How Do We Learn from the Lives of Others?

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My life has mirrored the lives of those around me. I find myself becoming like the people I am exposed to. I imitate their actions and attitudes. I can, however, only rarely recall making a conscious decision to imitate or be like these people in any way. One of my teachers, I recall, was such a towering presence that he radically changed the direction of my life, although I was only dimly aware of his influence at the time. Only long after did I see his imprimatur on everything from my occupational decisions, my views about religion and spirituality, and my opinions about where to go for lunch. When I think about this influence, I wonder how it happened and whether it has, on the whole, been a good thing for me to have learned in this imitative way. This paper is, among other things, a very personal attempt to formulate questions about how I became who I am.

These questions, however, are far from merely being of personal interest. When one looks at discussions of education in local communities, in scholarly circles, and in mass media, the topic of imitative learning and human exemplarity is often present. People usually discuss the topic using the phrase "role models," a popular but problematic term that is intended to cover a wide range of modeling and exemplary processes. Consider how often the idea of role modeling arises in educational discourse. Conservatives place role models as central features in their character education programs. Liberals, in turn, view the absence of role models for disadvantaged students as a major justification for affirmative action initiatives. Christian children are urged to do what Jesus would do, itself a manifestation of the tradition of *imitatio dei* that is shared by many world religions. Endless debate surrounds the status and value of celebrities as role models, and new teachers are urged to find and imitate experienced mentors during their first years of employment. Clearly, the notions of modeling, imitation, and exemplarity are some of the central concepts in contemporary educational and social discourse.

When one looks at the history of Western educational thought, one sees a similar interest in exemplars and imitation. I have found the issue discussed by Platonists and Sophists, Skeptics and Stoics, poets and monks, and Christians and Jews. Human exemplars have been given a privileged place in the educational thought of philosophers as different as Locke, Nietzsche, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Wittgenstein. Some have celebrated imitative learning, others have condemned it, but few have ignored it. And yet, what have contemporary philosophers had to say about this topic? Not much. As Javier Gomá has recently pointed out, it is a forgotten tradition. It is "una tradición intelectual que había quedado olvidada en filosofía, la tradición de ideas como modelo, prototipo, ejemplo…que tuvieron una importancia enorme a lo largo de los siglos."[1]

This is not to say that some philosophers of education have not done work relevant to our understanding of imitation and human exemplarity. Gary

Fenstermacher's research on manner in teaching, David Hansen's work on the moral dimensions of teaching, and Nel Noddings's proposals regarding care theory are some of my favorite examples, and one could certainly think of others. But imitation and human exemplarity are rarely addressed as independent topics of analysis and theorization. Indeed, a review of the papers in philosophy and philosophy of education databases reveals few articles that address the topic directly. The neglect of the topic is bizarre given its prominence in educational discourse.

Why this neglect? It may be because questions about human exemplarity often quickly reduce to empirical questions and are thus, it seems, better left to psychologists or sociologists — after all, philosophers often cannot or do not want to enter the messy world of empirical claims and counterclaims. The neglect may also have occurred because, at first glance, there seems to be little philosophical mystery involved with human exemplars: we see somebody doing something attractive, we observe the action closely, and then we replicate the actions we observe. At times it seems there is little more to do than to advocate this process as an educational truism, or warn against it, perhaps, if we do not like the idea of imitating others.

I hope to show, though, that many issues remain unresolved and that philosophers of education can play a large part in deepening and enriching the discourse surrounding human exemplarity and imitation. Specifically, I believe that philosophers of education could fruitfully engage in three tasks. They can (1) specify the assumptions made in discussions of role models and imitative learning, (2) make connections between these assumptions and the disparate groups of relevant literature, and (3) assess the meaning, value, and genuine limitations of imitative learning. In what follows, I hope to give brief examples of these tasks and of some avenues of investigation that appear promising. The main point of these examples is to suggest how much we do not understand. My discussion is not intended to be an extensive or comprehensive account of all the issues involved; I only wish to provide a taste of the questions. In the end, I will argue that these examples suggest the need for a larger social analysis of human exemplarity and imitation, one that looks beyond the model and the observer.

