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beyond exemplification and role modelling for the education of moral character

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This paper briefly explores the possible perception of inconsistency or contradiction between the author's defence in a former 2007 essay of the importance of good or virtuous character and moral role-modelling for the professional practice of teachers and a more recent essay of 2023 which has taken a more cautious view of such exemplification. Basically, while admitting some recent significant change of ethical perspective, it is here argued that these two papers are not fundamentally at odds, and that the problem to which the later essay is addressed follows more from some serious overstatement of the moral educational role of character in more recent virtue ethical and moral educational literature.

Keywords: ethical particularism, moral character, moral example, role modelling, virtue

Almost two decades ago, I published a paper entitled 'Character in Teaching' in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Carr, 2007). While this essay reflected the author's more general concern in previous work with pressing contemporary need for a conception of professional educational practice embracing more than just the technical or instrumental aspects of instruction or pedagogy (see, notably Carr, 2000), it was more specifically concerned to argue that personal moral character should be considered a key dimension of the professional role of teachers insofar as teachers can hardly avoid some personal and moral influence on those placed in their professional care. To be sure, it may be considered symptomatic of even such late days, that a pre-published version of this paper, delivered as a keynote address to the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain in Oxford, attracted a fairly hostile and scornful reaction from several quite distinguished members of the audience (some quite surprising names could be named) who protested that the character of teachers was of little or no professional concern (indeed, no business of anyone but the teacher's) and that what rather mattered was the competence and effectiveness of his or her instruction.

Despite this, I have since regarded my paper of 2007 as one of my better past academic efforts, and though – as I shall shortly elaborate – I have lately undergone a quite radical moral philosophical sea-change, I nevertheless see little to recant regarding the basic drift of this earlier paper on the importance of character in the professional role of the teacher. In a nutshell, this position is that insofar as we can hardly deny that human agents do influence each other for good or ill, and that much of this influence is exercised by older over younger people, it behooves those to whom the upbringing and formation of young is entrusted – most notably parents and teachers – to try to provide some morally good example to those charged to their care. Thus, while far from ignoring the obvious primary intrinsic professional significance of qualities of good character for teaching – since it should also be clear that such virtues as honesty, temperance, integrity, fairness and compassion are of no less importance for the good conduct of teaching than for (say) medical and

legal practice – we need to recognise a further, albeit secondary, case for the moral exemplification of such virtues in the case of some professions such as teaching and (probably) religious ministry. Indeed, the case for such moral example remains compelling even though it is no less clear that such exemplification is liable to be far from entirely effective, not least in the case of adolescents who may often be attracted to more glamorous, if also often less morally salubrious, role models in the course of some teenage resistance to 'uncool' authority.

Still, for present purposes, it should here be said that my former arguments for this explicitly character-focused conception of the professional practice of teachers (and others) were precisely shaped by allegiance to a particular neo-Aristotelian ethics of virtue (Aristotle, 1941a), which – while at that time well to the fore in mainstream ethics – was a relative newcomer to educational philosophy and professional ethics. However, while this ethical perspective may have formerly been the exception rather than the rule, times change, and with recent exponential growth of influence – not only of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics but also of other ethics of character – it may now be doubted whether my previous arguments for the moral role-modelling of teachers (and some other professional practitioners) would now raise many hackles. In this light, recent publication of my paper 'The hazards of role-modelling for the education of moral and/or virtuous character' (Carr, 2023a) – which enters a distinctly more cautionary or critical note regarding commitment to moral or virtue exemplification as a key moral educational strategy – might well be considered a *volte face* or repudiation of the position of my earlier essay. In fact, there is no fundamental contradiction or inconsistency between these two papers. The case for my more recent note of caution follows rather from some latter-day evident over-statement of the case for role-modelling in character education precisely in thrall to a currently influential – primarily neo-Aristotelian – virtue ethics that I have now come to regard as quite problematic (see, for example, Carr, 2021; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c).

Modern day interest in character as a significant feature or component of moral education has somewhat diverse theoretical and academic origins. Such concern with character seems first to have shown up in the resistance of American psychologists of education to the moral cognitive developmentalism of Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) – much under the influence of the deontological ethics of Kant and others – that largely dominated moral educational theorising for most of late post-WW2 twentieth century. In a nutshell, the psychological if not ethical objection to Kohlbergian construal of moral development in terms of the 'cognitive' or intellectual grasp of general normative principles of universal reciprocal regard is that this seems neither necessary nor sufficient for practical moral formation and/or right conduct. It seems hardly sufficient insofar as agents who endorse such principles may yet fail to act morally, but also not strictly necessary insofar agents may still act morally without any explicit ('cognitive') appreciation of such principles. To this extent, initial North American attention to moral education as character formation shifted the focus from cognitive or rational development to more practical positive character formation – namely to the psychological cultivation of dispositions to right or decent conduct – under the guidance of (empirical) research into optimum developmental conditions for such agency (for such early character-focused approaches, see Lickona, 1991, 2004; Ryan & Bohlin, 2003).

