The *Phronimos* as a moral exemplar: two internal objections and a proposed solution

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The Aristotelian *phronimos*, the person who is skilled at the exercise of the virtues, is frequently proposed as a moral exemplar for the student of virtue. The student of virtue is an immature moral agent, on the long road to character development, and he is an agent whose long and fragile journey towards virtue is influenced by a large number of factors. One of these factors is the availability of moral exemplars. Whichever conception of the virtuous one supports, either as someone who is able to determine the right principle, or as someone who exemplifies the skill of virtue, she is a role model the student of virtue can look up to, learn from and be motivated by. In fact, the significance of mature moral agents as potential role models is such that some authors structure their entire moral theories around the possibility of radical moral exemplarism (Zagzebski, 2017).

In this paper, I will present two objections to the idea of the virtuous agent as a moral exemplar, the perspective objection and the context objection. Both objections are internal to virtue ethics, that is, they proceed from how the theory itself understands the *phronimos*. Given the virtue ethical account of the *phronimos* there are good arguments to think that she cannot occupy the role of a moral exemplar. Yet at the same time, the Aristotelian long journey of character education includes a significant role for moral exemplars. To retain the possibility of moral exemplars but avoid the problematic appeal to the virtuous agent to fulfil this role, I will suggest that we should look to a different kind of role model, the less-than-virtuous. The less-than-virtuous can fulfil the role of moral exemplars that has been central to many accounts of Aristotelian virtue ethics (and plausibly may even play this role for other accounts of exemplarism), while avoiding both the perspective and context objections. Finally, I will briefly show how empirical evidence from psychology supports the idea of the less-than-virtuous as moral exemplars.

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1 The *phronimos* as a moral exemplar

Early attempts to revive virtue ethics faced the action guidance objection (Louden, 1997). Rule based theories, the objection suggests, give clear practical guidance to the student of morality in the form of the rules or principles they promote, while virtue ethics fails to tell us what to do, it merely tells us how to be. Any advice virtue ethics gives is vague, indeterminate and ultimately unhelpful.

The first response to this objection on behalf of virtue ethics questions the kind of advice the student of morality should be seeking. Rule-based theories assume clear, determinate answers, but the moral life cannot be captured in a code, so the student should seek an answer which captures the complexity of the moral life (McDowell, 1979). Moral life, actual, practical moral life as lived by beings like us, is not the kind of subject matter that can be captured by rigid (even if informative and prescriptive) rules.The second response to the objection points out that virtue ethics does provide some practical guidance in the form of v-rules and does so while embracing rather than denying the complexity of the moral life. We receive much greater practical guidance from considering what is involved in the virtue of honesty than from an inflexible rule that commands us to tell the truth (Hursthouse, 1999). The student of morality then needs to change his approach, as Solomon suggests, he should not be seeking algorithms for solving difficult moral dilemmas, he should be enrolling in a fitness programme to get him ready to run a race (Solomon, 1997). The third response turns the objection around and suggests that if virtue ethics fails to provide action guidance than so do rule-based theories. The deontologists will need the same qualities of imagination, perception and moral judgement to make sense of, for example, how to formulate maxims and judge whether they pass the Categorical Imperative. The advice for the student is the same: develop moral character traits such as moral imagination, perception and moral judgement (Hursthouse, 1999).

As philosophers have developed detailed accounts of contemporary virtue ethics, the virtuous agent as a moral exemplar has emerged as one of the central themes because the *phronimos* has the moral perception, moral imagination, affective sensibilities, moral judgement and practical know-how that make up virtue. The roots of these arguments can be found in Aristotle either directly when he appeals to moral role models, or indirectly when he outlines what is involved in phronesis[1]. Aristotle sees imitation, *mimesis*, as part of human nature. We imitate others from early on, whether it is to learn language by copying other language users, or specifically in the moral sphere where we develop character traits by imitating those who already possess them (Poetics, 1148b 4-24). In the *Rhetoric* he gives a further account of the importance of emulation (Rhetoric 1388a 15ff) which we will come back to later in this paper, while in the *Nicomachean Ethics* there are arguably direct references to

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[1] There are a number of diverse accounts of the *phronimos* in the literature, some drawing a distinction between agent-based and agent-centred (Slote, 2001), others focusing on consequences (Driver, 2001), while others highlight the plurality of virtue (Swanton, 2003). They all deserve further consideration but for reasons of brevity in this paper I am focusing on a neo-Aristotelian conception of phronesis.

the virtuous agent as a role model in the definition of virtue (NE 1106b 35 – 1107a 3). When Aristotle defines virtue as determined by the right reason and by what the *phronimos* would use to determine it (NE 1106b 35ff), he is arguably encouraging us to look to the *phronimos* as a model of virtue.

Similarly, Hursthouse recommends that the student of virtue look directly to the *phronimos* and do what she does. To observe the *phronimos'* actions is to learn something about her reason and emotions for so acting (Hursthouse, 1999). Annas argues that what the student learns from the role model is not a superficial duplication of action, but an illustration through her actions of the reasons behind them (Annas, 2011). Finally, Zagzebski goes a step further: her entire moral theory is developed around the idea that we can identify moral exemplars through reflective admiration and can learn for ourselves by discovering what makes them act as they do (Zagzebski, 2017). Virtue ethicists, then, are optimistic about the role of the virtuous agent as a moral exemplar. However, as we shall see below, this optimism may be misplaced.