Examining the Assumptions of the Discourse

The first contribution philosophers can make comes through examining the assumptions that are implicit in the discourse surrounding modeling, exemplarity, and imitation. This process might begin with a genealogical or historical approach exploring how beliefs about human exemplars have developed through time. Contemporary discussions have doubtless been burdened with the presuppositions taken for granted during previous conversations. Looking at the intellectual history of the topic may help us expose with greater clarity our current assumptions.

What are some of the assumptions that are exposed with this historical approach? Like many other aspects of Western discourse, discussions of modeling and imitation can be traced back to Homer. Indeed, throughout his epic poems, Homer describes what would become a popular view of how imitative learning proceeds. In the early stages of the *Odyssey*, for example, Telemachos (Odysseus's

son) is urged by Athena to be like the hero Orestes, who had avenged his father's death by killing his conspiratorial mother and her illicit lover, Aigisthos. Athena implores:

> Or have you not heard what glory was won by the great Orestes
> among all mankind, when he killed the murderer of his father,
> the treacherous Aigisthos, who had slain his famous father:
> So you too dear friend, since I can see you are big and splendid,
> be bold also, so that in generations to come they will praise you.
> (1: 298-303)

Athena's injunction reveals one model for how we teach and learn by observing others: an act is represented to the learner (in this case, defeating the "treacherous Aigisthos"), descriptions of the rewards that flowed from the excellent act are presented (the glory that Orestes won by avenging his father), and a challenge, in the form of a conclusion, is given to replicate the action ("be bold also").

This process of representing a person's actions, relating the benefits that came from the action, and then using these benefits to conclude that the student should be like the model, has been one of the most popular ways of thinking about learning from role models. It can be found, for instance, in everything from Plutarch's famous moral biographies to more contemporary social learning theories of vicarious reinforcement. It underlies much of the current discussion of role models. It is so fashionable that I will call it the *standard model* of thinking about human exemplars and imitation and, for now, I will focus my analysis on this highly influential view.

What are the assumptions behind the standard model of imitative learning? The standard model assumes that there are two elements of imitative learning: (1) a cognitive element, which selects and represents the important aspects of the model's actions or goals, and (2) an affective element, which gives the learner a certain feeling of wanting to be like the cognitive representation. Under the standard model, the cognitive element of imitative learning is supplied when attention is drawn to the exemplar's actions and to the results that flow from the actions, thus allowing the observer to construct a mental representation of the action and its consequences. Something becomes an example to be imitated, in other words, when it is intentionally pointed out as such by a teacher. We could call this *the assumption of intentional exemplarity*. The motivational element is created, according to the standard model, as the observer considers the action's consequences. If the results are attractive, they inspire the observer to replicate the action. In other words, watching the results of an action supplies the motivation to imitate. We could call this the *assumption of consequential motivation*.

These two assumptions alone raise many questions. With regard to the assumption of consequential motivation it seems that the assumption is not so much wrong, but limited. It is true that while I am fishing I often imitate the lures used by others who seem to be having successful outcomes — seeing people catch fish motivates my imitative action. This motivational assumption, however, does not account for many instances of imitation. As a matter of fact, it seems that imitation can occur even when one is cognizant of negative consequences and it can fail to occur even

when one is aware of positive consequences ("Things won't turn out that way for me," we might think to ourselves in both cases). Most commonly, perhaps, imitation proceeds without any knowledge of, or concern for, the consequences of an action. Imitative motivation is not always born from a rational, means-to-ends analysis of how to get what we want. How motivation enters into imitation, then, is a question that requires more serious engagement.

This standard model also assumes that a person becomes an example to imitate when a teacher identifies the person as an example to the learner (that is, it assumes intentional exemplarity). The teacher, under this model, has control over which actions and individuals are taken to be exemplary and which are not. Thus, the standard model presupposes the possibility of selection and makes certain assumptions about how things become examples. Examples become examples simply when we want to use them as examples. But do these assumptions hold up? It seems to me that we have good reasons for thinking that the processes of exemplarity may be more complex than the standard model supposes. Another major question, then, would ask how instances of a thing become *examples* of the thing — how seeing somebody else's action comes to be seen as an example for what I should also do. Analyzing these and other such questions is the next task facing the philosopher.

