishonesty. The point is that while there may be virtuous deliberation to *either* of two morally competing but compelling courses of action – *both* of which conduce to objective human benefit – there may yet be no (epistemically) satisfactory or conclusive way of deciding which of these should be considered the best or *right* one. Indeed, while such opposite and opposed courses of action may well have quite objective moral grounds, we might as well regard them as equally morally right *and* wrong. On the other hand, however, in (the no doubt numerous) cases in which there is little or no moral uncertainty about what should be done (such as whether to refrain from rather than commit adultery), it is no less clear that while the practical deliberations and judgements of more *and* less virtuous agents (say, of Aristotle's virtuous and continent) may *both* aim at the right or correct moral goal, those of the latter must be considered *inferior* to those of the former – precisely insofar as the continent agent still harbours lust in his heart and has to resist this. But what this evidently shows – contrary to any possible view that the primary concern of practical wisdom lies with the production of right moral action or conduct – is that this cannot be the prime target of *phronesis*. In short, while correct moral action must of course be a significant aspect or concern of virtuous deliberation – since no immoral deliberation could be virtuous – the primary purpose of the practical wisdom of *phronesis* must lie rather with the more psychologically as well as ethically complex refinement of character.

But as such, considered from a basic moral educational perspective, there is evidently some problematic excess or overkill about any (certainly school or institutional) proposal or program devoted to the promotion of such virtue or character formation. Precisely, such cultivation of virtuous character would seem wildly to exceed anything that is (again institutionally) required for basic moral educational purposes. Moreover, given what (especially Aristotelian) virtue educationalists are generally inclined to hold about the cultivation of virtuous character – that it requires fine attunement of human affect to cognition in the light of highly diverse individual differences of personal nature and nurture – it is difficult to see how any *general* program of character education might be devised for its promotion. Thus, just as virtue ethics largely emphasises (as against other ethics of general principle) that the deliberation and conduct of the more and/or less virtuous requires sensitive adaptation to inevitably variable contexts and circumstances of moral agency, it would also seem – by much the same token – that there can hardly be any one-size-fits-all psychological template of virtuous character and that agents are therefore liable to be virtuous in their own individual and unique ways. In this light, it would seem not only that programs of virtue or character education must venture beyond any seriously feasible or legitimate (certainly school or institutional) moral educational warrant, but that these must also sail perilously close to those winds of personal indoctrination previously noted (though, see Croce 2019 for some opposition to this charge). By this token, it appears that any general program of personal character development is open to much the same kind of criticism lately mounted against that other currently fashionable Aristotelian goal or purpose for education of human flourishing (Carr 2021; Hand 2023; Siegel 2023): namely, that given the highly personal and idiosyncratic trajectories of human virtuous or other character and flourishing, neither of these would seem realistic or (morally or otherwise) defensible concerns for public education or professional intervention.

But all of these larger concerns about the possibility or legitimacy of virtue or character education have serious implications for the key issue of present concern of how, or by means of what kind of

learning, role modelling – if this is held to the most effective, if not indeed the only, means or route to moral education – might succeed in this task. Precisely, what are those under the care of or otherwise within the sphere of influence of such role models to learn from them and how might they come to learn it? As lately noted, any claim that role modelling offers the best approach to moral education would first need to show that it is much more effective than merely giving children moral lessons to the effect, say, that one should not do unto others what one would not have them do to you. But how so? Clearly, any response along the lines that it is superior insofar as it provides a *practical* illustration of a moral principle or precept is no more than question-begging: this merely assumes without argument that exemplification by role modelling is simply better because it is practical. Further to this, it is anyway hard to believe that the golden rule has had less moral impact down the centuries upon those who have only encountered it in written form, or had it reported to them by others, than upon those who were present at the time to hear it preached by Jesus or some other religious leader. Still, perhaps a more promising train of thought might be the virtue-ethical contention that insofar as general moral principles such as the golden rule need situation-specific application in light of the context-sensitive deliberations and judgements of practical wisdom, this could only be learned through close proximity or attention to the conduct of agents who possess and exercise such wisdom. On closer scrutiny, however, this suggestion is hardly compelling.