2 Two internal objections to the idea of the virtuous as a role model

Let us assume for a moment that the student of virtue has managed to conclusively identify the virtuous, she is in front of him and she is available to act as a role model. This is, of course, an extremely contentious assumption. For example, some commentators are concerned that the virtuous seem to be few and far between (Driver, 2001, p.53) and the fully virtuous, those who exemplify a global kind of phronesis, the kind assumed by the unity of the virtues thesis, are even rarer (Badhwar, 1996, Swanton, 2003, p.229ff); while others worry that the virtuous may be difficult, or even impossible to identify in a climate of moral disagreement (Louden in Statman, 1997). However, let us set these practical objections to one side for a moment, because there are two internal objections to the idea of the virtuous as a role model.

The first is the perspective objection; the idea that the perspective of the virtuous is, by definition, opaque to the student. This objection can be developed in a variety of ways. Firstly, to borrow a phrase from Julia Annas, the virtuous is not an operator of a moral manual (Annas, 2013, p.680). Whatever she does is tailored to the specific situation she is faced with. To be an effective role model for the purposes of copying her actions, the virtuous needs to be observed reacting to the exact same situation the student of virtue is faced with. However, even if all the particulars of the situation were the same, the virtuous and the student of virtue will never face *exactly* the same situation, purely because of the difference in their relative positions. Russell points out that it is precisely because of her virtue that the virtuous will have skills the student of virtue will lack (Russell, 2009, p.106). It is because she sees the world in a compassionate or a courageous manner that she perceives the right thing to do – the very skills the student of virtue lacks. The virtuous and the student of virtue are two different types of people, with different dispositions, abilities and skills so that they will never, by definition, be facing exactly the same situation.

This problem the student of virtue has, that of lacking the very virtues that would allow him to exercise his moral judgement, cannot be underestimated. Hursthouse

discusses this point at length and explains how moral perception is not merely a matter of pointing out relevant features of the situation (Hursthouse, 2011, p.52). If it were, the virtuous role model could point at the features of the situation that were relevant to her judgement and the student could copy this approach. But the student of virtue lacks the very *phronesis* that would make it possible for him to appreciate the features as morally relevant in the first place. He is at least partially 'blind' in this respect and having a significant feature of the situation be pointed out to him is not sufficient to make him come to see its significance. One can say that amount X for activity Y is not a generous amount, it is a profligate one, but lacking the ability to judge what counts as generous or profligate in the first place, means that the student has not learnt anything from observing the virtuous's judgement of this act of giving as excessive.

It is important to note that this objection to the virtuous as a role model goes deeper than the simpler idea that virtue is difficult to copy. It is not so much the objection that mere mimicry is not virtue, that for true virtue one needs to understand the reasons behind one's action, but rather the worry that the very reasons that the student has to come to understand are incomprehensible to him due to his viewpoint as a student – someone on the outside of the perspective of virtue. Consider McDowell's claim that "a conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out" (McDowell, 1979, p.331), which highlights the importance of truly sharing the perspective of the noble and the good. However, from the perspective of the student this claim begins to seem problematic; the student must come to see from the inside out but he is given this advice while standing firmly on the outside.

From where the student stands, what the virtuous sees and what she does makes little sense and, other than waiting till the student has become virtuous, there is nothing the virtuous can do to get the point across. The same objection can be made from another angle. We know that the virtuous person's deliberative process is not a computational application of rules. The best that can be said about *phronesis* is that it is a kind of expertise, a skill in moral deliberation exercised at the expert level. Perhaps then, like expertise in other areas, the skill lies not in considering and dismissing all possible options but in homing in directly on the salient ones. A comparison is made here with other areas of expertise like grand master chess players. In chess playing it seems that expert players do not go through an exhaustive process of considering all options, nor do they apply set rules. Rather, expertise in this domain involves being able to see through what is irrelevant and focus on the right thing to do. This is not so much a computational skill of considering and dismissing all options, but rather a discriminative ability to focus only on what is relevant which includes an evaluative understanding of what counts as relevant in such a situation[2]. It is not clear what the virtuous can say or do in order to teach this kind of expertise, expertise which goes beyond rules to a perceptual ability. A rule, a definitive decision process, even an exhaustive ruling out of all possible options, can be shared – it

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[2] For a philosopher's account of these ideas see Russell, in Snow 2015, for a psychologist's account of the empirical evidence for these claims see Gobet and Charness, 2006.

is more difficult to see how an elusive and poorly understood ability to see through to the right answer can be shared for the purposes of education.

The second objection is the context objection; the context within which one learns is different from the context within which one operates as a mature moral agent. This objection can be made in a variety of ways. Williams offers one of the earliest accounts of this objection. He points out that what is effortlessly set aside for the virtuous because of her virtue may turn out to be an insurmountable challenge for the student. The intemperate will have reason to avoid some of the things the temperate may properly and safely do as his very intemperance puts him at risk of temptation (Williams, 1995, p.190ff). Johnson generalises this point: anyone who suffers from any kind of moral weakness and is aware of his weaknesses will do well to avoid situations of great temptation while creating conditions favourable to success and development (Johnson, 2003, pp. 817-22). Another version of the same objection points out that anyone who, like the habitual liar for example, wants to mend his ways will have to undergo a process of moral change which does not apply to the virtuous who has already achieved perfection. This process may involve a number of strategies such as avoiding temptation as we just saw, or seeking guidance, or making reparations; all strategies the virtuous has no need for and cannot act as a role model for (Johnson, 2003, pp. 817-22, Russell, 2009, ch. 2).

