



Wilson, A. (2019). *Admiration and the Development of Moral Virtue*. In A. Grahle, & A. Archer (Eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Admiration* (pp. 201-215). (Moral Psychology of the Emotions). Rowman and Littlefield. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786607683/The-Moral-Psychology-of-Admiration>

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## ADMIRATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL VIRTUE

Alan T. Wilson

Philosophers and psychologists have recently been focusing on the important question of how positive character traits are developed.<sup>1</sup> Within philosophy, these positive character traits are referred to as *virtues*. In this paper, I examine one intuitively appealing proposal concerning virtue development – the idea that the path to moral virtue can begin with the experience of admiration for a moral exemplar. My aim is to provide a model of how this process might work by identifying the different stages that it would involve. I then highlight three ways in which admiration might nevertheless *fail* to result in the development of moral virtue. It is hoped that providing this model, and highlighting the potential problems, will be helpful for those interested in *encouraging* virtue development. With this in mind, I also provide a brief discussion of admiration in the context of virtue education.

### I. Preliminaries

Before setting out the proposed model of virtue development through admiration, I want to briefly provide some detail on the main concepts being used. Those concepts are: (i) virtue, (ii) admiration, and (iii) moral exemplar.

As mentioned above, virtues are positive character traits, and philosophers typically follow Aristotle in dividing these traits into (at least) two categories. *Moral virtues* are thought to include traits such as compassion, courage, honesty, and justice. *Intellectual virtues* are thought to include traits such as inquisitiveness, intellectual rigour, and intellectual humility. In both cases, virtues can be conceived of as stable dispositions to react appropriately (both emotionally and in terms of behaviour) to the situation that one finds oneself in, and to do so for the right reasons. Being virtuous involves an agent's emotions, behaviour, and habits of reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

For example, the moral virtue of generosity involves more than simply the behaviour of giving time and resources to other people. Instead, the virtuously generous agent will give *appropriately*, in a way that is sensitive to relevant features of the situation (such as whether the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Annas, Narvaez, and Snow (2015); Miller *et al* (2015, Part VII); and Snow (2014).

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful outline of the Aristotelian conception of virtue, see Hursthouse (1999, 10-14). For an excellent introduction to virtue theory, see Battaly (2015).

recipient will be able to manage the increased resources, or whether those resources could be better used in some other way). Importantly, the virtuously generous agent will also be disposed to act in this appropriate way for the right reasons. That is, the virtuously generous agent can be expected to give appropriately out of a desire to help others, rather than out of a desire to receive favourable publicity. My focus in this paper will be on the development of moral virtues, and on the idea that this development can be prompted by the experience of admiration for a moral exemplar.<sup>3</sup>

In recent work, Linda Zagzebski (2013; 2015; 2017) has developed an *exemplarist moral theory* based on exemplars who are identified through admiration. As explained by Zagzebski, admiration is an emotion and, as such, involves both a characteristic affective component and an intentional object.<sup>4</sup> To say that admiration has an intentional object is just to say that it is directed *at* something or someone. We do not feel admiration in general, but rather we admire *that* person or *that* action. This is similar to other emotions. Anger, gratitude, fear, and so on, are all directed at intentional objects in the same way. Just as admiration is directed towards admirable people, so anger might be directed at a friend's thoughtless comment, and fear might be directed at the large spider in the corner of the room. Of course, as Zagzebski acknowledges, the targets of our emotions are not always appropriate. The friend's comment, while thoughtless, may well be trivial, and so not warrant our anger. The spider, while large, may well be harmless, and so not warrant our fear.

Concerning the characteristic affective component, or the "feel", of admiration, Zagzebski discusses relevant work from Jonathan Haidt and colleagues. Haidt refers to the emotion of "elevation", which Zagzebski takes to be roughly equivalent to what she is interested in when discussing admiration.<sup>5</sup> According to Haidt, the characteristic feel of this emotion involves:

distinctive physical feelings, including the feeling of dilation or opening in the chest, combined with the feeling that one has been uplifted or "elevated."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the development of intellectual virtues, see Wilson and Miller (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> The account of admiration outlined here is set out in Zagzebski (2017, 32-35).

