

A Denial of Photocopy Virtue: A Problem of Student Passivity in Moral Education¹

April 11th, 2008

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According to John Doris, an emulation model of moral education which is concerned with the ideal psychology of a virtue exemplar fails to morally improve the virtue student. Doris argues that if emulation consists in approximating the psychology and behavior of the virtue exemplar, then students in such a moral education program are susceptible to moral failure. Doris claims not all behavior of the virtue exemplar should be emulated since there are some situations involving high moral risk in which the exemplar could involve herself, but should the virtue student do so, situational pressures are likely to induce the student to moral failure. For example, the intemperate drinker should not follow the example of the virtue exemplar in having one drink, because once she has one she, unlike the exemplar, is likely to have more and more.

In what follows, I will argue John Doris's portrayal of the emulation model neglects the virtue student's own moral judgment. The success of Doris's counter-example depends on his claiming the student is following or copying the virtue exemplar in emulation. That is, what the virtue student should do is what the virtue exemplar would herself do. However, neo-Aristotelians emphasize active engagement with moral training on the part of the virtue student. Once problems of student passivity are brought out in copying a virtue exemplar, Doris's attack on the exemplar's ideal psychology fails to pose difficulty for the virtue ethicist's program.

¹ I am indebted to Margaret Scharle and Steve Arkonovich for their helpful comments throughout this paper's development. This study was supported, in part, by a Reed College Undergraduate Opportunity Grant.

First, I will present what Doris thinks an emulation model is, which I will call an ‘example model’. Then, I will argue the example model requires the virtue student passively copy what the virtue exemplar would do. I next make some objections to this model of moral education and claim virtue ethicists should reject it. Finally, I argue the virtue ethicist should reject a model of moral education which makes what the virtue student should do and what the exemplar would do symmetrical in every respect.

I.

Doris does not directly criticize the emulation model, but rather supplements it with an advice model which he takes to be a welcome addition to the virtue ethicist’s position. I do not think the advice model is a welcome supplement, but would like to get clear on what Doris thinks the counter-example would be against an emulation model in light of the distinction. Doris cites Michael Smith’s contrast of an example model with an advice model:

We are not to suppose that the agent’s fully rational self is giving advice to herself in the evaluated world, but rather that the agent’s fully rational self is setting up her own behaviour in her own world, the evaluating world, as an example to be followed by the self in the evaluated world.²

Doris distinguishes between the emulation and advice models using Smith’s distinction between an example model and an advice model. Doris identifies the virtue ethicist’s emulation model with Smith’s ‘example model’.³ An emulation model then, using Smith’s distinction, requires the student to follow the exemplar’s behavior as an example.

Doris’s counter-example to the emulation model occurs in a first person ethical deliberative context. We are to imagine a flirtatious colleague extends an invitation to

² Smith, p.110

³ Doris, p.518

dinner, and that it is you and I who are being asked what the ethically desirable choice is. In considering Doris's counter-example then, you and I are to follow the behavior of the virtue exemplar in our choice of accepting the dinner invitation. Let the 'example model' be the model of moral education which requires you and me to follow the virtue exemplar's behavior in making ethical choices.

However, we should not follow the example of the virtue exemplar, claims Doris. Should we try to follow the exemplar's behavior, "emulation in this case would have disastrous results. Because actual agents typically cannot attain, or closely approximate, the psychology of an ideally virtuous agent, they cannot, in many instances, safely pursue the course the ideal agent would favor for herself."⁴ Doris argues we should not follow the exemplar's behavior because we are such that we can neither closely approximate nor attain the exemplar's psychology. Because the example of the exemplar's psychology is not something we can follow, then we should not follow the exemplar's behavior either.

Why does Doris think you and I cannot approximate the exemplar's psychology? Doris denies the virtue student has a reliable character which can withstand situational pressures. A character capable of virtuous action is what the virtue student *aims* to develop in moral education. Aristotle has three criteria action must meet in order to distinguish virtuous action from skillful action. The third criterion Aristotle introduces requires the agent "must also do [virtuous action] from a firm and unchanging state."⁵ Doris thinks the firm and unchanging nature of virtuous character ensures the virtue exemplar will behave blamelessly in the face of situational features exerting pressure on

⁴ Doris, p.518

⁵ NE (1105a32-35)

her to do otherwise.⁶ Doris cites Aristotle's third criterion to illustrate the character he has in mind, so let us call a character 'reliable' if it meets Aristotle's third criterion of being firm and unchanging. So on Doris's argument, you and I cannot approximate the exemplar's psychology because we lack a reliable character.