Finally, yet another version of this objection goes even further; following the example of the virtuous may expose the student of virtue to substantial risk of harm. For example, Swanton sees virtue as inner strength; otherwise challenging actions are made possible for the virtuous precisely because of her inner strength. But the student of virtue falls short in this respect, the challenges are real to him and it may not be beneficial to his overall character development to face these challenges as they may be overwhelming for him and may even lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. The unregulated virtue of altruism can, without inner strength, become distorted into resentful or self-serving action (Swanton, 2003, p.62ff). Tanesini also worries about a version of this objection. If a student who is pre-disposed towards the intellectual vices of haughtiness and arrogance because of his excessively high self-esteem, is encouraged to compare themselves with someone who is presented as a superior ideal, his arrogance will make them assert that they already possess the features of the role model. The comparison with the role model strengthens his deluded view of his own-self worth – ironically, a delusion that is put in place by the original vices, haughtiness and arrogance, that one would like the educational comparison with the role model to eliminate in the first place (Tanesini, 2016, p.525).

3 Introducing a new role model

These two objections to the *phronimos* as a role model are internal to virtue ethics because they are fundamental to how virtue is understood. The perspective objection arises because of the conception of the virtuous person as occupying a privileged standpoint that can neither be understood nor shared by the student. The context objection is based on the differences between mature and immature moral agents and is grounded in the Aristotelian view of moral development as a long and gradual

journey, on the road to which one occupies different standpoints and has different educational needs.

However, doing away with role modelling altogether is unsatisfactory and doesn't seem to match up with our practical observations about how people learn in a moral context. Therefore, I will propose a new conception of the *phronimos*, as a model for emulation, a specific type of role modelling which avoids the perspective and context objections, and I will suggest that the less-than-virtuous are better suited to fulfilling the practical role of moral exemplars.

The *phronimos* should not be conceived as either a direct or ideal role model but as an object of emulation, understood in a specific, Aristotelian, manner (Rhetoric, 1388a, Kristjansson, 2016 and 2006, Zagzebski, 2015). Aristotle contrasts emulation with envy. Emulation and envy are both feelings of pain we have when faced with others who possess highly valued goods. However, envy is a base feeling because its object is to deprive others of these goods, while emulation is a virtuous feeling because its object is to make oneself fit to also possess such goods. The crucial difference is that the pain of emulation is felt because we do not possess such goods, which is what spurs us on to do what is necessary to come to possess them, whereas the pain of envy is because others possess such goods, which is what spurs us on to come to deprive them of these goods. Admirable goods which may be the object of emulation and envy are wealth, social honours, numerous friends, and so on, but the highest object of emulation are the virtues as this is what we value the most amongst all these goods. The feeling of emulation comes about through two things: through our recognition of the noble and the good in others, and through self-knowledge. The recognition of the noble and the good in others operates in the same way as it does in Aristotle's discussion of perfect friendship (NE Book VIII). The object of perfect friendships is the recognition of the good in the friend herself, rather than an external good like pleasure or utility. The trust and loyalty that are felt towards the perfect friend are underpinned by her sharing in the good, by her being trustworthy and worthy of loyalty. Similarly the feeling of emulation provoked by the virtuous is underpinned by her being virtuous. The admiration and emulation felt towards the virtuous are underpinned by her sharing in the good, by her being admirable and worthy of emulation. The other ability necessary for emulation is self-knowledge. The self-knowledge is two-fold, we both see ourselves as lacking in these goods we admire, but also as being capable of reaching them; we have a claim to these goods as it is possible for people like us to reach for them.

The virtuous person is the object of such emulation[3]. She is not a direct model to copy, nor is it the student's role to attempt to comprehend a perspective he, of necessity, stands to the outside of. She is an embodiment of virtue and as such is

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[3] Kristjanssen, 2006, argues that we should focus on the qualities the virtuous has and not on her as a direct role model. Russell, 2009, argues that virtue ethics ties right action to features of virtuous people rather than situations, pp. 126-9. Both seem to me to go a bit further than Aristotelian emulation warrants. Emulation is a more abstract feeling that results in general feelings of admiration and a wish to develop in this particular direction, rather than more content specific information about the qualities needed to be virtuous. De Caro et al, 2018 and Vaccarezza, 2020, also offer Aristotelian inspired accounts of admiration.

an example of what one aspires to. There are two conclusions we should draw from this: the virtuous is an aspirational model, and a shared love of the noble and the good is needed before she can occupy even this position in the eyes of the student. In emulating the virtuous, the student aspires to share in the noble and the good in its many instantiations, he aspires to become virtuous himself which means that he needs to find his own path to virtue, determine his own expression of virtue in his life and judge what virtue requires of him when faced with the particulars of his circumstances, rather than follow the minutiae of someone else's life. This means that different types of instantiations of virtue can be models for emulation, e.g. fictional literary constructs, historical examples, as well as living examples; any real or imaginary character who partakes in the noble and the good is an example for emulation. However, the student of virtue cannot start from a neutral ground; he must start from a position oriented towards the noble and the good. Aristotle makes it clear that early habits and associations play a crucial role in orienting immature moral agents towards the noble and the good (NE 1095b 3-8, 1179b 25ff and Vasiliou 1996).

In addition to the *phronimos* as a model for emulation, the student of virtue should look to the less-than-virtuous as practical role models to guide her choices. To understand how this is possible we need to consider not just how we succeed in virtue, but how we fail.