<sup>5</sup> Haidt uses "admiration" for the response generated by non-moral excellence and reserves "elevation" for the response generated by moral excellence. I will follow Zagzebski in using "admiration" for both. Kristjánsson (2017) suggests the need to make a further distinction. He describes "a kind of moral awe" for "transpersonal moral beauty".

<sup>6</sup> Described in Zagzebski (2017, 41). See also Algoe and Haidt (2009, 106) and Haidt (2003).

While this may be right, it will not be necessary to endorse Haidt's specific understanding of the characteristic feel of admiration/elevation. All that is required is to accept that admiring a person or an action feels different from experiencing other emotions in response to the same intentional object. It feels different to admire someone than it does to fear them, or to love them, or to be angered by them. That is what is meant by the claim that admiration involves a characteristic affective component, in addition to having an intentional object.

The final concept to be explained is that of the exemplar. One approach here would be to provide a list of putative moral exemplars to illustrate the general idea. Exemplars listed by Zagzebski (2017) include Leopold Socha, who risked his life to shelter and protect Jewish families during the Holocaust, and Jean Vanier, who set up a network of interfaith and intercultural communities that welcome and care for those with disabilities. William Damon and Anne Colby (2015, Ch. 2) have identified exemplars including Eleanor Roosevelt, and Nobel Peace Prize winners Jane Addams and Nelson Mandela. We might also want our list to include exemplars that are less extreme, such as those who volunteer for charity in their spare time, or who set a good example in more everyday situations.

A different approach would be to define exemplars in terms of either of the two concepts already discussed. For example, exemplars could be understood as those agents who are appropriate targets of the emotion of admiration. Alternatively, we could understand exemplars as those agents who possess actual virtues. Rather than relying on the exemplarity of specific individuals, I will here assume that a moral exemplar is someone who it is appropriate to admire due to the possession of moral virtue.

## II. From Admiration to Moral Virtue

There is a strong tradition of philosophical thought linking moral virtue with reflection on exemplars. Aristotle (1941, 1402-03 [1388<sup>a</sup>30-<sup>b</sup>20]), tells us that experiencing *zēlos* in response to those who possess something highly valued can drive agents to acquire the valued thing for themselves. And he lists the virtues among those highly valued possessions that we can be driven to pursue in this way.<sup>7</sup> Despite this tradition, however, a surprising lack of detail has been provided

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<sup>7</sup> The usual translation of "zēlos" is "emulation". For discussion, see Zagzebski (2015) and Ben-Ze'ev (2003).

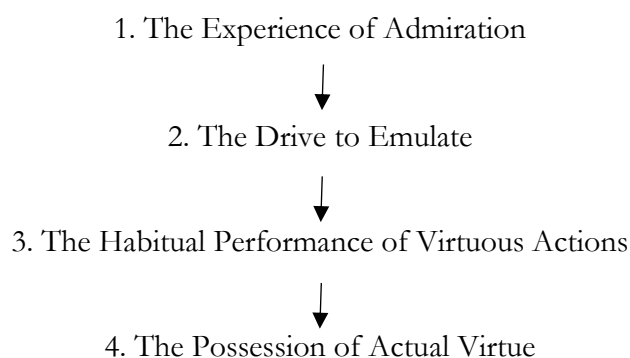
on the process by which recognising and admiring a moral exemplar can lead to the possession of moral virtue.

In the most recent attempt, Zagzebski (2017, 134-39) suggests that the developmental process importantly involves imagination. The idea is that an agent who admires someone will want to imitate that person, including the emotions that characteristically motivate them. The admiring agent will then imagine being motivated in the same way, and this will lead to the actual possession of such motivations. As Zagzebski (2017, 136) states:

I think the model can work because even though imagining ourselves with a motivating feeling is not the same thing as having the feeling, imagining is very close to having, and an imagined feeling can cause an actual feeling, especially when we want to become a person with such a feeling. There are many examples of this phenomenon. Women can sometimes fall in love with a man by spending a long time imagining themselves in love with him.