Making Connections Among Literatures

So far, I have pointed to two questionable assumptions of the standard model. As we begin to look closely at these assumptions to see how far they are justified, it will be necessary to make connections with other fields of inquiry. Indeed, at this point it will be necessary to synthesize different literatures rather than doing independent philosophical work since portions of these questions are empirical in nature. Literatures that are useful in criticizing these particular assumptions will include, among others, empirical research on imitation, cognition, and brain science, as well as philosophical discussions of exemplarity.

First, consider again the assumption of intentional exemplarity — the assumption that things become examples to imitate when an educator wants to use them as such. Even initially, this assumption feels a bit simplistic. The philosophical work on exemplarity helps us to understand, I believe, one reason why we might feel this way. In his book, *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman defines exemplarity in terms of "possession" plus "reference," and thus emphasizes the communicative aspects of examples.[2] To be an example of something, a thing must not only possess certain features, but it must communicate those features as well. Katherine Elgin helpfully illustrates this point: All paints possess the feature of viscosity, but not all instances of paint give us examples of viscosity. Only certain uses of paint, such as a Jackson Pollock painting, serve to exemplify viscosity, even though it is a feature that all other paintings possess. Elgin argues, correctly, that examples give us "epistemic access" to what they exemplify.[3] Athena may want to use Orestes as an example of courage and filial duty, but to be an example for Telemachos, Orestes must *speak* to Telemachos in a certain way. It must give Telemachos "epistemic access" to those traits, and Orestes's mere possession (or alleged possession) of these traits does not always guarantee this access.

So how does something become an example of something else? One of most important processes in exemplarity is "differentiation."[4] It seems that something becomes an example in large part because of how it is different from what is around it. A Jackson Pollock painting exemplifies viscosity because of how different it is from the paintings that surround it. If all paintings were of the style of Pollock's *Number One*, I suggest, this particular painting would cease to be an example of viscosity, even if the painting itself were to remain exactly the same. The painting exemplifies viscosity precisely because of its differences from other paintings within a certain field of comparison. Examples depend on structures of similarity and difference within certain contexts; they depend on their placement within a group.

Knowing this also helps us understand that exemplarity is only partially related to the qualities of the model. Someone might say, for example, that it is not the teacher's intentions or identification of something as an example that creates exemplarity, but rather, it is the particular qualities of the model. Orestes becomes an example simply because of his virtues and excellences, not because of the teacher's selection. Looking at the philosophical literature on exemplarity, however, helps us see that the qualities of the model by themselves do not create an example; these qualities exemplify only insofar as they exist within systems of similarity and difference. If everybody were as courageous as Orestes, he would not then be an example of courage.

This discussion of exemplarity has important implications for education and suggests that what comes to be exemplified is beyond the complete control of any individual educator because the power of exemplarity derives from larger social contexts. Teachers are part of the social context, to be sure, but they do not fully constitute it. As teachers, examples have a way of always slipping out of our hands, usually saying more and less than what we want them to say.

Next, consider the *assumption of consequential motivation*. If it is wrong to say that seeing the results of an action always supplies the motivation for imitation, in what other ways can motivation arise? One source that might be helpful is William James's discussion of the "will" in his *Principles of Psychology*.[5] According to James, mental representations are inherently impulsive, and no extra feeling of motivation or act of will is required to produce an action from the idea of an action. An idea is by nature already geared toward action and it will be expressed in action unless there is another idea that impedes its expression. If I see a bowl of peanuts on the table, it is not as though I have the idea of peanuts and supply to this idea an act of will or an act of motivation — I simply find myself reaching for the peanuts. Unless another idea impedes the action (a worry, say, about gaining weight), the idea of peanuts is itself impulsive.

James's observations have since received support from brain science, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology. Neuroscientists have discovered "mirror" neurons in the F5 area of the premotor cortex in the brains of macaque monkeys.[6] The same neurons fire both when an action is observed and when it is performed. In

human brains, PET and fMRI studies have located brain areas associated with both the perception and production of actions.[7] In addition, clinical investigators have noticed that some patients with prefrontal lesions are unable to inhibit their imitation of gestures or even some complex actions when they observe them.[8] The fact that perception automatically and involuntarily elicits actions in such circumstances suggests that perceptions, ideas of actions, and the performance of actions are closely related. The convergence of evidence from these and other sources suggests that, on a very basic level, action and perception are not separate faculties that need to be connected somehow through something called a "motivation" or an "act of will"; rather, action and perception are built on the same mental foundation.