Aristotle tells us that failure is possible in many ways but success is possible in only one (NE 1106b 25ff). Success is a complete life of perfect virtue, one which, if we accept the unity of the virtues, includes perfect virtue in all possible moral character traits. But failure is complex, and some failures will be much closer to the aim of virtue that others. Aristotle talks of virtue using the example of hitting a target. More than once he compares moral enquiry to archery in terms of trying to hit the one, correct target when there are many wrong ones and once, he uses the analogy of finding the middle of a circle for finding virtue (NE1094a23-4, NE1106b30ff, NE Book II sec 9 and NE 1109a24-26). Aristotle tends to concentrate on virtue, on hitting the mark, but perhaps there is value in the arrows that fail to succeed. If we extend the archery analogy and accept that virtue hits the centre mark, perhaps vice corresponds to the arrows that aim in an entirely different direction away from the target[4], but there are still many arrows that set off aiming for the centre and don't quite make it. Some of these arrows will be closer to the centre than others and maybe these arrows can help us in becoming good. I want to suggest that failures that are close to virtue are entirely appropriate pedagogic role models.

By failures, arrows that aimed at virtue but fell short of perfection, I mean a variety of character states on the road to virtue. A non-exhaustive list of these various character states that fall short of virtue could include continent agents who have a (partial) appreciation of the right reason but are still fighting contrary desires[5], incontinent agents who have just lost the battle the continent have won,

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[4] It is possible that there is some educational value to be had from those who aim at vice, but considering this possibility is beyond the scope of this paper.

[5] Croce, 2020, discusses the possibility of continent agents as moral exemplars along with 'injustice illuminators'.

agents who are immature but are aware that they must avoid temptation for fear of succumbing to it, agents who are still exploring practical ways of instantiating their *boulesis* into action, agents who have erred but have learnt from their mistakes, and so on. The continent, for example, might not do the right thing perfectly, as they are fighting against contrary desires but they win the fight, so they are still a good example of kind, courageous, liberal, truthful, or temperate actions. At the same time, the continent's reasoning process into action is not easy and effortless and is more likely to be similar to the difficulties the student of virtue faces. The incontinent may be an equally illuminating role model, shining light into the factors that lead some people to lose the battle against contrary desires. The student of virtue can learn lessons and deploy developmental strategies with respect to avoiding temptations, attempting realistic moral tests, strengthening the right desires, extinguishing the wrong ones, etc. all from the examples of the continent and the incontinent. The perspective of the continent and the incontinent, unlike that of the virtuous, is shared by the student of virtue.

Furthermore, many immature moral agents will be perfectly good role models of what to do when faced with common-place, non-challenging situations. It is true that the virtuous passes with ease demanding moral tests that the rest of us may fail at, but it is also the case that for the greater part of many moral lives the tests we face are commonplace and undemanding. At the same time, it is by habituating ourselves in easier, more-straightforward, less demanding situations, that we develop the strength of will to do the right thing in more challenging ones.

Another source of help comes from the idea that virtue is complex. Virtue requires the ability to perceive morally salient features of situations, the moral imagination to empathise with others, the development of cognitive and affective abilities that strengthen moral judgement and the practical know-how to bring about particular effects in the world, amongst other abilities. Perhaps there are immature moral agents who have yet to achieve perfect virtue but have made progress in different aspects of the skill of *phronesis*. Perhaps someone has a well-developed sense of moral imagination even though he struggles to put his convictions into practice; such a person could still offer an insight into moral imagination even if he is not the perfect role model.. A student of virtue who is self-aware, has identified his weaknesses and is mindful of his flaws may seek role models who are strong in precisely those areas he lacks.

It is also important to note that it isn't only success that can be educationally useful, failures can also act as role models with respect to what to avoid (Athanassoulis, 2017, Besser-Jones, 2014, ch. 3). A role model can model what one should avoid doing, just as well as how one should act. A role model can help us identify pitfalls, mistakes and weaknesses to avoid by showing us, in detail, the many ways in which we could also go wrong. Clearly not all failures will serve this educational purpose. Those who are oriented towards vice may provoke a feeling of repugnance but probably do not offer anything else in terms of pedagogical value. What we need are interesting failures, failures that can become constructive lessons for students, so perhaps we need people who are similar to us and fail in ways in which we are also likely to fail, or people who fail by a small margin, or people who fail in specific

circumstances that reveal their particular weaknesses and serve as cautionary tales, and so on.

All this means that we do not need to look to the virtuous for a role model, a position which, as we have seen, she can never fulfil. We should look instead to the process of becoming virtuous. The road to virtue provides plenty of role models for the student in the shape of the less than perfectly virtuous, those who are close to the mark but not quite there, but also failures, those who fall short of the mark in a particular way – in such a way that they serve as an example of what to avoid. The less than perfectly virtuous as role models avoid the two objections we saw above to the idea of the virtuous agent as a role model. Firstly, the less than virtuous do not occupy a privileged perspective which the student has no means of sharing. By 'privileged perspective' I mean a perspective which is by definition inaccessible to others, one whose viewpoint cannot be shared. Of course, every person occupies a unique perspective from which they evaluate the requirements of the situation they are in, but acknowledging this is quite different from the idea of a privileged perspective. A privileged perspective is inaccessible and therefore of very limited (if any) value for educational purposes. A unique perspective may be replicated by similar people, in similar circumstances. It is of use to others who also come to share this unique perspective, so not all less than virtuous agents will be of educational value to all students of virtue, but some, who find themselves in similar positions, making judgements from similar viewpoints, will be good role models. The less than virtuous are on the same character developmental journey as the student, they are on the same imperfect journey as the student and share the same perspectives. Secondly, the less than virtuous are similar to the student in that they are also on the long and difficult path towards virtue, so they are more likely to face the same kinds of situations as the student and more likely to be useful as role models. They are likely to face the same challenges, have to avoid the same temptations, develop similar developmental strategies, struggle against similar weaknesses and take advantage of similar strengths.