The difference in the character of the virtue exemplar and that of the virtue student is significant on Doris's argument because the exemplar has a character which can be relied upon in a high-pressure situation. Doris claims virtuous characters are "dispositions to moral decency serving as guarantors against destructive behavior."⁷ Since virtuous character guarantees against destructive behavior, then the virtue exemplar can accept the dinner invitation. The flirtatious colleague might exert pressure on the exemplar, but the exemplar can be "secure in the knowledge of [her] righteousness."⁸ Due to guarantees of blamelessness, "relying on character" is an option for the exemplar.⁹ In contrast, the virtue student cannot rely on character in going to dinner with the colleague because hers is not yet developed to be reliable.

Doris thinks since emulation of the virtue exemplar fails in the first personal deliberative context, the emulation model will likewise fail in an educational context. If emulation of the exemplar's behavior has disastrous results due to one's being unable to approximate the exemplar's psychology, then the virtue student, not having a reliable character, will be all the more unable to approximate the exemplar. Because emulating the exemplar in a first personal deliberative context leads to moral failure, then the virtue student's emulation of the exemplar could also lead the virtue student to do actions which

⁶ Doris expresses the Aristotelian character trait another way, as "characters that will determine our behavior significantly independent of circumstance," (p.515).

⁷ Doris, p.516.

⁸ Doris, p.517.

⁹ Doris, p.517.

are not virtuous. Doris concludes the emulation model fails because it does not take into account the susceptibility to moral risk of the virtue student's character.¹⁰

So far, it has been argued Doris thinks an emulation model of moral education is an example model as defined by Michael Smith. On an example model, emulation of the virtue exemplar just is following the behavior of the exemplar. In Doris's counter-example we are to try to follow the example of the virtue exemplar in considering whether to accept an invitation from a flirtatious colleague to dinner. Following the example of the virtue exemplar without a reliable character, Doris argues, leads to an increased probability of moral failure in high pressure situations. On an example model of moral education then, the behavior of the moral exemplar should not be followed by the virtue student since the exemplar's psychology cannot be emulated.

II.

Doris argues the virtue ethicist champions the ability to inculcate the virtues by looking to an exemplar; that virtue students morally improve by emulating a virtue exemplar. On his argument the virtue exemplar is not only supposed to provide an example of the behavior the virtue student is to follow but also provide a psychological example to be followed as well (or at least approximated).¹¹ In following the exemplar's example the virtue student should conclude to accept the dinner invitation in her deliberation. Doris thinks an emulation model which claims the virtue exemplar is an ideal faces difficulties explaining the way in which the virtue exemplar is employed in deliberation to reach a conclusion the virtue student should choose.

¹⁰ Doris, p.518.

¹¹ Ibid.

Behind criticism of approximating the exemplar's psychology there is disagreement over what role the virtue ethicist claims the virtue exemplar has in deliberation. Critics argue the agent looks to the virtue exemplar in a deliberative context, so that what the agent should do is dictated by the exemplar's behavior. Virtue ethicists reject this use of the exemplar and argue the virtue exemplar has no role in a deliberative context but is simply what the student is striving towards; that is, the virtue exemplar is simply the agent morally developed to the fullest.¹² I will argue Doris's criticism of the emulation model turns on which role the virtue exemplar has in a virtue ethicist's theory. If the exemplar is employed in a deliberative context on an example model, then the virtue student's deliberation occurs at the exclusion of considering the gap between the student's and the exemplar's character.