First, indeed, leaving aside all question of the literal truth of any Gospel narrative, it seems that even the closest and most devoted of Jesus's disciples often fell short of grasping the true purpose of his mission, and the master is constantly depicted as rebuking them for their blind failure to understand his teaching and conduct. Moreover, insofar as this often seems to have been the case of actual historical moral and spiritual teachers (such as Mahatma Gandhi), how much more likely is this to be so with (say) school pupils who do not even seem (on evidence: see Sanderse 2013) to hold teachers in especial regard as significant role models? Yet further, it is not hard to see that the potential for misunderstanding of such exemplars is apt to be greater on a virtue-ethical account of moral deliberation and judgement than on other less nuanced or context-sensitive ethical perspectives. For example, consider what pupils might be in a position to learn from the conduct of classroom teachers about the nature of justice or fairness. While it is likely that some justice or fairness on the part of teachers is equally desired by parents and pupils, it is no less probable that most if not all teachers have been, or will at some point be, regarded as unjust or unfair – and, indeed, pupils may often be merely inclined to regard those teachers they like (or who like them) as fair, and those they dislike as unfair. That said, students often distinguish between strict and lenient teachers – and here, to be sure, it might appear promising to regard the just teacher as lying in some Aristotelian mean between those too strict and those too lenient. However, the trouble now – especially given the standard virtue-ethical line about practical wisdom – is that there would seem to be no general rule about what might here count as a reasonable mean for good teachers ever faced with deciding from one context-specific occasion to another when it is appropriate to be more strict or lenient with pupils of different need. To be sure, this will invariably require highly sophisticated and nuanced moral judgement on the part of the very best teachers, which is no less likely to be well beyond the deliberative competence of all who are not yet practically wise. In fact, such moral epistemic shortfall between the virtuous and those who are developmentally less so is highlighted as a general problem for virtue education by the leading modern virtue ethicist John McDowell (1997), who has precisely drawn attention to the insuperable difficulty of much (if any) understanding of the virtuous perspective by those have not yet reached the higher stage of cognitive and affective integration that precisely enables the virtuous to notice, feel, and understand what the not yet virtuous cannot. In consequence, as virtually all experienced teachers are aware, the most well-meaning and disinterested of teacher judgements (particularly in matters of discipline) may be considered unfair by at least some pupils – not least from the viewpoint of their own very partial interests and concerns. But what here applies to learning about justice from classroom example seems quite generalizable to other virtues. If, as virtue ethicists insist, understanding any virtue is a matter of grasping the situationally complex deliberations and judgements of *phronesis* whereby genuine virtues are informed and guided, it is unlikely that any very accurate or reliable lessons about the nature of justice, courage, charity, and so forth are liable to be picked up by pupils from their inevitably brief encounters with teacher conduct in the context of no less local and

particular events and circumstances. (For related points about the difficulties of learning virtue, see Haldane 2019.)

So considered, it is far from easy to see how pupils might – at least without some distortion or prejudice – learn much of the nature of justice and fairness from this or that teacher's conduct unless they have already otherwise developed some *independent* capacity for, or grasp of, moral principle and/or judgement. This raises perhaps the largest and most compelling objection to any and all virtue-ethical aspirations to derive conceptions or judgements of what is morally good or virtuous from more "natural" or empirical observations of human character and conduct. In this regard, the recent highly influential proposal of Zagzebski (2010, 2013) to derive appreciation of what is morally right or good from human admiration for what is here and now judged or *perceived* to be good or virtuous character or conduct clearly puts the empirical cart before the normative horse. Indeed, it seems much at odds with the ancient hunch of Plato's *Euthyphro* (Plato 2010) that it is more plausible to suppose that the good is good, not because God (or anyone) loves it, but that God loves it only insofar as it is good. (For some insightful recent criticism of Zagzebski on this and other issues, see Szutta 2019.) To be sure, we here encounter the final and most decisive objection to any form of character-based virtue ethics – not least to any that might claim naturalistic or empirical grounding: precisely, that no natural (or socially constructed) states of human character and conduct can be considered moral in and of themselves. In sum, any and all human conduct rightly meriting appraisal or commendation as morally good or virtuous can hardly be so by virtue of any human nature or personal example but only in light of its conformity to this or that independently justifiable (morally) normative perspective. To be sure, the slightest acquaintance with history and (not least) contemporary affairs is surely sufficient testimony to the sad human fact that while role modelling has often been all too highly effective, many of the most successful of past and present-day political, religious, and other role modellers have been people of quite deplorable moral character who have exercised the worst possible moral influence over their (invariably gullible) followers. This, indeed, would seem to be the last nail in the coffin of any claim that role modelling offers any fool-proof means to the promotion of morally desirable character in others.

In conclusion, role modelling is evidently a fairly unavoidable and ubiquitous feature of human life and association; but – since people are as likely to fall prey to the adverse influence of bad role models – it can be morally beneficial *only* when agents are reasonably acquainted with the moral concepts, precepts, and principles required for distinguishing good from bad role models. Again, with respect to the more particular modelling of so-called virtuous character, this can be successful *only* when agents have some capacity to grasp the complex moral deliberations and judgements that virtue ethicists associate with the practical wisdom of *phronesis* – or where the role modeller takes trouble to *explain* the more principled rationale for such deliberations. Without some such rational or intellectual resort to such more commonly accepted moral concepts and principles, virtuous character cannot be simply "read off" from observable human behaviour, which – in the absence of such knowledge – is liable to serious misapprehension. Here, while Kristjansson's conceptually nuanced account of emulation is not without merit, it suffers from typical Aristotelian equivocation between two rather different – true and more illusory – notions. If, as Kristjansson maintains, genuine emulation is a matter of agents grasping the spirit or essence of the virtuous role modeller's conduct – precisely, the moral point and purpose of this agent's action – then this is only possible by virtue of *some* prior grasp of such import. If, on the other hand, the claim is that such role modelling suffices in and of itself for such understanding – more seriously, that there can be no such moral comprehension in the absence of such exemplification – then this is no less misleading and unlikely. On the contrary, appropriately educated moral sensibility depends ultimately more upon free and independent commitment to what is right or good in the light of serious rational appreciation and appraisal of the best that has ever been thought and said on moral questions – in the rich heritage of human religious, philosophical, and imaginative literature (as noted at the outset of this essay), as well as the history of enlightened social reform – than upon contingent attachments to the personal character or conduct of even great prophets, philosophers, or reformers, which is ever likely, as with all frail human nature, to be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

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