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Entangled *phronesis* and the four causes of emulation: Developmental insights into role modelling

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tre**Emerald Henderson** 

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Abstract

A new theory of emulation – the method by which one learns from moral role models – is emerging through the combined efforts of philosophers, psychologists and educationists. Using a previous argument reconceptualising emulation as a moral virtue as a philosophical springboard, in this paper, I extend this theory by building a more robust case for how emulation *qua* role modelling works in practice through direct appeal to Aristotle's account of causation: the four causes. Historically revered for their explanatory power, I argue that reconstructing the four causes and synthesising them with emulation enables us to better comprehend it as a quadripartite causal process. Through doing so, I propose that emulation is driven by 'entangled *phronesis*' – a mechanism which enables immature moral learners to acquire virtue by sharing in the *phronesis*, that is, practical wisdom, of a role model. Since the degree of entanglement depends upon a learner's phase of virtuous character development, I also divide emulation into two types: *pre-phronetic* 'habituated emulation' and *phronetically-informed* 'complete emulation'. Combined with my four-causal account of emulation, these concepts represent a novel contribution to neo-Aristotelian character developmental theory and help explain – step-by-step – the method by which one potentially acquires moral virtue and *phronesis* from moral role models.

Keywords

Aristotle's four causes, emulation, moral development, *phronesis*, role modelling

Introduction

A new theory of emulation – the method by which one learns from moral role models – is emerging through the combined efforts of philosophers, psychologists and educationists.

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In a previous paper, I set the scene for this theory by proposing a reconstructed neo-Aristotelian account of emulation as a moral virtue (Henderson, 2022). Inspired by Aristotle's focus on emulation *qua* role modelling as a method of virtuous character development in both his *Rhetoric* (2001: 75–76) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009: 1180b3–1180b8), but noticing there was something amiss in his and his neo-Aristotelian sympathisers categorisation of it as purely a virtuous emotion (e.g. see Kristjánsson, 2006, 2018), I proposed it be reconceptualised as a moral virtue in its own right (Henderson, 2022). Put simply, virtuous emotions – as elements of virtues – comprise: perception, thought (cognition), physical feelings and a *behavioural suggestion* (Kristjánsson, 2018: 13). However, as virtue proper must include *virtuous action* (e.g. see Aristotle, 2009: *NE*, 1098b30–1099a6; Rorty, 1984: 535), and virtuous emotion necessitates only a *suggestion* to said action (Kristjánsson, 2018: 13; Knuuttila, 2004: 32), as a matter of logical coherence emulation must also include action because it is explicitly associated with *virtue* development (Henderson, 2022). Understanding emulation, or emulousness, as a moral virtue is educationally salient because it provides a conceptual umbrella with which to explain and clarify the *whole process* through which one learns *both* virtuous emotion and virtuous action, that is, virtue, from moral role models. This conceptual clarity provides the foundations for a more substantial methodological endeavour regarding how emulation potentially works, which I expound in this paper.

Illuminating the emulative process is especially important in educational contexts because – inevitably and unavoidably – teachers *just are* moral role models to pupils (Kristjánsson, 2020: 139; Sanderse and Cooke, 2021: 227). Combined with the additional empirical claim that role models, pedagogically speaking, are required to develop virtue (Croce and Vaccarezza, 2017: 5; Kristjánsson, 2006: 46; Vos, 2018: 7), this creates a substantial case for role modelling to be taken seriously by teachers and teacher educators. Yet while role modelling is typically championed as a central method of virtuous character development (e.g. see Carr, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2006, 2015; Miller, 2014, 2017; Sanderse, 2012, 2013; Warnick, 2008; Zagzebski, 2013, 2017), proponents of virtue ethics remain conflicted as to the precise mechanisms which facilitate learning from role models (e.g. see Kristjánsson, 2020; Protasi, 2021; Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2019; Zagzebski, 2017) – a conundrum which is no doubt exacerbated by Aristotle's renowned lack of explicit guidance on the matter. This enduring debate has been particularly lively in the present journal (e.g. see Croce and Vaccarezza, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2017; Little, 2021), and I intend this paper to contribute to it by ameliorating a predominantly methodological gap in the literature – by introducing new concepts and processes which further disambiguate the method of emulation *qua* role modelling. More precisely, by providing a developmentally sensitive step-by-step account of how the morally immature potentially develop moral virtue and *phronesis* by emulating moral role models, I seek to extend the conceptual and methodological repertoire of neo-Aristotelian character developmental theory.

Assuming my previous argument reconceptualising emulation as a moral virtue is convincing (2022), this paper thus builds a more robust case for how emulation *qua* role modelling works in practice through direct appeal to Aristotle's account of causation: the four causes (*Physics*, 1936: 194b21–194b35; *Metaphysics*, 1999: 1044a32–1044a34).

