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Role Modeling is Beneficial in Moral Character Education: A Commentary on Carr (2023)

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In his recent paper, Carr (2023) relies on an oddly limiting account of moral education based on behavioral discipline, and the narrative force of fictional novels and other stories, while launching an attack on the emphasis on role modeling as a deliberate educational strategy. He suggests that although role modeling might be inevitable during moral education and human life, it could only be considered an auxiliary phenomenon rather than a reliable educational method. Carr is concerned about the possibility of indoctrination, difficulty in generalizing the method across different students, and potential risk involving imperfect or negative models.

Carr's conceptualization of role modeling views professionals as responsible for taking on a modeling role concerning those they serve, e.g., teachers or ministers. While this may be the case, it is not the only source of role models. Parents, peers, friends, and fictional characters are all possible sources of role modeling (Annas, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2007, 2020; Sanderse, 2012; Sherman, 1987) that are not acknowledged by Carr.

We see no reason to accept such a narrow conception of role modeling as the one suggested by Carr, but even if we do, a much more concerning aspect is his juxtaposition of free personal choice by the agent with the claimed, "deliberate shaping, manipulation or coercion" (2023, p. 71) involved in role modeling. As evidence of this understanding of role modeling, Carr discusses schools and their emphasis on discipline and rule-following. However, this conception of role modeling is neither theoretically sound nor supported by empirical evidence. Role modeling can include numerous expressions of an independent agency, from the recognition that growth is necessary, to the choice of the suitable role model, to a conception of what counts as a suitable role model, to an ongoing critical evaluation of the role model, etc. (Athanassoulis, 2022). Carr views role modeling as divorced from a normative perspective. Nevertheless, we have no reason to agree with him - the very choice to engage in modeling a particular person is normative.

In addition, recent research points out the importance of autonomy and self-cultivation within moral education employing exemplars. Sanderse (revised and resubmitted) argues that teachers need to focus on helping students identify and learn from the students' moral role models rather than demanding them to emulate themselves. Researchers interested in moral role modeling are aware of the point that the mechanism of moral role modeling should focus on students' self-cultivation instead of passive reception and imitation of presented moral values and behaviors. In addition, the appropriate ultimate goal of moral education via role modeling from their perspective

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is the promotion of autonomy and self-identity, not indoctrination or unidirectional instillation of values and beliefs.

Furthermore, from the methodological perspective, we can also refer to previous research underscoring the use of autonomous instructional methods, not indoctrination, in moral role modeling. A recent empirical study by Han and Graham (2023) supports that autonomy-supported aspects should be considered in moral education via moral role modeling. In the study, they synthesized data collected from previous exemplar intervention studies. They found that the motivational and behavioral outcomes, i.e., emulating presented exemplary behavior, were maximized when: 1. Presented exemplars were perceived as relatable and attainable, and 2. Autonomy-supporting instructional methods, such as discussion and crafting, were employed. They connected this point to the Self-determination theory that underscores support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in education for promoting intrinsic, not extrinsic, motivation in the long run. Han and Graham (2023) demonstrate that students' sense of autonomy should be supported while employing moral exemplars. In addition to what Sanderse (revised and resubmitted) argued about the necessity of self-cultivation as the goal of role modeling, Han and Graham (2023) suggest that the educational methodology should also be autonomous.

Effective role modeling via moral exemplars can only be done through autonomous instructional methods and by aiming at self-cultivation. In the case of its aim, indoctrination should not be pursued in moral role modeling as discussed by Sanderse (revised and resubmitted). Furthermore, indoctrinating educational methods cannot be effective in applying moral exemplars as shown by Han and Graham (2023). Therefore, it is clear that rather than being inimical to role modeling, self-reflection, deliberation, and endorsement are part of it and, contrary to Carr, indoctrination if not an inherent part of moral role modeling.