Maria Merritt objects to Doris's employment of the virtue exemplar in the student's deliberation over whether to accept the dinner invitation. Merritt thinks we are led to Doris's conclusion because deliberation is structured by the exemplar's example. She claims, "it is not *for the purpose of* framing deliberation about the right action that ideals of virtue are primarily supposed to be used," where the deliberation of the agent and the deliberation of the exemplar are depicted by the ideal.¹³ Recall, the example model claims that what the virtue student should do is what the virtue exemplar would do in the same situation. According to Doris, the virtue ethicist thinks that "through reflection on moral exemplars, we may improve our own character and conduct."¹⁴ If the virtue student morally improves by reflecting on the virtue exemplar in an example model of moral education, then we are left to conclude that the virtue exemplar is

¹² I owe this way of putting the issue to Julia Annas *The Morality of Happiness* p.84

¹³ Merritt, p.370

¹⁴ Doris, p.512.

engaged in a similar reflection on an exemplar. However, we must admit emulation will not be symmetrical in every respect. The deliberative agent reflects on the exemplar, but the virtue exemplar in turn does not. Were emulation to be symmetrical in every respect, then *even* the virtue student's reflection on the virtue exemplar would be in emulation of the exemplar.

If we accept that reflection can be genuinely action-guiding, then I do not think we can presuppose one is using the ideal to be guided *to* reflection, rather one is guided *in* reflection. On Doris's argument, A should ϕ iff the exemplar would ϕ and A should reflect on the virtue exemplar (that is, the ideal is guiding one *to* reflection), but then it must be because the exemplar is engaged in reflection on an exemplar that A should reflect at all. If this is the way the virtue exemplar is to be used in the virtue student's choices, then we have the regress Merritt indicates. The virtue exemplar is supposed to be guiding the virtue student as to what should be done in moral improvement, but if what the student is guided *to* do in emulation is reflect on the virtue exemplar then the exemplar must likewise be reflecting on an exemplar. We can avoid the regress if one is guided *in* reflection on the exemplar; then what the exemplar would do contributes to the student's deliberation *in* reflection. That is, it is taken for granted the virtue student engages in reflection by asking, "What action here and now would be doing well?"¹⁵ The student does not need to follow the exemplar in order to engage in reflection.¹⁶

¹⁵ I borrow this way of framing the virtue student's deliberative question from John McDowell (See 'Deliberation and Moral Development'), because it captures questions concerning how virtue theory brings virtue concepts to bear on deliberation without supposing as virtue ethicists reject, that the virtue student employs the exemplar in all her choices as suggested by the question 'Should A ϕ ?'

¹⁶ Annas admits this is just a brute fact virtue ethics assumes, "it is a rare person who if unaffected by other factors grows up morally in a purely passive and dependent way, never reflecting on the moral beliefs they have grown up with." See p.16 of 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing.'

Thus far I have claimed the model of moral education Doris makes use of, which I call the ‘example model’, supposes emulation is symmetrical in every respect. As Merritt has pointed out, symmetrical emulation leads to a regress. In order to raise Doris’s criticism I have suggested drawing a distinction between being guided *to* reflection versus being guided *in* reflection. Once Doris’s criticism is raised on a model in which the virtue student is guided *in* reflection, it is assumed reflection is engaged in when the question “What action here and now would be doing well?” is posed.

III

Doris tries to show the virtue ethicist is committed to an example model, on which to morally improve, the virtue student follows the virtue exemplar’s behavior. Virtue ethicists deny a model of moral education which makes this copying essential to virtue theory, because it exhibits an attempt to formulate a technical model which can be applied by anyone regardless of their background.¹⁷ Suppose the exemplar is to be employed *in* deliberation on an example model. Then the student could ask ‘what would the virtue exemplar do?’, and according to the example model derive the behavior which should be followed; likewise anyone else in a similar situation will derive the same behavior as what should be done.¹⁸ Doris is wrong to attribute such an example model to virtue ethicists since it exploits the virtue exemplar as providing behavior which anyone in principle could apply, a feature virtue ethicists deny.

What do virtue ethicists find wrong with the example model? Aristotle notoriously emphasizes the role a good upbringing has in enabling one to benefit from ethics (1095a1-10). In an ethical upbringing character and reason develop in tandem, but

¹⁷ Annas, Julia ‘Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing’, Hursthouse, Rosalind ‘Applying Virtue Ethics’, McDowell, John ‘Deliberation and Moral Development’

¹⁸ The schema ‘What would the virtue exemplar do?’ derives from Rosalind Hursthouse.

Doris's characterization of the example model depicts the behavior of the exemplar as something which is recognized as doing well "in an act of pure intellect."¹⁹ The difficulty is that "the content of the correct conception of doing well can be abstracted away from the psychological state, the result of habituating evaluative and motivational propensities into shape."²⁰ Doris is right to criticize the example model for not taking account of your character's susceptibility to moral failure, because on an example model character does not contribute at all to the conclusion of what would be doing well. However, the failure of the example model to account for the contribution of character is not a problem with the virtue ethicist's model of moral education—we've seen virtue ethicists reject this sort of picture—rather it is a problem for the view Doris attributes to the virtue ethicist.

