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beyond admiration: rethinking the nature of emulation qua role modelling

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This paper seeks to disambiguate the nature of emulation – the method of learning from moral role models. Within neo-Aristotelian character education, emulation is considered a primary method of virtuous character development, yet what emulation is and what it involves remains obscure. I argue that this is largely due to a category mistake: the misconceptualisation of emulation as a mere emotion, rather than a moral virtue in its own right. Predominantly composed of virtuous emotion and necessarily entailing virtuous action, I propose a componential account of the virtue of emulation, which I synthesise with Aristotle's theory of 'four causes'. I then make visible the importance of phronesis to the emulative process and accordingly introduce a new concept – entangled phronesis – as the psycho-moral mechanism which underpins it. Subsequently, I highlight the developmentally sensitive nature of emulation by dividing it into two main types: pre-phronetic habituated emulation and phronetically-informed complete emulation.

Keywords: character education, emulation, moral development, phronesis, role modelling

Introduction

At first sight, the act of doing as the role model does may appear to be a fairly uncontroversial aspect of emulation, yet on closer conceptual inspection things are somewhat more complicated. Zagzebski, for example, who has been considered an authority on moral exemplarism (see 2017), takes emulation to be a 'form of behaviour' (2015, p. 210), yet in doing so limits its scope to merely this. She posits the positively experienced emotion of admiration as the primary motivation for emulation, a reading which she 'assumes' to be similar to Aristotle's reading of the emotion of emulation in *Rhetoric* (2013; 2015; 2017). The thing is that in *Rhetoric* (2001, p. 75) Aristotle describes emulation as an *overall* negatively experienced emotion, combining both the feeling of admiration *and* the feeling of distress, which is 'caused by seeing the presence, in persons whose nature is like our own, of good things that are highly valued and are possible for ourselves to acquire' – something which calls Zagzebski's similarity assumption into question. Indeed, whilst Zagzebski's *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (2017) should be credited for reviving the interest in exemplarism in multiple academic discourses, many scholars have voiced persuasive objections to her overemphasis on admiration at the expense of other important aspects of exemplarism – such as exemplarity-related negative emotions – which has begun to push it out of favour (see also Irwin, 2015, p. 247; Kaftanski, 2022; Szutta, 2019; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019, p. 333; 2022, p. 112). All this said, perhaps Zagzebski was onto something important in her description of emulation as a form of behaviour, something which understanding emulation as merely an emotion excludes. Let me explain.

Inspired by Aristotle's depiction of emulation (*zélos*) as *an emotion* in *Rhetoric* (2001, pp. 75-76) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009, 1180b3-8), most neo-Aristotelians also categorise emulation as an emotion (e.g., see Croce, 2019, p. 238; Kristjánsson, 2006, 2018; Sanderse, 2013, p. 36; Steutel & Spiecker, 2004, p. 545; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2022, p. 113; Vos, 2018, p. 6). Within virtue ethics, it is understood that virtuous emotions, i.e., emotions infused with practical wisdom (*phronesis*), are the central ingredients in virtue proper, yet the two are distinct in that virtuous action is a necessary condition of virtue, but not of virtuous emotion – a point which is reinforced by Aristotle and other eminent neo-Aristotelian scholars multiple times (e.g., see 2009, NE, 1098b30-1099a6; Rorty, 1984 , p. 535). More specifically, according to Kristjánsson's componential account of virtuous emotions, they comprise: perception, thought (cognition), physiological feeling and a *behavioural suggestion* (Kristjánsson, 2018, p. 13). However, since proponents of neo-Aristotelian character education – a form of moral education rooted in virtue ethics – consider the emulation of moral role models to be *a*, possibly even *the*, central method of virtuous character development from infancy to early adulthood (e.g., see Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015; 2020; Vos, 2018), this means that emulation is explicitly associated with *virtue* development. Whilst this might seem like a truism, if one accepts Krisjánsson's componential account of virtuous emotions, it is clear that they entail a *behavioural suggestion*, but not full *virtuous activity*, which is reserved only for virtue. Yet, if emulation concerns the development of virtue *qua* full virtue, then, as a matter of logical coherence, it must also include the activity of doing as the role model does, i.e., putting the moral ideals they represent into practice (Henderson, 2022). In addition to virtuous emotion, then, activity should be considered essential to being emulous.