Zagzebski's suggestion is that we can come to be virtuously motivated by imagining ourselves as being like the virtuous exemplar. Of course, one worry here would be that such imagining will lead to complacency, rather than to virtue development. Zagzebski (2017, 137) ultimately presents her suggestion only as a hypothesis to be tested, while remaining optimistic that it is plausible. My focus here will not be on Zagzebski's imagination-based account. Instead, I will provide an alternative model of how the move from admiration to virtue might occur, and then use this model to identify ways in which the process can go awry.

In order to understand the process leading from admiration to moral virtue, it is important to first differentiate the distinct stages that this process involves. My proposal is that attention needs to be paid to (at least) the following four stages:



Suppose that Anne is a moral exemplar due to her possession of the virtues of honesty and compassion.<sup>8</sup> It will be possible for another agent, Ben, to begin on the path to moral virtue by first experiencing admiration for Anne. That is, Ben will experience the characteristic affective component of admiration in a way that takes Anne as its intentional object. As Zagzebski (2017, Ch. 2) has explained, admiring someone involves perceiving that person *as admirable*. In experiencing admiration for Anne, therefore, Ben will be perceiving Anne *as admirable* in some way.

An open question here concerns the extent to which Ben must be capable of articulating exactly what he is experiencing, and exactly which features of Anne are responsible for her admirability. It is unnecessary to demand that Ben be able to use the language of virtues and vices, or that he be capable of identifying the emotion that he experiences as “admiration”. However, it is important that Ben’s admiration be responsive to *Anne*. That is, Ben’s admiration ought not to be focused solely on some sub-set of Anne’s *behaviour*, be that moral behaviour (such as telling the truth) or non-moral behaviour (such as driving an expensive car or captaining the football team). If Ben only admires certain behaviours, then the intentional object of his admiration is plausibly understood as the behaviour itself. If Ben instead admires Anne, then he will admire Anne as a person, and not merely the behaviour that she engages in.

Having first experienced admiration for the exemplar, Stage 2 involves the agent being driven to emulate the exemplar. On some accounts of admiration, there is thought to be a conceptual link between viewing a person as admirable and being driven to emulate them. This would mean that it is not conceptually possible to experience admiration without being motivated (at least to some extent) to emulate the admired person. If you are not motivated to emulate, then you are not experiencing admiration. At times, this looks to be Zagzebski’s view, such as when she distinguishes admiration from other emotions by offering what looks like a definition: “admiration, a positive feeling with the desire to emulate” (2017, 58). However, Zagzebski clarifies elsewhere that the drive to emulate is merely the “typical response” to experiencing admiration (2017, 34). In Section III, I will explore the possibility of admiration failing to result in a (sufficient) drive to emulate. But in cases where admiration successfully leads to virtue, the experience of admiration for a moral exemplar motivates the agent to be *like* the exemplar in question.

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<sup>8</sup> The purpose of using a (somewhat thinly described) fictional example is to avoid unnecessary distraction. Those with firm views on who the moral exemplars are (and why) should feel free to substitute their own preferred example here.

Consider again the example of Ben's admiration for Anne. If Ben is going to continue along the path to virtue, then it is important that his perception of Anne *as admirable* generates in him the drive to emulate her. That is, the affective component of Ben's admiration must motivate in him the goal of wanting to be like Anne. (Similar to how the affective component of fear can motivate in us the goal of avoiding the large spider in the corner of the room.) Given that Ben's admiration is responsive to Anne as a person, Ben will view emulating Anne as including those actions that are most expressive of her character. Anne's honest and charitable nature means that being like Anne involves engaging in actions such as telling the truth and donating to homeless shelters. By the time an agent successfully moves through Stages 1 and 2, therefore, the experience of admiration for an exemplar will have led to a motivation to be like the exemplar, where this includes acting in certain ways.