4 Two objections to the idea of the less than virtuous as role models

There are, however, two further objections to the idea of the less than perfectly virtuous as role models. The first objection relates back to practical concerns. Earlier, we temporarily set aside practical concerns regarding the plausibility of identifying the perfectly virtuous as a role model for the sake of the discussion, but these same concerns apply to the possibility of the less than perfectly virtuous acting as role models. How do we know whose example to follow and how far to follow her for? How do we know what to follow the role model in and what to learn from? How do we know what lesson we should learn from what we observe?

The answer to this objection is that good beginnings, reflection and judgement are still necessary. We must keep in mind that role modelling is just a tool, and like any tool it is only as good as the hands that use it. Practice is crucial to becoming virtuous, no one becomes virtuous merely by observing the example of others, rather the example of others offers some guidance with respect to how one should

orient oneself in one's actions. Judgement, rather than blind copying, is crucial for the student to benefit from the role models, judgement concerning which role models are appropriate to the student's development at that particular time, judgement concerning what lesson the student learns from the role model, judgement in drawing conclusions from the particulars observed, and so on. A foundation in developing moral judgement of this kind, the moral judgement that can steer us towards useful examples in our moral education, comes from good beginnings and is homed in by practice, but it is ultimately reliant on developing the ability to judge what counts as a good role model and what does not.

It is possible to object here that the argument has become circular: the student requires judgement in order to identify the very role models who will help him cultivate his moral judgement. I don't think this is a concern because the ability to judge correctly is a multifaceted skill, which involves many other capacities and which functions alongside other perceptual, affective and imaginative faculties, in a variety of diverse ways. So, for example, the ability to identify an appropriate role model requires self-knowledge, that is the ability to identify one's weaknesses, to be aware of where one needs guidance and to know one's deficiencies, all in light of a conception of where one should be headed. It also requires an ability to, to an extent, understand and appreciate others, in order to identify the right kind of people, the role models who fit the needs of the student at that particular moment in time. This kind of judgement, judgement in correctly identifying those who could be helpful to one's moral journey, is part of the qualities needed for moral development and may differ from the moral judgement displayed by the mature moral agent, the fully virtuous. That there are many aspects to moral judgement, and that its exercise is relative to the individual and the situation should not surprise us given Aristotle's warnings about the nature of ethics (NE 1094b 11-13).

We also come to see the noble and the good slowly. Different role models provide different pieces to the puzzle as do other factors like self-reflection, self-knowledge, habituation, and so on. We also come to see from a particular perspective, a perspective that has already oriented us towards the noble and the good. When the parent says "Share the truck" to the three year old, she is not concerned with trucks but with transmitting something about how she and those around understand friendship, kindness, hospitality and fairness. When the three year old learns to share the truck he catches the tiniest glimmer of the virtues of friendship, kindness, hospitality and fairness, a glimmer he will need to build on during a life time, but crucially does so from a background that values these virtues. The student of virtue approaches his own developmental journey from a background in which he has caught glimpses of what it is to be a friend, to be kind, to be hospitable and to be fair, and certainly from a background that has led him to commit to wanting to become friendly, kind, hospitable and fair. It matters that the student be oriented towards the noble and the good to begin with so that he can catch glimpses of it.

The role of judgement in identifying the right role model for the right student, in the right manner and at the right time cannot be underestimated. Aristotle tells us that there are different kinds of skills. Some skills like grammar are captured almost entirely in rules, while others, like medicine, require interpretative judgement to decide what is required in each situation, a requirement which will vary from

situation to situation[6]. Similarly becoming virtuous is a skill that must be exercised in practice because its exercise requires situation specific judgement. A role model may give the student some direction but even choosing the right role model is something for which the student must practice - all the while recognising that what counts as the right role model will vary with the situation and the person.

Consider the question of whether and to what extent a role model should be articulate about her reasons for action. Some of the literature on virtue ethics is becoming concerned with how articulate the virtuous role model needs to be in order to be of any use to the student (Annas, 2011, Hills, 2015). Some of the discussions set up a dichotomy between virtue ethicists who require articulacy from role models and those who do not (Hills, 2015). It seems to me that such an approach is not very Aristotelian in spirit. The kind of help that the student is likely to get from the role model will vary depending on the situation and its particulars. Some situations do not admit to great articulacy, e.g. if you ask me why I hugged my bereaved friend it may be that I cannot say more than "She needed it", whereas other situations may admit to a much more articulate account of the chosen option, e.g. if you ask me why I chose charity A over B, I could tell you about A's efficient behind-the-scenes set up which allows almost all the money donated to be passed onto the cause as opposed to B's wasteful bureaucratic practices, how A supports solutions that work towards eliminating the problem that caused the need for charitable giving, while B perpetuates these conditions, and so on. Had I said "Charity A needed the money" I would not have helped the student understand my choice given that charity B is equally cash strapped – here articulacy is relevant, but not all moral situations admit to the same degree of articulacy.

Furthermore, even if they did, it is not clear that all students learn equally well from being offered articulate reasons. Watching me hug my bereaved friend may be a more moving and instructive moral experience for the student than discussing my reasons for doing so in the abstract, some examples are instructive without having to be articulate or analysed. Some students may learn best from observing and living through situations than having the reasons behind decisions articulated, others may not.