Carr is also concerned about the dangers of falling prey to the wrong role model. However, again this is only a concern if we view role modeling as a blind process on the part of the student. Role modeling does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it is supported by the appropriate upbringing, the correct early influences, and the ability to slowly discover the direction one should be going towards, all of which need to be in place before one chooses who will light the way on this path. Even if one were to choose unwisely, it is not clear that there can't be an educational lesson in that choice. Imperfect role models may do an excellent job of enlightening imperfect students, e.g., in the ways of resisting temptation, in being a student of virtue rather than a perfectly virtuous agent, etc. (Athanassoulis, 2022). Even the vicious may have an educational role as examples of what not to do (Lockwood et al., 2002). Consistently, recent research on moral exemplars and role modeling has shown that imperfect exemplars perceived to be more attainable and relatable compared with perfect moral saints are more effective in promoting moral and prosocial motivation (Han & Dawson, 2023; Han & Graham, 2023; Monin, 2007).

Finally, we argue that moral exemplars possess unique values for cultivating virtues, specifically practical wisdom, i.e., *phronesis*, which Carr consistently underestimates. Carr argues, "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 (p. 74)." However, recent philosophical and psychological works addressing *phronesis* suggest that moral virtues and strengths are functioning in a complicated cooperative manner, so utilizing moral exemplars as holistic sources for moral education is recommended. In philosophical papers proposing the standard models of *phronesis*, Darnell et al. (2022) and Kristjánsson and Fowers (2022) argue that *phronesis* is a multifaceted virtue constituted by multiple functional components, and their interaction and coordination are also fundamental aspects. Moreover, Han (2023b) demonstrated that functional constructs in moral psychology, e.g.,

reasoning, empathy, and identity, create a network structure, so the robustness of the network significantly predicts moral motivation and behavior.

If the exercise of moral virtues with *phronesis* is structurally and functionally complicated, educational methods to cultivate them might be insufficiently explained without considering the inherent complexity. In light of that, moral educators require moral exemplars, who demonstrate optimal or vicious moral functioning holistically. In the cases of virtuous moral models, the exemplars are more likely to possess more sophisticated individual functions and demonstrate improved coordination among the functions compared with ordinary people (Kristjansson & Flowers, 2022). On the other hand, a network of suboptimal moral functioning might exist among vicious exemplars. Such negative exemplars can present an example of the functional network of anti-morality that students might need to avoid. For instance, recent studies in clinical neuroscience report the aberrant functional networks among brain circuitries associated with moral cognition, emotion, and motivation among psychopaths, white-collar criminals, and other types of people demonstrating anti-morality without any intellectual or other cognitive issues or even with above-average mental skills (Raine, 2019; Raine et al., 2012).

According to network science, a network consisting of connections between nodes possesses significantly more information than a mere sum of the nodes (Klein & Hoel, 2020). Connectivity, which represents interactions between nodes, in such a network provides unique additional information to the network beyond what can be explained by the components per se (see Seth & Bayne [2022] for theoretical review). Given what has been suggested by network science, it would also be plausible to assume that moral exemplars present unique strengths and qualities emerging from the network of virtues and functionings. Hence, teaching individual moral skills, which was proposed by Carr without displaying concrete examples of moral functioning, either optimal or vicious, via presenting networks holistically, is insufficient to promote virtue development (see Damon & Colby, 2015). Emulating presented moral exemplars would be an irreplaceable and fundamental way to let students exercise, adjust, and finetune the network aspects of virtuous beings (see Han, 2023a), especially those constituting *phronesis*, such as coordinating individual virtues and functions, in moral education.

In conclusion, we suggest that Carr's concerns regarding utilizing models in moral education can be well addressed by updates in recent research. Moral educators can employ moral exemplars, including imperfect and even negative ones, as sources for moral development with autonomy-supporting instructional methods and self-cultivation. Furthermore, we argue that moral exemplars as moral paragons demonstrating optimal moral functioning in an integrative manner can be unique sources for *phronesis* cultivation. Given these, moral exemplars in general should be considered irreplaceable sources for moral education.

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