Doris arrives at his characterization of the virtue ethicist's view by shifting from emulation to reflection in his discussion of the virtue ethicist's model of moral education. Doris initially introduces a model of moral education by discussing the work of Lawrence Blum. However, Doris concludes that Blum thinks emulation fails even though Blum's model is supposed to be the emulation model Doris is considering.²¹

For example, Blum's²² virtue ethic does not require commitments regarding the general realizability of virtue: 'it is given to very few to be moral exemplars,' he says, regardless of 'how conscientiously one sets oneself to become anything like the moral paragons one admires.' Blum's is not that many of us, or even any of us, can successfully emulate Aristotelian ideals of character, but rather that reflecting on these ideals can help us become people who are, and do, better: through reflection on moral exemplars, we may improve our own character and conduct. If the practical efficacy of emulation is not undercut by the extreme difficulty of the object of emulation

¹⁹ McDowell, J. 'Deliberation and Moral Development' p.23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Doris, p.518.

²² Blum, pp.94-96.

being fully realized, emulation is not problematized by situationism.²³

Doris depicts Blum as claiming that emulation fails, but that reflection on the virtue exemplar morally improves the virtue student. But later, Doris claims, “There is the possibility, as we have seen Blum suggest...that the agent is best served by attempting to emulate an exemplar.”²⁴ Doris thus shifts in his criticism of the emulation model between the virtue student following the example of the exemplar and the virtue student reflecting on the virtue exemplar.

Since we have seen the example model is wrong to employ the virtue exemplar in deliberation at the exclusion of character, an alternative remains open which makes use of both character and reason in moral development. The alternative view claims the virtue exemplar is simply the virtue student once moral education is complete and the student is morally developed in full. While the example model claims the virtue student and the exemplar’s character differ but the intellectual aspects of both agents are the same, the latter view explains the difference in character by appealing to moral progression and argues an analogous transformation occurs in the agent’s reasoning. Julia Annas argues this latter view is typical of ancient theories and derives from there being “no such advance privilege given to a single form of reasoning.”²⁵ In moral education the virtue student progresses to full virtue “developing the affective and intellectual aspects until they form a complete harmony.”²⁶ The virtue student’s intellect and character are transformed in moral development as progress is made towards full virtue. An emulation

²³ Doris, pp.511-512

²⁴ Doris, p.518.

²⁵ Annas, J. *The Morality of Happiness* p.84

²⁶ Ibid.

model of moral education which emphasizes the development of both intellect and character avoids problems with the virtue student learning behavior apart from considerations of character.

Doris's counter-example relies on the virtue student following the example of the exemplar in accepting the colleague's dinner invitation. In the counter-example Doris assumes the behavior and deliberation of the virtue student will be symmetrical to that of the virtue exemplar. So when he claims the exemplar can 'remain secure in the knowledge of her righteousness' or the exemplar can 'rely on character' to leave her morally blameless, the virtue student must likewise passively rely on her own faulty character in following the exemplar. The virtue ethicist should deny the student could follow the psychological example of the exemplar without being able to follow the example of the exemplar's character. On the example model the virtue student becomes a passive follower of the exemplar failing to even initiate reflection. Denying the virtue student is a passive follower of the exemplar ensures the student's moral judgments are the student's own.

I have argued that Doris criticizes the virtue ethicist's model of moral education because he thinks the virtue student cannot *now* follow the example of the virtue exemplar's reliable character. But the way in which the student is to follow the exemplar depends upon how the exemplar is employed in deliberation. If the virtue exemplar guides the virtue student *to* deliberation and the exemplar is supposed to be copied, then there is a regress. In order to raise Doris's criticism I modified his argument to consider how the exemplar guides the virtue student *in* deliberation. I then argued Doris criticism of employing the exemplar's ideal psychology is built into his shifting between the virtue

student following the example of the exemplar's behavior and the student reflecting on the exemplar. The virtue ethicist should reject the exemplar's deliberative conclusion can be reached by the student apart from considerations of character.

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