Still, albeit briefly, any such pendulum swing from principle to practice faces the fairly obvious objection that, on any reasonable understanding, moral agency is surely a matter of *both* principle (appreciation of what is right) *and* appropriate (good) practice. In this light many (though by no means all) recent character educationalists have been drawn to a neo-Aristotelian conception of *virtuous* character and conduct as the holy grail of moral education. In the first place, Aristotelian moral agency *is* basically a matter of good character formation. But, secondly, what makes such

character good is an agent's (implicit or explicit) exercise of a distinctive rational or 'intellectual' capacity for deliberation and judgement – called by Aristotle *phronesis* or practical wisdom – that mostly (with some allowance for human error) suffices for practically effective moral conduct. But it is likely that the decisive case for Aristotelian ethics and moral conduct as a form of character formation rests on a further key consideration. For since the deliberations and judgements of practically wise agents are shaped by the specific contextual (social, cultural, interpersonal or other) particularities of this or that human circumstance they cannot be readily captured by or summarised in the general rules of (say, Kantian or Kohlbergian) moral principle. But, in this light, if moral agents need to be persons of Aristotelian virtue and/or practical wisdom, they may not – as one might expect – be identified primarily by their performance of right or good actions: on the contrary, right actions seem to require specification as the sort of actions that practically wise Aristotelian agents – namely agents of good character – are wont to perform.

This radical view of the function of rightly ordered character in human practical and other affairs has had extraordinarily wide-ranging impact: indeed, it has been significantly applied beyond the normative or 'moral' sphere of personal and interpersonal conduct to the more intellectual, theoretical or epistemic concerns of knowledge acquisition. In this light, modern so-called virtue epistemologists have argued that just as what counts as good or right action may only be determined as that which an agent of good or virtuous character would perform, we should also take genuine knowledge or justified true belief to be that as determined by agents of epistemically 'reliable' (Sosa, 1991, 2007) or 'responsible' (Zagzebski, 2000) character. Still, on this matter, it must suffice here to note that this view is plainly at odds with that of Aristotle who, as an epistemic realist, quite clearly held that knowledge is of objective truth that is quite beyond subjective human determination (Aristotle, 1941b). That said, character-centred *moral* particularism has been widely influential on virtue ethicists not least in the 'exemplarism' of Linda Zagzebski – a leading exponent of both moral and epistemic virtue ethics – which aspires to explain our understanding of what is good in terms of human 'admiration' for particular human exemplars or role models (Zagzebski, 2010; 2013; for criticism, see Szutta, 2019). Moreover, such essentially character-based approaches to moral formation have also had significant impact on contemporary moral educational theory, prompting a recent author to write that 'although virtues are morally justifiable independent of the role model, there is pedagogically *no way* (my italics) to become virtuous than by emulating role models' (Sanderse, 2013, p. 47).

In fairness, it should here be conceded that by no means all latter-day neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists endorse such character-centred moral particularism. (For a notable and highly influential virtue ethical opponent of particularism, see Kristjánsson, 2006; 2015). Indeed, since he insists in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that there are forms of conduct (such as murder, theft and adultery) that are never morally defensible, it is far from clear that Aristotle himself endorsed particularism in any radical form. All the same, for virtue ethicists who do reject particularism, the problem now surfaces of upon what grounds the forms of human conduct that Aristotle ruled out as impermissible might be so proscribed. On this matter, virtue ethics could hardly base any such proscriptions on deontological norms of universal human regard or on negative consequences without collapse into the non-virtue ethics of duty or utility. But, of course, the more usual virtue ethical response at this point is the standard Aristotelian line that the good conduct of virtuous character is that which conduces to *human flourishing* (or, in the Aristotelian term, *eudaimonia*). But now, what is the meaning of human flourishing? The danger here is of some pernicious circularity. For while Aristotle did not take virtuous character and conduct to be quite *sufficient* for flourishing – since he also held that human agents need favourable or fortunate circumstances in order to flourish

– he evidently comes close to regarding it as necessary, since vicious agents could hardly be considered to flourish in any significant normative sense. Now, however, while we were to understand virtuous character and conduct as that which conduces to a flourishing human life, it may seem less than helpful to take (certainly moral) flourishing to be the product of virtuous character and conduct.