This short foray into the emulation literature gives a flavour of the conceptual tensions which permeate the discourse. Indeed, despite the consensus that becoming virtuous requires the emulation of moral role models, as it stands, there exists a lack of clarity regarding what emulation involves and how the method works in classroom contexts (see Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 136; Vos, 2018) – indicating that questions regarding how role modelling does or should take place remain open. This paper seeks to disambiguate the process of emulation *qua* role modelling, by unpacking the concept of emulation itself. I argue that much of the ambiguity surrounding emulation lies in a category mistake: the misconceptualisation of emulation as a mere emotion rather than, as I will argue, a virtue in its own right (Section 1). I propose that understanding emulation as a virtue allows one to accommodate how becoming virtuous concerns both the cultivation of virtuous emotions and virtuous action under one conceptual umbrella. To further my thesis, I propose to add methodological rigour to emulation as a causal process by systematising it with Aristotle's understanding of causation in his *Metaphysics* (1999, 1044a32-4): the four causes (Section 2). I then make visible the importance of *phronesis* to the emulative process and accordingly introduce a new concept – entangled *phronesis* – as the psycho-moral mechanism which underpins it (Section 3). Here, I also highlight the developmentally sensitive nature of emulation by dividing it into two main types: *pre-phronetic* habituated emulation and *phronetically-informed* complete emulation.

Before I proceed, I will take a moment to outline the scope which I intend this analysis of emulation *qua* role modelling to encompass. For reasons of space, I cannot go into as much depth as I would like, and thus direct readers to two recent papers which add further contours and nuance to the arguments I briefly summarise here (Henderson, 2022; 2023). Furthermore, it should be noted that whilst my position is inherently reconstructive rather than exegetical in nature, I maintain that synthesising much of what follows with Aristotle's ethics and metaphysics can meaningfully extend the contemporary understanding of emulation in neo-Aristotelian character education. Finally, I broadly understand virtues – such as honesty, compassion and justice – as *acquired stable traits of*

character, with character conceptualised as the 'the integration of a constellation of virtues within personality' (Wright et al., 2020, p. 9). Relatedly, *phronesis* is conceptualised in accordance with the Aristotelian *Phronesis* Model (Kristjánsson et al., 2021, p. 240-241), as 'an intellectual meta-virtue of holistic, integrative, contextual, practical reflection and adjudication about moral issues, leading to moral action'.

1 Emulation as a Moral Virtue

Since I have already outlined the central tenets of this argument in the introduction (see also Henderson, 2022), I will now proceed to frame it in standard form:

1. Virtuous emotions are components of virtues.
2. Therefore, virtues and virtuous emotions are intrinsically related but distinct.
3. Virtues are distinguished from virtuous emotions by activity, with virtuous activity being a necessary condition of virtue, but not of virtuous emotion.
4. This entails that, in order to become virtuous, one must put virtuous emotions into practice by exercising virtuous activity.
5. The central way to become virtuous is through emulating moral role models.
6. This implies that, in addition to virtuous emotion, the emulation of role models must include activity.
7. If emulation must include activity, it cannot be purely a virtuous emotion.
8. Therefore, emulation is better categorised as a virtue.

It is worth noting that as Premise 5 is inductive and relies on empirical evidence, this is not purely a deductive argument and best my conclusion 8. can be *highly* probable. To make my argument as persuasive as possible, I shall now proceed to defend the most contentious premises, primarily 3, 4 and 6.

Premise 3: 'virtues are distinguished from virtuous emotions by activity, with virtuous activity being a necessary condition of virtue, but not of virtuous emotion', is supported both by Aristotle and his neo-Aristotelian sympathisers. Aristotle, for example, unambiguously suggests that virtue includes an explicitly behavioural component:
'…to virtue belongs virtuous activity…one who has the activity will of necessity be acting and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete…so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and the good things in life' (2009, NE 1098b30-1099a6).

Something that he reinforces at numerous other junctures in his writing (e.g., see 1936, pp. a33-1103b1; 1103b20–32; 1104b13–15; 1105b5–10). This move is also supported by contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosophers and moral psychologists who all include a behavioural element in their quadripartite componential accounts of virtue (e.g., see Curren & Kotzee, 2014; Fowers et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2020). It is also worth reflecting here that in *Rhetoric* Aristotle explains emotions in three ways, rather than four, (Aristotle, 2001, p. 55), which could be taken to support virtuous action as the distinguishing factor between virtuous emotions and virtues.

Rorty's definition of virtue also makes visible that virtue includes action:
'Virtue (*arete*) is that sort of active disposition (*hexis*) which sets a person to act or react in a mean, in situations involving choice (*prohairesis*), following reason (*logos*) as the person of practical

wisdom (*phronimos*) does in matters concerning *pathe* and actions' (1984, p. 535).
Pathe and actions. Rorty can be interpreted as following Aristotle and others in proposing that virtue must include both emotion (*pathe*) and action. Regarding the *pathe* element, she explicitly states that to contribute to virtue these emotions must be voluntary, appropriate and appropriately understood, i.e. deliberate, medial and rational (Rorty, 1984, p. 537). Regarding action, she further emphasises that 'Aristotle characterises each of the virtues as dispositions to typical actions and reactions' (Rorty, 1984, p. 537), whist maintaining there is a relationship between virtuous emotions and virtue (Rorty, 1984, p. 538). Taken together, these considerations uphold the intrinsic link between action and virtue, and therefore Premise 3.