With these two aspects in place, it ought to then be clear how an agent could progress to Stage 3 – the habitual performance of virtuous actions.<sup>9</sup> If Ben has the goal of wanting to be like Anne, and if Ben's view of being like Anne involves telling the truth and donating to homeless shelters, then this can be expected to lead Ben to act in these virtuous ways. As long as nothing changes, Ben can be expected to continue to act in these ways. Ben will have developed a habit of virtuous action. This ought to be viewed as a moral achievement for someone not previously inclined to act virtuously. And it may be that, in some cases, the performance of virtuous actions (or the avoidance of vicious actions) is our most pressing concern. Nevertheless, it is important to note that habitual virtuous action is not sufficient for the possession of actual virtue. If we are concerned with actually being virtuous, then more will be required.

Moral virtue requires not only performing right actions, but also performing those actions for the right reasons. Ben's admiration for Anne might lead him to perform actions such as telling the truth, but Ben will not possess the virtue of honesty as long as his motivation for doing so is simply to imitate Anne. Plausibly, the motivation to imitate an exemplar is not the appropriate motivation for performing virtuous actions. The problem here is not that Ben's motivation is *immoral*. But if the explanation for Ben's truth-telling is his desire to imitate Anne, then this reveals that Ben's values and reasons are not (yet) those that would be expected of a morally virtuous agent.

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<sup>9</sup> I follow Swanton (2003) here in distinguishing virtuous actions and actions *from* virtue.

How, then, might an agent move from the habitual performance of virtuous actions (Stage 3) to the possession of actual virtue (Stage 4)? At this point, we move beyond the specific issue of how admiration is connected to virtue development, and on to a more general question in virtue theory. It is widely agreed that developing virtue requires acting virtuously (where this means acting as a virtuous agent would act). This widespread agreement follows on from Aristotle's well-known claim (1998, 29 [1103<sup>a</sup>32-<sup>b</sup>35]) that:

men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Any account of virtue development that accepts this claim will owe an explanation of how the habitual performance of virtuous actions results in moral virtue. This question is not specific to the issue of whether *admiration* can lead to moral virtue. For that reason, my focus here will be on how admiration can get us to the point of habitually performing virtuous actions, and (in the next section) on how this process might go awry. At this point, I will simply highlight that any theorist who makes positive claims concerning the connection between admiration and virtue development will have a stake in the general task of explaining how acting virtuously results in becoming virtuous.

It is important to note, however, that virtue theorists have recently been working on this very question. For example, Nancy Snow (2018) has argued that acting virtuously can lead to moral virtue through a series of realisations about the value of being virtuous. According to Snow (2018, 73), it is possible for an agent to realise the instrumental, constitutive, and intrinsic value of being virtuous through habitual virtuous action, such as when a parent realises the intrinsic value of patience while interacting patiently with his child. Other theorists, such as Julia Annas (2011) and Matt Stichter (2007; 2011), have argued instead that virtue development occurs in a way that is similar to skill development, where this too requires a period of practice through virtuous action. In these ways, virtue theorists have been providing proposals on how virtuous action can lead to virtue possession.<sup>10</sup> Some such account will be required to complete the proposed model of how the experience of admiration for a moral exemplar can lead to moral virtue.

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<sup>10</sup> For discussion of the two proposals mentioned here, see Wilson and Miller (forthcoming).



In this section, I have sought to provide a model for understanding the path from admiration to moral virtue. However, in clarifying the different stages involved, it becomes apparent that there is plenty of scope for things to go wrong. In the next section, I discuss three ways in which the path from admiration to moral virtue can go awry.

### III. Three Potential Problems

In addition to the question of how virtues are successfully developed, there is the related question of why virtues sometimes fail to develop. This related question is interesting both at the conceptual level, for theorists of virtue and vice, and at the practical level, for those interested in *encouraging* virtue development. Distinguishing the different stages involved in moving from admiration to virtue helps to identify potential problems.