This body of research raises exciting questions for how we think about imitative learning and education generally. Since the mental representation of action is inherently impulsive, the key question is not why we imitate observed actions; rather, the key question is why all actions we see are not then imitated. We need a better theory about how, exactly, some actions are impeded from execution. We also need to think more about the relationship between these already impulsive ideas and our sense of self (for example, our feeling of not wanting to gain weight by eating peanuts), since this would almost certainly be relevant. And there are additional questions: When we see an action, what are we seeing the action *as* and how is our conceptualization of the action determined? If I think of Orestes killing Aigisthos, for example, do I picture the "action" as a certain arm movement as the sword comes down, as an act of general killing, as an act of vengeance, or as a violation of God's law? Perception of an action may be inherently impulsive, but what determines the action, exactly, that I see?

Although these are partially empirical questions, to be sure, they do contain many philosophical elements. Philosophical investigations into the nature of the self, particularly into the social and narrative nature of the self, seem relevant to the question of how impulsive ideas are brought forth, or not brought forth, in action. Discussions of exemplarity, like those by Goodman and Elgin, are pertinent in determining how we come to see bodily movements as representative of certain types of actions (exemplarity could even be developed as a form of Wittgensteinian "aspect seeing"). I believe that philosophers have much to contribute to these questions and that these inquiries into human imitation really matter — think, for example, about how these questions might be related to debates about censorship.

ASSESSING THE MEANING AND VALUE OF IMITATIVE LEARNING

So far, I have suggested that philosophers of education can give greater depth to educational discourse by analyzing the assumptions that are implied in statements about role models and by synthesizing various literatures that might speak to these assumptions. The final task I propose is to study the meaning that imitative actions can bring to social situations. Imitation, after all, is taken to mean many different things. Imitating others can be a sign of flattery, mockery, humility, worship, or dependency. Imitation can be taken as a compliment or as a form of plagiarism. In short, imitation can be a language that shapes and reshapes communities, including educational communities. Like any language, the meaningfulness

of imitative actions depends on a certain "grammar," and uncovering this grammar would help us to better understand how classroom communities are formed and sustained.

One of the most intriguing questions that imitative meanings present for education has to do with the role of imitation in forming communities of practice and inquiry. When I imitate others in a group, it has many different meanings for myself and for the group. For one thing, my imitative action sculpts how I understand my *past* because my imitation of practices such as storytelling offers a framework for reconceptualizing my personal history. For another, my imitation often regulates my placement within *current* community boundaries because it often marks who is and who is not a member of a group. Finally, my imitation sets the stage for *future* communal action, that is, it partially allows for a shared interest in common problems and it gives me shared methods and vocabularies for working in cooperation with others to solve these problems. It could be said that one meaning of imitation, then, resides in its temporal mediation of group identity.

So what difference does this make? Clarifying the meanings of imitative action has implications for how we come to see the value of imitation in education. The value of imitative learning has been much disputed, after all, with critics arguing that learning by imitating examples is a betrayal of proper human reason. John Locke warns that to imitate is to present a "counterfeit" self, while Rousseau says that imitation promotes a "forgetfulness" of our true natures. Ralph Waldo Emerson goes so far as to call imitation a type of "suicide." Contemporary critics, in turn, have cautioned that imitative learning (emphasized especially in virtue ethics approaches) is unsuited to a world of pluralism and rapid change.[9] Although imitation may have worked well in more stable societies, learners in today's world, it is said, need to be able to "think for themselves" — they should think creatively and produce independently justifiable reasons for their actions. Imitation and critical inquiry, for the critics, are necessarily opposed. Thus, it seems that the critics of imitation have made certain assumptions about the relationship between imitation and reason, just as proponents of imitation have made assumptions about selection and motivation.