Premise 4: 'in order to become virtuous, one must put virtuous emotions into practice by exercising virtuous activity'. That virtuous activity evolves a virtuous emotion into a virtue is a point that appears to gain support from Aristotle himself. Indeed, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he posits that the 'the virtues are concerned with actions and passions [emotions]' (1936, pp. 1104b13–15), which suggests that both action and dispositional emotion are necessary for virtue. Action alone is insufficient for virtue (1936, p. 1105a28), nor is an emotion a virtue (1936, p. 1105b29). In light of this, even if prosocial acts are in accordance with virtue, in order to be considered virtuous they must be performed when the agent is in 'a certain condition' (1936, p. 1105a30). This 'certain condition' can be interpreted as being primarily driven by dispositional medial cognitive emotions, which are infused with *phronesis*, which subsequently enables active choice. Importantly, Aristotle (1936) further claims that 'virtue makes the goal correct, and practical wisdom makes what leads to it correct' (*NE*, pp. 1144a8–9). I interpret this as supporting that moral virtue is a perfected disposition to act, driven by *phronetically* informed, i.e., virtuous, emotion.

Premise 6: 'in addition to virtuous emotion, the emulation of role models must include activity'. Let us consider two situations, in the first a *pre-phronesis* or *low-phronesis* moral learner perceives the exemplar's virtues as representative of a moral ideal; *thinks* that they are worthy of emulation, possible to acquire and deserved; *physically feels* the distress and zeal associated with one's lack of the desired quality; and perhaps a *suggestion* to behaviour. Here the learner may start to acquire a virtuous emotion yet cannot be credited with the acquisition of virtue proper. This is partly due to the compelling account of habituation prophesised by Steutel and Spiecker—guided by a role model, virtue must be practiced frequently and consistently to facilitate virtue acquisition (Steutel & Spiecker, 2004). Now consider a second situation which involves a similar process, but instead the behavioural suggestion motivates the learner to practice virtuous action. Consequently, whilst it may be perfectly reasonable to conceive of virtuous emotions without behaviour, as emulation is explicitly associated with *virtue development*, the same cannot be said for virtue. This entails Premise 7: 'if emulation must include activity, it cannot be purely a virtuous emotion', and following this the conclusion, that in light of the required behavioural aspect, 'emulation is better categorised as a virtue'.

Given the complexity of my argument, of which the present account is admittedly only a brief summary, it is worth reiterating it in plain English. Essentially, since emulation is already categorised as a virtuous emotion in the neo-Aristotelian literature, but since emulation must also include virtuous behaviour, conceptually it is more coherent to categorise it as a moral virtue in its own right. Those who define emulation purely as an emotion may thus be guilty of a category mistake. Further, *only if* emulation is understood as a virtue can one accommodate how becoming virtuous concerns both the cultivation of virtuous emotions and virtuous action under one conceptual umbrella. Having briefly justified my argument in favour of conceptualising emulation as

a moral virtue, I will now proceed to add additional conceptual and methodological clarity to its components.

2 The Four Causes of Emulation

Devising a four-causal account of emulation first requires dividing it into its component parts. To do this I appeal to and synthesise a number of relevant sources, primarily Aristotle's four causes (Physics 1936, 94b21-35; Metaphysics 1999, 1044a32-4), the empirical virtue measurement literature (Morgan et al., 2017, p. 4; Wright et al., 2020, p. 8) and Kristjánsson's componential account of virtuous emotions (2018, pp. 8-13). Regarding the latter, it should be noted that Kristjánsson – albeit briefly – proposes a four-causal account of virtuous emotions. I draw upon this for their temporal order – something Aristotle omitted – but due to my focus on virtue proper replace the final cause with *virtuous action*. Reimagined, Kristjánsson's four causes of virtuous emotion encompass:

- **the efficient cause:** the 'source' of an emotion – perceptionthe formal cause: the 'intentional object' of an emotion – thought (cognition)
- **the material cause:** the 'physiological valance' of an emotion – physical feelings
- **the final cause:** the 'goal directed activity' of an emotion – behavioural suggestion.