#### (a) *Inappropriate Admiration*

The most straightforward way in which admiration can fail to lead to moral virtue is when it is directed towards an inappropriate intentional object. Of course, this will happen when an agent experiences admiration towards someone who is non-virtuous. An agent who experiences admiration while thinking about vicious agents cannot be expected to thereby develop moral virtues.<sup>11</sup>

A different problem case is when admiration is experienced for a moral exemplar, but where the admiration is not responsive to the exemplar's morally relevant characteristics. In the simple example used above, it was important that Ben admired Anne in a way that was inclusive of her honesty and her compassion. Admiring Anne only when she is driving an expensive car would not be sufficient. For our admiration to be appropriate, it is not enough to ensure that we admire actual moral exemplars. It is also important that our admiration encompasses those features that are responsible for the exemplar's admirability.

This complication raises a serious challenge for those interested in using admiration when attempting to encourage virtue development. It is not obvious how agents can be brought to experience admiration for moral exemplars, but one tempting option is to utilise fictional stories and narratives. Children's literature, for example, is replete with righteous and hardworking

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<sup>11</sup> One complicated case would be admiration in response to someone who *appears* virtuous, but who is actually vicious. Such a case may be more like experiencing admiration for a fictional exemplar than for a (real) vicious person.

exemplars who overcome initial hardship in order to later achieve success and popularity. The difficulty, however, lies in ensuring that any admiration that is sparked for these exemplars focuses on the fact that they are righteous and hardworking, and not (only) on the fact that they are ultimately successful and popular. It is to be hoped that future work can provide insights on exactly how narrowly focused the experience of admiration tends to be, and on what factors tend to influence our admiration for others.

(b) *Admiration Without the Drive to Emulate*

A second problem concerns the worry that admiration might fail to result in a drive to emulate the admired exemplar. As mentioned above, it might be thought that the experience of admiration is conceptually tied to emulation. Even if we accept this, it is clear that the motivation to emulate will not always determine an agent's actions. This is because the motivation to emulate will be just one among the many, perhaps conflicting, motivations that are present. There is no reason to suppose that this one motivation will always be given priority. Whether we understand this as admiration failing to generate a drive to emulate, or as admiration generating a *pro tanto* drive to emulate that is then overridden, if agents ultimately fail to emulate the exemplar, then they will not continue on the path to moral virtue.

Consider the following three ways in which a (sufficient) drive to emulate might fail to develop. First, there will be cases where the agent believes that emulation is too costly. It is possible to admire someone who is risking her life by protesting a brutal regime while at the same time deciding that such behaviour is too dangerous to emulate. Similarly, we might admire those who donate a significant percentage of their earnings to support worthwhile causes, while at the same time deciding that that is not the life for us. In such cases, there is no need to stipulate that we must not *really* admire the agents in question after all. Instead, our admiration has failed to result in a sufficient drive to emulate the admired exemplar.

A second type of problematic case is where emulation is thought likely to be ineffective. This possibility is most obvious when we focus on non-moral attributes. I can admire Roger Federer's tennis ability and yet be in no way moved to emulate him, simply because I realise that no amount of emulation is likely to succeed. The thought here is not that it would be too difficult or too time-consuming. Rather, it is that becoming as skilled as Roger Federer is simply not going to be possible for me, even if I devote the remainder of my life to the task. Of course, I could make progress in becoming more like Federer than I am currently. But I could not attain the actual thing that I admire, which is not simply above-average tennis ability, but truly exceptional,

unprecedented skill. Believing that it will be impossible to match the exemplar's admirability can cause people to fail to develop a sufficient drive to emulate.

One option here is to distinguish different forms of admiration. Zagzebski (2017, Ch. 2, Section 3) argues that admiration differs depending on whether it is experienced in response to "natural" or "acquired" excellences. It might be thought that if we focus on the latter form of admiration, and if we assume that acquired excellences are always potentially attainable, then we will not need to worry about cases where emulating an exemplar is unrealistic. However, such a move is problematic. First, there is the problematic assumption that the characteristics we admire can be divided into those that are natural and those that are acquired. It is unclear, for example, where Federer's immense skill falls on this divide. But even if we ignore this, it is important to note that the crucial factor here is not whether the admired attribute *really is* attainable. Rather, what is important is whether the admiring agent *believes* it to be attainable. Suppose that, contrary to Aristotle, it is possible for everyone to become virtuous. Nevertheless, someone might believe that virtue is impossible *for her*. If so, sufficient drive to emulate the virtuous exemplar will fail to develop.