When we attend to the meanings of imitation within larger social contexts, however, it seems hard to support these assumptions. If imitation plays a role in the temporal mediation of communities, as I have suggested, then it would also influence communities that themselves promote inquiry and creativity. The scientific community, for instance, promotes imitation on many levels, from styles of dress, to methods of communication and investigation, to future problems of interest. Yet, even with this imitation, the scientific community is a community of inquiry. Critics who say that imitative behavior is damagingly conservative and uncreative tend to ignore the role of imitative behavior in bringing together groups of people that cooperatively work on shared problems. Although any particular imitative action within the group may seem uncreative, inflexible, and uncritical, when the action is taken in its larger social context, it can often be shown to play a role in forming and maintaining the community and the community, in turn, may be acting in ways that are very creative, flexible, and critical.

What alerted me to this idea was reflecting on the group of friends I ran around with as a teenager. There was a good deal of imitative behavior within this group, which probably appeared quite thoughtless at times. (Indeed, my parents sometimes would highlight the perceived thoughtlessness of such imitations by asking the age-old parenting question, "If your friends jumped off a cliff, would you?") The imitative behavior formed us into a community, though, and in this community we felt free to discuss important questions into the late hours of the night. Such conversations were probably my first taste of philosophy, although I did not recognize it at the time. This community, based in part on imitative action, also promoted inquiry. An even better example would be to think of a school of artists, like the Impressionists, where a good deal of imitation takes place within the group, but the group goes on to produce revolutionary and groundbreaking artistic achievements.

This is not to say, of course, that all imitative communities produce creative and critical inquiry all of the time. In fact, some imitative communities may impede inquiry as much as others promote it. Most communities (like the scientific community) probably promote inquiry in one sense while closing it down in another. My argument is only that (1) imitative actions play a role in building communities of cooperative action, and (2) these communities may sometimes be communities of creative inquiry. This is enough to suggest that a creative, flexible, and critical inquiry is not *necessarily* in opposition to the imitation of examples, and indeed, that sometimes imitation can facilitate such inquiry. Asking questions, then, about the social meanings involved in imitation might help resolve lingering disputes about the value of imitative learning and help us, in turn, to better evaluate educational communities.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to expose and evaluate some of the assumptions that are made in the discourse surrounding imitative learning. I have raised questions and suggested some ways these questions can be fruitfully engaged. One idea that grows from this analysis is that the discourse so far has taken a much too individualistic view. Larger social forces, contexts, and meanings have been neglected as people have looked at imitative learning. The imitative encounter is not simply an engagement between a learner and a model, as it has often been taken to be. Just as our understanding of a phenomenon like unemployment must look beyond transactions between individual employers and jobseekers to larger social forces, so also must our understanding of imitative learning. There are powers within social contexts that shape how imitation occurs, what it means, and what value it has in education. When studying imitation and human exemplarity, therefore, we need to turn away from simply looking at the individual human subjects and toward the practices, communities, and traditions in which the individuals are situated.

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1. Quoted in "'Imitación y Experiencia' de Javier Gomá gana el Nacional de Ensayo," *La Semana,* 18–24 (2004). http://www.lasemana.es/periodico/noticia.php?cod=10132.

2. To understand Goodman's point, it is necessary to keep in mind two different senses of word "example." The word is sometimes used to mean any particular instance of a category. Any pencil is also an example of a pencil under this understanding. At the same time, it seems odd to say that any time I walk I am also an *example* of walking. That is, we tend to also think of examples as having something extra that draws our attention to them.

3. Catherine Z. Elgin, "Understanding: Art and Science," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, *XVI*, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore Uehling Jr., and Howard Wettstein (South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame, 1991).

4. This idea is also developed by Douglas Arrell, "Exemplification Reconsidered," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30, no. 3 (1990): 233–243.

5. See William James, *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 648–713.

6. See V. Gallese et al., "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex," *Brain* 119 (1996): 593–609.

7. See J. Grèzes and J. Docety, "Functional Anatomy of Execution, Mental Simulation, Observation, and Verb Generation of Actions: A Meta-Analysis," *Human Brain Mapping* 12 (2001): 1–19.

8. See F. Lhermitte, B. Pillon, and M. Serdaru, "Human Autonomy and the Frontal Lobes: Imitation and Utilization Behavior: A Neuropsychological Study of 75 Patients," *Annals of Neurology* 19 (1986): 326–334.

9. Edmund L. Erde, "On the Inadequacy of Role Models for Educating Medical Students in Ethics with Some Reflections on Virtue Theory," *Theoretical Medicine* 18, no. 1–2 (1997): 31–45.