Synthesised with the aforementioned influences, I then propose that the four causes of emulation comprise:

- **the efficient cause:** the moral agent's perception of the role model's virtues as representative of a moral ideal;
- **the formal cause:** the *phronetically* informed evaluation that these ideals are worthy of emulation and possible to acquire;
- **the material cause:** *physically feeling* the distress *and* admiration, associated with one's lack of the desired quality, i.e., the role-model-represented ideal, which induces the motivational state of inspiration;
- **the final cause:** virtuous action concerning ends – putting the role-model-represented ideal of virtue into practice.

Ultimately, reconstructing Aristotle's four causes and applying them to the virtue of emulation enables me to explain it as a quadripartite causal process encompassing both virtuous emotion (the first three causes) and virtuous action (the final cause) – a process which helps one better understand how emulation works. It is worth noting here that in contrast to Zagzebski (2017), I accommodate admiration within just the material cause, understand it as merely a physiological feeling, and do not elevate it to the status of full-blown virtuous emotion. It is also worth noting that I have constructed and defended a full four-causal account of emulation (Henderson, 2023), yet for present purposes this deliberately brief nod to it will suffice.

3 Entangled Phronesis

A further way in which my account represents a novel contribution to neo-Aristotelian character developmental theory concerns the introduction of a new concept: entangled *phronesis*. In short, entangled *phronesis* is the underlying psycho-moral mechanism which I suggest drives emulation by enabling a role model to rationally communicate with a learner in developmentally sensitive ways. The introduction of this concept enables me to overcome a potential objection to understanding

emulation as a moral virtue, namely that due to Aristotle's insistence that moral goodness 'in the strict sense' requires *phronesis*, and *phronesis* requires moral virtue (e.g., see 1936, *NE*, 1144b30–23), as moral learners have not yet acquired *phronesis*, appealing to emulation as a method of virtue development appears misguided.

Ultimately, adding entangled *phronesis* to the conceptual landscape of emulation renders this paradox specious. More precisely, since entangled *phronesis* concerns the role model as a substitute for *phronesis*, it enables the learner to be virtuous by association. I argue that the entangling process is developmentally sensitive, meaning that it works differently according to one's degree of *phronetic* development. In one's earliest years, I suggest that the role model's *phronesis* directly supports elementary moral learners in the practice of 'virtue' even before their *phronesis* has begun to develop, primarily by encouraging and discouraging virtuous and vicious behaviour. This I call 'habituated emulation'. From this phase follows a more sophisticated form of emulation where the role model's *phronesis* and the learner's emerging *phronesis* combine to stimulate virtuous action. This I call 'complete emulation'. In this sense, emulation can be thought of as a two-step psycho-moral process which concerns the gradual development of both moral virtue and *phronesis*.

However, in light of the Aristotelian truism that *pre-phronetic*, i.e., non-rational, habituation is insufficient for full-virtue, since virtue entails one is in a certain— *phronetically* informed—state (1936, *NE* , pp. 1105a30–32; 1144a17–21), one may question the extent to which, particularly habituated, emulation can be considered virtuous. I argue that the role model's substituted *phronesis* means that habituated emulation can be considered virtuous in a very weak and indirect sense. However, the virtuosity of complete emulation is somewhat more complicated, partly because once *phronesis* is fully developed, emulation becomes superfluous, since *fully-developed phronesis* enables a person to autonomously practice virtue, rather than doing so via the emulation of role models. Going beyond Aristotle's own texts, I therefore propose that complete emulation should be understood as a virtue which, unlike other virtues, requires only *developing*, rather than *fully-developed phronesis*, because of its entangled association with the role model's *phronesis*. This point also entails that emulation ought to be understood as a moral virtue which is explicitly associated with the sphere of moral education, and thus one which is practiced prior to other virtues, in order to acquire them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed a reconstructed neo-Aristotelian four-causal account of emulation as a moral virtue. This conceptual framework, then enabled me to expound emulation as a two-step psycho-moral developmental process involving entangled *phronesis*. Implicit to this account is that role models must be good-enough *phronomoi*, meaning that they must have cultivated a sufficient amount of *phronesis* to enable it to entangle. This also implies that known, i.e., experientially available, role models best stimulate emulation, thus illuminating the normative importance of ordinary role models that the morally immature might encounter in their lives, such as their teachers. Having added considerable clarity to our understating of what emulation *qua* role modelling is and what it potentially involves, it would be tempting to here propose practical insights as to how it ought to manifest in a classroom or professional context. However, doing this with integrity requires first establishing that the concepts and mechanisms I propose in this paper are psychologically realistic (see Flanagan, 1991, p. 32) and developmentally adequate (see Lapsley, 2021, p. 138) – an endeavour which will comprise the next step in this emerging theory of emulation.

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