A third way in which admiration might fail to result in emulation is when admiring agents view the exemplar's positive features as lacking in relevance for their own lives. Even if an agent believes that it would be both possible and not too costly to acquire the positive features herself, she may nevertheless lack the drive to do so if she believes that those features are somehow irrelevant to her circumstances. Again, this possibility is most easily demonstrated by thinking about non-moral characteristics. Someone might genuinely admire the specialised navigational abilities of sailors and explorers, and yet view this skill as lacking relevance to the average person in an age of Google Maps and GPS. In such a case, sufficient drive to attain those navigational abilities is unlikely to develop.

Is this sort of example possible regarding moral virtues, as opposed to non-moral skills? Perhaps moral virtues are universally relevant, regardless of one's life circumstances. This will be the case if, for example, the possession and exercise of moral virtue is necessarily connected to human flourishing. However, this would not be enough to demonstrate that agents will always *believe* that the possession of moral virtue is relevant to their own circumstances. Again, the problem here is that the drive to emulate may fail to develop depending on what agents believe to be the case, and not on the facts of the matter. We have no reason to accept that it is impossible for someone who admires a morally virtuous exemplar to nevertheless view the virtues as lacking

in relevance for her own life. This perceived lack of relevance is one further way in which an agent can fail to develop a sufficient drive to emulate a moral exemplar, even in cases where the agent correctly recognises the exemplar's admirability.

(c) *The Drive to Emulate Without Habitual Virtuous Actions*

An agent who successfully progresses through Stages 1 and 2 will have experienced appropriate admiration for a moral exemplar and will have developed a sufficient drive to emulate the exemplar. In the simple example of Anne and Ben, Ben's admiration for Anne prompted him to want to be like Anne, in a way that included telling the truth and donating to homeless shelters. However, there is no guarantee that appropriate admiration plus a sufficient drive to emulate will result in habitual virtuous actions. Successful progression to Stage 3 will fail to occur when the agent is unable to work out how the exemplar would act in different situations.

The problem here is that any agent's experience of an exemplar will be limited. While Ben knows that Anne often tells the truth, he will not have witnessed Anne in every possible situation, and so may be unsure whether Anne would tell the truth regardless of the circumstances. Similarly, even if Ben has witnessed Anne donating to homeless shelters, he may be unsure whether she would be willing to donate to all charitable causes. Therefore, even if Ben wants to emulate Anne, his limited knowledge of Anne may mean that he is unsuccessful when attempting to do so. If virtuous actions are those that a virtuous agent would perform, then even those who are driven to emulate might fail to perform virtuous actions in situations where they are unable to work out how their admired exemplar would behave.

This is one place in which Zagzebski's discussion of the importance of imagination could prove useful. Zagzebski's suggestion, following David Velleman (2002), is that agents can imagine themselves as already possessing the admired features of their exemplars, and that this can lead them to acquire those features. Zagzebski (2017, 137) compares this process to method actors who take on the emotions of the characters they portray.

A different role for imagination would be to help fill in any gaps in the knowledge of how an exemplar would act in different situations. Even if Ben has only witnessed Anne in a limited number of situations, it may nevertheless be possible for him to spend time imagining how she would act in unfamiliar circumstances. By doing so regularly, Ben may be able to prepare himself in advance for times when he is in an unfamiliar situation and would otherwise be unable to work out what being like Anne would involve. Imagining exemplars in a variety of situations might go

some way towards reducing the number of cases in which agents are unsure how to emulate their exemplars. This strategy will, of course, be limited by the extent of agents' imaginations, and by the data that they have to work with. But it may reduce the likelihood of agents failing to act in virtuous ways despite having a sufficient drive to emulate their exemplars.