Finally, one should expect articulacy from those who are articulate; that is part of the lesson of learning how to make use of role models. Some role models are articulate, some are good at transmitting knowledge, or explaining motives, some are very self-aware, or are good teachers, and some are not. It seems then that there is no hard and fast answer to whether role models should be articulate, nor a definitive rule as to how articulate they should be in order to be good role models. Some role models will be articulate, others will not; some situations will admit to articulacy, others will not; and some students will learn better from articulate role models while

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[6] Aristotle EE 1226a34 – b2 and Dunne, 2009, ch. 8. In this paper I have followed Dunne's (2009) analysis of virtue as a skill, variations on which are developed by Annas (2011) and, particularly in relation to empirical evidence, by Stichter (2018). However, there are authors who challenge this conception, e.g. Zagzebski (1996) and Hacker-Wright (2015).

others will not. Matching the right teacher to the right student will be part of making role modelling successful.

In response, then, to the objection that the less than virtuous role model is practically difficult to identify, the reply is that skill is still required; skill in selecting appropriate role models, e.g. role models not too far removed from the student, role models on similar character development paths as the student, role models who have found good coping strategies for weaknesses shared by the student, role models who are good teachers for this student, and so on. This skill can only be developed in the right context in the first place and by those who are invested in developing it.

The second objection I want to consider is the idea that my argument is circular and unhelpful because it requires the student of virtue to pull himself up by his own boots. However, learning from other learners is not problematically circular. If anything, it is an advantage as it supposes a community of learners with a shared commitment to the noble and the good, embarking on an educational journey that leads them to shape their conceptions of what constitutes a virtue and what virtue demands of them in practice. The student of virtue learns from others who are like him, who face the same situations he does and who are committed to understanding and internalising the same conception of the noble and the good. He learns in a community that faces particular moral challenges, which are often shaped by historical, cultural and environmental factors (Bakhurst, 2005, p.274). Moral education occurs within a particular context, a context of other people who are committed to the same moral goals, of thinking, feeling and acting virtuously. The student of virtue becomes part of a tradition of people who share the same ambition, to understand and internalise virtue (Arendt, 2003, pp. 145-146). Those around us can help us develop morally both because they have been where we are and because they are heading where we are heading. Learning within a community of learners does not generate a bootstrapping problem, rather it involves the recognition of a shared project.

5 In practice

In this last section of the paper I would like to draw some connections between the arguments so far and evidence from psychology on the efficacy of role modelling.

Some psychologists are as optimistic about the power of role models to inspire, as some philosophers. Consider, for example, Haidt who carried out research on participants who had observed unexpected acts of goodness, which led them to experience strong feelings of elevation (Haidt, 2000, p.3). Participants are inspired to feel more loving and motivated to perform similar prosocial actions. Haidt goes as far as to predict that feelings of elevation may have a social dimension, creating an 'upward spiral' of good deeds triggering further good deeds in others. Some philosophers share this optimism, consider for example Zagzebski's arguments which develop an entire moral theory on the idea that we identify moral exemplars based on the feelings of admiration they provoke (Zagzebski, 2017). For Zagzebski moral education

is essentially the emulation of exemplars[7]. Indeed Haidt and Zagzebski come to very similar conclusions from two different disciplines[8].

However, a more detailed look at the effects of exemplars reveals a more complicated picture. Who is affected by exemplars and how are they affected by them? The answer to the first question is that different types of exemplars will be more likely to affect different participants. Philosophers tend to focus on positive role models[9], people who are doing better than us in a field where we have aspirations to excel, but little or no attention is paid to negative role models, that is, people who have failed at endeavours that we are also undertaking. Psychological research, however, has quite a lot to contribute to this discussion.

Some role models offer opportunities for upward comparisons, e.g. a role model who highlights achievements the participant can strive towards. Other role models highlight feared and to-be-avoided outcomes who offer opportunities for downward comparisons. Whether participants will be impacted by positive, upward comparison role models, or negative, downward comparison role models, will depend on the participant's goals. Participants who are focused on promoting successful outcomes will be more motivated by the example of upward comparisons that represent desired alternative selves. So the student who focuses on the goal of a good degree and a good job will be motivated by a comparison with a graduate with a good degree and a good job. Participants who are focused on preventing unsuccessful outcomes will be more motivated by downward comparisons with undesirable alternative selves. So, a risk averse driver who is faced with the example of a drunk driver who has hit a pedestrian will be motivated to act to avoid a similar mistake and a similar disaster. A positive role model provides a guide to success, but only for those who are already geared towards success; while a negative role model highlights way of avoiding failure, but only for those who already fear failure. Significantly, when faced with role models that are contrary to the participants' regulatory goals, e.g. a goal-oriented person faced with a downward comparison target and vice versa, participants will not only fail to draw motivation from the models but may even feel their motivation undercut by such models (Lockwood et al, 2002). The philosophical overreliance on, exclusively, positive role models may prove harmful for some students of virtue.

The regulatory focus of individuals, whether they are focused on promoting successful outcomes or preventing unsuccessful outcomes, may be chronic or temporary, may change from domain to domain and at different times of a person's life, and may be open to manipulation. For example, in some domains, e.g. health, strong prevention concerns tend to prevail, that is, when it comes to health, participants tend to be more focused on outcomes to avoid than goals to achieve. Or participants

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[7] Zagzebski, 2017, p.129. To be fair to Zagzebski she does acknowledge that a certain amount of development is a prerequisite before benefiting from an exemplar, Zagzebsky, 2017, p.25.

[8] It is worth noting that Zagzebski argues that we identify exemplars due to the feelings of admiration we have for them, while Haidt uses the term 'elevation' for moral exemplars and reserves the term 'admiration' for nonmoral exemplars, Haidt, 2013.