But even worse conceptual indeterminacy and slippage hovers on the horizon. For a serious difficulty with much present-day virtue ethics is that despite a common Anglophone construal of 'virtue' in moral terms, the ancient concept of virtue and/or virtuous character as expressed by the Greek term *arete* (via the later Latin *virtus*) actually falls well short of any modern moral sense (see Carr, 2023b). To be sure, it should here be recalled (as modern virtue ethicists rarely do recall) that return to the ancient concept of virtue as advocated by Elizabeth Anscombe – whose paper 'Modern moral philosophy' (Anscombe 1958) was the primary inspiration for the modern revival of virtue – was explicitly driven by her repudiation of any modern search for a distinct conception of morality as exhibited in the leading ethics of her day of duty (deontology) and utility (consequentialism). In this light, she precisely advised modern moral philosophers to *abandon* the notion of morality in favour of (albeit philosophical) psychological attention to the ancient concept of virtue as *good character*. But while this advice has certainly yielded rich dividends in terms of an enormous body of fertile work lately produced by philosophers on a wide range of particular character virtues, it has clearly had grave normative costs. For what, in the absence of some specific and independent mark of *moral* value, could be meant by 'good' character? In the event, for the ancients, *arete* and *virtus* generally signified 'excellence' or fitness for purpose – not only of human agents but also of non-human objects – and, as such, virtue had a largely *functional* sense. Indeed, in human terms, such ancient virtue was by and large focused upon largely masculine capacities of personal power, valour and dominance.

Moreover, while his philosophical predecessors Socrates and Plato certainly sought (if not quite successfully) a wider and more other-regarding conception of virtue, Aristotle's chief yardstick of virtue in terms of *eudaimonia* or flourishing does not actually stray too far if at all from this essentially functional or instrumental conception of *arete*. In this light, while such positive character traits as self-control, courage and perseverance may be exercised for the successful prosecution of diverse personal projects, this need not at all preclude their deployment in the service of quite selfish, wicked and immoral ends. Thus, while it is true that Aristotle devotes much space in his ethical writings to discussion of the wider social virtue of justice, as both character trait and wider normative principle, it remains difficult if not impossible – as, indeed, leading modern virtue ethicists such as Phillipa Foot (1967) have explicitly acknowledged – to accommodate this essentially other-regarding attitude, ideal or disposition within any overall conception of virtue focused largely if not exclusively upon the promotion of well-being or flourishing (and it should not be forgotten that Aristotle's treatment of justice did not preclude explicit defence of slavery). So considered, it would seem – as, indeed, Socrates and Plato evidently sought to show – that the genuine moral agency of altruistic or self-sacrificial conduct in the general service of others (such as slaves or the oppressed) requires the endorsement of principles and attitudes hardly reducible to any purely functional conception of personal or even local communal flourishing. To act in the service of what is morally right may cost us everything in other terms; but Aristotle's virtue ethics evidently lacks any clear conception of what is *morally* right.

Although all of this might be considered so much idle philosophical digression with little bearing on the main issue of current concern, its relevance could not be more crucial. For while the argument

of my earlier 2007 paper on the significance of teacher character was that teachers certainly do, along with other professional practitioners, need moral and other virtues for good example to others (as well as for otherwise obvious professional reasons), the argument of my more recent paper of 2023 is that all of this risks hapless overstatement if such example is conceived, as indicated in recent moral educational literature, as quite sufficient or even necessary for effective moral education or instruction. So, to be sure, we need not doubt any general professional case for requiring teachers, parents or other custodians of the young to exhibit the best possible character and conduct of which they are capable in the caring capacities entrusted to them in home or school. But, that said, apart from the fact that such morally exemplary conduct may fail to impress the young at some wayward stages of their development (such as rebellious adolescence), it should also be clear that quite genuine exercises of self-control, courage or even compassion may yet fall short of clear moral ends. Indeed, taking both these points together, the dangers of placing the major moral educational burden on alleged exemplary character are abundantly evident in the lessons that both life and literature have to teach us about the perennial hazards of toxic impact of the wrong sorts of character on both young and old.

First, in educational terms, common experience – as well as such memorable literary and cinematic works as Muriel Spark's *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Spark, 2000) – well testifies to the dangers posed to young people of teachers of immediately striking or impressive character (or personality – which is often humanly confused with character). Secondly the briefest acquaintance with contemporary global politics – particularly in an age of mass IT manipulation – shows clearly how wealth and television or other celebrity status, nowadays commonly endorsed as key markers of human flourishing, have been and are successfully exploited by demagogues of the worst imaginable human character to persuade others to their self-serving agendas. In this light, virtue theoretical assertion of the normative primacy of character – as exhibited, for example, in the exemplarism of Zagzebski – as well as via the stress on character exemplification as the key means to moral education clearly puts the (empirical) psychological cart before the ethical horse. In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* (Plato, 2010), Socrates – bent on questioning the common assumption of divine moral authority – raises the shrewd question of whether what God commends is good because he commends it, or whether he commends it because it is good. We have only to reflect on the many past (and present) unjust gods (such as the Zeus who crucified Prometheus) to appreciate that there is but one appropriate moral response to this question. Given the error to which even the best of human flesh is heir, the mortal need for moral standards based on more than the contingencies of human character is evidently pressing. So, while we need nor should not deny that sound moral character is a laudable professional aspiration for all teachers worth their salt– to the end of the best example of which they may be humanly capable – even the best of such modelling may be weighed in the balance and found morally wanting. In this light, the main burden of moral education can only lie elsewhere: precisely, with equipping young as well as old with the (cognitive or rational) normative resources for the principled discernment of what *is* actually of genuine moral worth in human character.

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