The idea that we can be prompted into virtue by our admiration for moral exemplars is intuitively appealing. However, once we identify the different stages that are involved in this process, it becomes apparent how difficult it will be to develop virtue in this way. Anyone looking to use admiration in the development of moral virtue will have reason to take steps to avoid the three potential problems highlighted in this section.

#### **IV. Educating from Admiration to Moral Virtue**

One motivation for setting out a model of the path from admiration to moral virtue is that this could prove useful for those interested in virtue education. Before concluding, I want to take some steps in a practical direction and briefly discuss the use of admiration in an educational context.

The character education movement is one of the most prominent approaches to moral education, and influential proponents of this approach have generally been in favour of the use of moral role models.<sup>12</sup> Proposals for an Aristotelian form of role-modelling have been provided by Kristján Kristjánsson (2006) and Wouter Sanderse (2013). Kristjánsson and Sanderse both argue that, in practice, the educational use of role models must involve more than simply exposing students to exemplars and hoping that they will copy the exemplars' behaviour. At best, this will result in mere imitation of positive behaviour. It may not result, using the language set out above, in the habitual performance of virtuous actions.

What is required instead is to combine the experience of exemplars with explicit teaching about the virtues and about moral reasons for action. For example, Sanderse (2013, 37-38) argues that teachers, as potential exemplars, "will have to explain to students how their actions and emotional reactions are related to an ideal of the virtuous life". He also suggests (*ibid.*) that the role modelling process could be improved "by giving so-called 'meta-comments', verbalising

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, other prominent approaches to moral education also discuss role models. This includes both Noddings' (2013) care ethics approach and the Kohlbergian approach, although the appeal to modelling is noted as the "least acknowledged of Kohlberg's methods of moral education". See Snarey and Samuelson (2014, 73-75). For an early character education theorist who discusses modelling, see Carr (1991).

feelings and explaining to students which choices they [the role models] make and why”. Similarly, Kristjánsson (2006, 48) argues that any use of exemplars for the purposes of moral education will need to “highlight *moral content*: the reasons why the given quality to be emulated is morally commendable, how it contributes to human well-being.” The idea is that combining the experience of exemplars with an explicit discussion of the virtues – what the virtues are, why they are valuable, and how they are related to human well-being – will provide students with the understanding required to do more than simply imitate their moral role models.

This Aristotelian approach of combining role modelling with explicit discussion of the virtues may be helpful in dealing with one of the problems highlighted above. One problem was that an agent might both admire and want to emulate an exemplar, and yet be unable to work out what acting like the exemplar involves in different situations. By taking time to explain why the exemplar is virtuous, and to explain the exemplar’s reasoning, those who are educating for virtue might provide students with the tools required to work out how to act when faced with unfamiliar circumstances. For example, if Ben knows why Anne told the truth on a particular occasion (rather than merely witnessing that she did), he will have a better chance of extending that reasoning to unfamiliar circumstances. In this way, the Aristotelian approach suggested by Kristjánsson and Sanderse may go some way in reducing the likelihood of one of the potential problems highlighted above.

However, explicit discussion of the virtues may exacerbate one of the other problems. As explained above, the experience of admiration for an exemplar can fail to result in a sufficient drive to emulate that exemplar. This can happen when agents view emulation as being either too costly or as unlikely to succeed. One possible downside of introducing students to, particularly Aristotelian, accounts of the virtues is that they might come to believe that developing virtues will be extremely difficult, or even impossible.

For example, Aristotelian accounts of the virtues emphasise the importance of *phronesis* (or practical wisdom) and follow Aristotle in arguing that it is not possible to be morally virtuous without also possessing *phronesis*. As explained by Hursthouse (1999, 12), *phronesis* is an ability to “reason correctly about practical matters”. As we gain a more detailed understanding of what is involved, it becomes clear that *phronesis* requires a range of different cognitive skills, as well as a high level of understanding concerning things like: the likely consequences of actions; the relative weight of different values; and the nature of the good life. In setting out just some of the elements of *phronesis*, Kristjánsson (2015, 88) tells us that:

the function of *phronesis* is to ‘deliberate finely’ about the relative weight of competing values, actions and emotions in the context of the question of ‘what promotes living well in general’. A person who has acquired *phronesis* has thus, *inter alia*, the wisdom to adjudicate the relative weight of different virtues in conflict situations and to reach a measured verdict about best courses of action.