[9] Consider, for example, Zagzebski, 2017 who develops her entire discussion around models for emulation but shies away from discussing even one contemptible role model.

may exhibit different goal focus at different times of their lives, e.g. older participants tend to expect fewer changes of their selves in the future so they have fewer hoped-for and feared-for selves altogether. Interestingly goals may also be primed by manipulation during an experiment which then makes participants more likely to be motivated by the relevant role model, that is, if you want people to be inspired by a positive role model get them to think about promoting their positive goals first (Lockwood et al, 2002). These insights have a great significance for educational projects that use role modelling. They tell us that the use of role modelling should be targeted to the individual and her regulatory focus, it should be sensitive to different domains and different times in a person's life and it may be most effective when preceded by goal priming.

The goals participants tend to have also seem to have a cultural dimension with parallel effects on whether individuals from different cultures will be motivated by upward or downward social comparisons. Western cultures concerned with personal achievement and self-enhancement, place an emphasis on promotion strategies; success, achievement and individualism are highly valued so upward comparison role models are likely to be more motivating. Asian cultures, by comparison, tend to be collectivistic and see the self as a part of a web of social relationships. This places an emphasis on prevention strategies and on avoiding failure, so downward comparison role models are likely to be more motivating (Lockwood and Marshall, 2005). Role models then, may be inspirational but whether they do so and what form this inspiration takes, e.g. imitation or avoidance, may depend on what participants are aiming for in the first place.

Furthermore, even if we do focus exclusively on positive, upward comparison role models, philosophical optimism about their unqualified positive impact is not warranted. Monin argues that while some moral comparisons might inspire us, others may be perceived as a threat to the self. Comparing oneself to a superior other may be an unflattering comparison and can trigger three experiences: feelings of moral inferiority which trigger defence mechanisms such as trivializing the comparison, feelings of moral confusion than trigger suspicion and lead to denying any meaning to the comparison, and feelings of resentment at the anticipated moral reproach from the moral comparison that would leave us worse off (Monin, 2007). What kinds of factors affect whether we will be inspired or feel threatened by an upward social comparison?

Monin's studies suggest that moral rebels are seen as inspiring to uninvolved observers, whereas they are perceived as threatening to those who are in a similar situation (Monin, 2007 and Monin et al, 2008). An uninvolved participant who hears of a tale of bravery by a moral rebel can still imagine their future self as similar, for example someone who reads of Milgram's studies can be inspired to similar, future resistance to authority on their part. However, a participant in Milgram's studies, someone who has already shocked an innocent person at the urging of an authority figure, is likely to feel threatened by the discovery of other participants who refused to press the switch[10]. Participants already in the situation find that moral role models

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[10] Incidentally, I think that these participants are a good example of people who feel true envy at a person because of her moral traits, a possibility discussed theoretically by Zagzebski, 2015, p. 212, but which, she concludes there are no empirical studies of. Monin's work, Lockwood and Kunda's and Han's

bring into question their own behaviour and provoke feelings of dislike instead of admiration. In short, a role model is an admirable role model only as long as the behaviour is still an option for the participant, if the participant had already chosen a different course of action the role model feels threatening. This conclusion highlights an extremely important dimension of role modelling, attainability.

It seems that attainability is an extremely significant factor in whether a role model will inspire and motivate or demoralize and deflate, with evidence to this effect coming from a variety of studies. In an influential paper Lockwood and Kunda suggest that role models are more likely to affect participants if they are considered relevant, and more likely to affect participants positively if they are considered attainable (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997 and Moberg, 2000). The relevance dimension affects whether the role model will be a source of comparison in the first place. The more relevant to the self the role model is judged to be, the more likely to trigger a comparison. Relevant others are people who are more similar to us in a variety of ways, e.g. age, race, gender or personality and who have acted in similar circumstances to our own. So, an academic is more likely to be affected by an academic role model than by an athletic one.

The consequences of the comparison will depend on the perceived attainability of the role model. An attainable role model is inspiring, she shows us what can be achieved, encourages and motivates us, and even points the way to achieving goals. An unattainable role model is discouraging and demoralizing by pointing out our failures and shortcomings and making us feel disheartened and inferior. In studies in which University students were shown a role model of a recent graduate student from their discipline who had achieved a good degree and gone on to get a good job, first year students felt inspired and motivated, fourth year students felt threatened. First year students reported feeling that the role model was someone they could aspire to, someone whose goals they shared and someone whose route to success they could copy – they actually reported being motivated to go out and follow the example of the role model in taking up particular activities which he had credited as contributing to his success. First year students were motivated to study harder and picked up the role model's success strategies as their own. Fourth year students, by contrast, tended to dismiss the comparison, felt they were dissimilar to the role model and explained why they could not learn anything from this particular role model. For the first year students the example of the role model was relevant, i.e. studying and working in the same discipline, but attainable, because in the first year of study there is the possibility that one will work hard, improve and reach the goals achieved by the role model by the time one also reaches graduation. For the fourth year students the example was equally relevant, but this time unattainable because by the fourth year one's academic progression is already set and graduation is looming. Faced with someone who had achieved well beyond what they had, with no time to improve, and

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Footnote 10 (continued)

discussions below of reactions to relevant but unattainable role models may be relevant empirical evidence for Zagzebski's point.

no control over improvement, meant that for the fourth years the role model was unattainable. Instead of being inspiring, an unattainable, but relevant role model, invokes threatening feelings. In order to manage the threat, the fourth year students dismissed, trivialized and rejected the comparison altogether (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997), so for them the role model was not a successful educational model.