If the Aristotelian position is correct, then the combination of cognitive abilities plus high levels of understanding that is involved in *phronesis* will be required in order for someone to possess moral virtues.<sup>13</sup> Upon learning that the development of any one virtue will require the development of *phronesis*, it would be unsurprising for students to conclude that virtue development will be too demanding, or even impossible, for them. If this happens, students may fail to develop a sufficient drive to emulate their virtuous exemplars.<sup>14</sup>

How might this worry be avoided in the context of virtue education? A first suggestion applies to those who advocate combining exposure to exemplars with explicit teaching about the virtues. In order to avoid students becoming disheartened and losing (or failing to develop) a sufficient drive to emulate, it may be necessary to avoid discussion of certain features of the virtues. That is, those who endorse a demanding account of the virtues may be required to conceal certain aspects of that account when teaching students about the virtues. At least in the initial stages of development, it may be better not to explain that being virtuous requires the complex skills and understanding involved in *phronesis*, for example. Even those who think that this is an accurate claim about the virtues will have reason to refrain from mentioning it when attempting to educate for virtue. This will reduce the chances of students believing that emulating exemplars will be overly demanding, or even impossible.

A second suggestion for avoiding this problem is more general. Those seeking to educate for virtue will have to choose which moral exemplars to provide as examples for discussion. When making this choice, it may be best not to select those whose level of virtue is extreme. Those who risked everything to protect strangers during the Holocaust, or who suffered from persecution for standing up to unjust regimes, are no doubt highly admirable. But their levels of virtue may also be daunting to the moral novice, in the same way that Federer’s level of ability can be off-putting

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<sup>13</sup> For more on *phronesis*, see Hursthouse (2006) and Russell (2009, Section 1.2).

<sup>14</sup> This problem will be exacerbated if we add further elements of Aristotelian doctrine, such as the “unity of virtue” thesis on which the possession of any one virtue requires the possession of all virtues.

to the beginner at tennis. Instead, it will be better to select those exemplars whose virtue is more immediately relatable and attainable.<sup>15</sup> Local examples of people who volunteer to run after-school programmes, or who contribute in less eye-catching ways, may be more effective in terms of ensuring that emulation is perceived as an achievable goal. The, perhaps surprising, result of this brief discussion is that those interested in admiration in the context of virtue education may have practical reasons to de-emphasise certain important features of the virtues, and to select as exemplars those who are less than perfectly admirable.

This discussion of the relevance of the proposed model to virtue education has only addressed the problem of failing to develop a sufficient drive to emulate as a result of viewing virtue as overly demanding or impossible. The hope is that this initial discussion will prompt future work on both this and the other potential problems that were identified above. Such work will be valuable if we want to pursue virtue education in a way that appeals to role models and exemplars.

## **V. Conclusion**

I have provided a model of how the experience of admiration for a moral exemplar might lead someone, through a series of progressive stages, to the development of moral virtue. One of the benefits of setting out this model is that it allows us to identify potential problems for the approach – ways in which the path to virtue can go awry. It is hoped that this discussion will be beneficial for those interested in conceptual questions about the development of virtues (and vices), as well as for those interested in practical issues concerning virtue education.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a similar point, see Croce and Vaccarezza (2017, 14), where it is argued that “it is easier to imitate someone, when we discover that her moral exemplarity is not beyond our reach.”

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to the editors for the opportunity to contribute to this collection. For comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to Alfred Archer; Christian Miller; participants at the ‘Psychology of Admiration’ conference in Munich; and members of the Beacon Project’s work in progress group at Wake Forest University. Work on this chapter was supported by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Templeton Religion Trust.



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