Similar conclusions on the importance of attainability are arrived at in other studies, for example, exposure to inspiring but self-relevant female leaders in the medical field or in STEM fields, inspires women to pursue a career in medicine or STEM, while exposure to elite female leaders, women whom participants do not identify with, can have negative effects on their aspirations, self-perceptions and stereotypes (on medicine Rosenthal et al, 2013, on STEM Betz, 2013). Parallel results have been found in studies of female leadership role models in general and stereotypical reasoning (Hoyt and Simon, 2011, and Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004). Specifically, with reference to moral exemplars, Han found that attainable exemplars had a positive effect on both the intentions and the behaviour of participants, leading them to commit to extra voluntary activity even during a high risk exam period, whereas exposure to unattainable role models even leads to a slight decline in voluntary service activity (Han et al., 2017). University students presented with the example of another student who volunteered for one to two hours a week, were inspired and motivated to volunteer themselves. However, when presented with a student who volunteered for fifteen hours a week, a target perceived to be unattainable, participants were significantly less likely to volunteer themselves. Middle school students reported feeling more motivated by peer examples in moral classes rather than examples of historical figures like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. (Han et al., 2017). Similar to Monin's conclusions, Han found that participants tended to trivialize the attainments of unattainable exemplars and feel lower levels of affection for them (Han et al., 2017). In another study, Han found that young people were more likely to be motivated by attainable role model examples from amongst their friends and family than from reading stories of exemplary exemplars like Mother Teresa (Han, 2016). It seems then that we don't admire all exemplars, just the attainable ones.

In summary, irrelevant but attainable role models may provoke some general reflection but are most likely to have no impact as their field of excellent is not relevant to the participant, so, for example, a peer athletic role model will not have an impact on someone whose goals are oriented towards academic excellence. An irrelevant but unattainable role model may lead the participant to bask in feelings of reflected glory but won't have an impact on motivation or behaviour, e.g. a participant who learns that a fellow countryman has won Olympic gold in athletics will feel pride at the national association but won't be motivated to take up athletics. A relevant and attainable role model will have a positive impact, will be inspiring, will increase motivation and will lead to changes in behaviour in order to become more like the role model, e.g. a young athlete is likely to be inspired and motivated to train harder by the example of a countryman's Olympic win. Finally, a relevant but unattainable role model will provoke negative emotions and reactions, e.g. an athlete towards the end of his career may feel threatened by his colleague's Olympic win

because a similar win is no longer a possibility for him (cf. Lockwood and Pinkus, 2007).

How does all this relate to the claim that the less-than-virtuous are better role models than the virtuous? Both groups of role models may be deemed to be relevant to the student as they all share a commitment to moral improvement and to the goals of the noble and the good. However, the less-than-virtuous are more numerous and more diverse so it seems more likely that the student of virtue will find models amongst them that are more relevant to him in terms of sex, race, background and identity, than among the virtuous. Indeed the moral role models frequently mentioned by philosophers seem, if anything, rather irrelevant to our lives, e.g. God-like religious figures, saints and people performing extraordinary acts of bravery under exceptional conditions. Consider, for example, Zagzebski's exemplars. Her hero, exemplifying courage, is Leopold Socha a Polish sewer inspector who at great personal risk hid a number of Jews in the sewers during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Her saint, exemplifying charity, is Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities where disabled people can be celebrated and supported in every aspect of their lives. Her sage, exemplifying wisdom, is Confucius, the Chinese philosopher and teacher (Zagzebski, 2015). I have no doubt that many readers will find Socha, Vanier and Confucius to be admirable and I share in that judgement, however I don't find them very relevant to my life. Both in terms of age, sex, occupation, and personal characteristics as well as in terms of the circumstances of their lives, these exemplars are removed from the circumstances of mine[11].

More crucially the less-than-virtuous are far more attainable role models than the virtuous. A role model who joins demonstrations against fascism, writes letters for Amnesty International causes and organises a fundraiser to support local immigrant families seems more attainable from the perspective of the average person than Leopold Socha. A role model who writes to their Member of Parliament in order to improve accessibility in their home town and volunteers for the Riding for the Disabled association seems more attainable than a role model who gives up their home, family and job to set up a L'Arche community. A role model who tries to combat her cognitive biases, who recognizes her reasoning mistakes and tries to improve her critical thinking skills seems more attainable than one of the greatest thinkers in the history of humankind.

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[11] Of course this judgement may be reversed in the case of, at least some, of my readers. If you find that these admirable role models of perfect virtue are also relevant to yourself then they would constitute useful educational role models for you. I don't want to preclude the possibility that the perspective of *some* virtuous role models will resonate with some students of virtue, just to argue that it is unlikely to do so for most students and as a result this lack of relevance makes them unsuitable for the students' educational needs.

6 Conclusion

Virtue ethics is a developmental theory; it is a theory about *becoming* virtuous. While the virtuous person is the goal, focusing exclusively on her is, for the purposes of education, misleading because when it comes to education the process is as important as the goal. Focusing on the virtuous as a role model for education gives the mistaken impression that all the student has to do is to jump directly from being a student to being perfectly virtuous. However, the development of virtue is a long, complex and challenging path. To make sense of this path, the student is best served by role models at every stage of it, at every turn of it and at every challenge of it. The less than virtuous are these role models. They show the way in glimmers and increments. They model particular, complex situations, and they reflect specific stages of character development, each one with individual weaknesses and strengths. The purpose of this paper has been to draw attention to the less than virtuous. They are the ones the student should be seeking out for effective moral guidance when it comes to the path to virtue and they function as helpful role models. This doesn't mean that the preceding discussion is exhaustive of everything relevant to role modelling. Many interesting questions remain, such as the possibility of moral exemplars eliciting negative emotions (Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2018) or the admiration of immoral and negative role models (Archer and Matheson, 2021). These are extremely interesting possibilities for further discussions[12].

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