Historically revered for their explanatory power, I employ the four causes in order to strengthen the foundations of this emerging theory by using them to expound emulation as a quadripartite causal process. Importantly, the account of this process is inherently reconstructive rather than exegetical in nature, since establishing the four causes of emulation requires, first, devising a four-causal account of virtue and, second, assigning each cause a temporal order – neither of which Aristotle did. I argue that emulation is driven by ‘entangled *phronesis*’ – a mechanism which enables immature moral learners to acquire virtue by sharing in the *phronesis*, that is, practical wisdom (see Kristjánsson et al., 2022), of a role model and their blueprint of a flourishing life. Essentially a form of rational moral communication, I also argue that the degree of entanglement depends upon a learner’s phase of virtuous character development, and accordingly divide emulation into two types: *pre-phronetic* ‘habituated emulation’ and *phronetically-informed* ‘complete emulation’. Since the journey from habituated virtue to full virtue is a lifelong process, my position implies that a form of emulation could persist, albeit in developmentally sensitive ways, over the course of one’s life.

In what follows, I first situate my argument within the broader literature on emulation, before motivating the suitability of applying Aristotle’s four causes to virtue. I then advance my four-causal account of the virtue of emulation by proposing that the ‘efficient cause’ – the catalyst of virtue acquisition – entails the moral agent’s perception of the role model’s virtues as representative of a moral ideal. From this follows the ‘formal cause’ as the *phronetically informed* evaluation that these ideals are worthy of emulation and possible to acquire. This in turn leads to the ‘material cause’, *physically feeling* the distress and admiration associated with one’s lack of the desired quality, that is, the role-model-represented ideal, which induces the motivational state of inspiration. Appropriately, this culminates in the ‘final cause’: virtuous action concerning ends – putting the role-model-represented ideal of virtue into practice. In constructing this argument, I also develop the aforementioned concepts of entangled *phronesis*, ‘habituated emulation’ and ‘complete emulation’. To ensure my position is sufficiently motivated and justified, throughout the paper I also anticipate and respond to possible objections.

Emulation as a moral virtue

Before advancing a four-causal account of the virtue of emulation, it is first instructive to briefly situate my position within the broader literature on emulation in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in order to outline my influences and, perhaps more importantly, make visible how I depart from them. While Aristotle’s main description of emulation (*zēlos*) in *Rhetoric* (2001: 75–76) is somewhat brief – not even two pages – his depiction of it as *an emotion* has inspired numerous neo-Aristotelian scholars to reaffirm this categorisation (e.g. see Croce, 2019: 238; Kristjánsson, 2006, 2018; Sanderse, 2013: 36; Steutel and Spiecker, 2004: 545; Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2022: 113; Vos, 2018: 6). For Aristotle (2001: 75), then, emulation is a negatively experienced emotion characterised by distress that others have acquired goods that one lacks, but that one feels one deserves, he writes:

Emulation is pain 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; but it is felt not

because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves. It is therefore a good feeling felt by good persons, whereas envy is a bad feeling felt by bad persons. Emulation makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, envy makes us take steps to stop our neighbour having them.

Notice here that, unlike envy, emulation compels us to ‘take steps’ to secure the good, that is, virtue, in question, but not at the expense of the emulated other. This implies there is no competition between the moral novice and the moral expert, the former can acquire what the latter has without the intention to deprive the latter of that good – unlike envy emulation is therefore distinctly moral. One particularly influential exception to this overall negative emotional reading of emulation comes from Zagzebski, who, in focusing on positively experienced admiration, ‘assumes’ it to be conceptually similar to Aristotle’s emulation (2015: 210; see also, 2013, 2017). For Zagzebski, as it is the emotion of admiration which motivates emulation, emulation is seen purely as a behavioural outcome – notably signalling a further departure from Aristotle. In addition, even though Zagzebski (2015) concedes that admiration can go awry, properly directed admiration ‘involves an awareness of an admired good in another person’ (p. 214) and is therefore always moral. Whilst Zagzebski’s *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (2017) should be credited for raising the profile of exemplarism in multiple academic discourses, her overemphasis on admiration at the expense of other important aspects of moral exemplarism has begun to push it out of favour (e.g. see Kaftanski, 2022; Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2019, 2022).

Vaccarezza and Niccoli (2022: 112), for example, are wary of her exclusive focus on positive emotions, because encounters with exemplars can elicit a multitude of negative emotions such as shame, envy or guilt – some forms of which may be morally transformative and motivational under certain conditions. Focusing on ‘emulative envy’, a benign form of envy directed towards an attainable moral good which has ‘no negative consequences for either the envied or the envious’, they argue that this kind of envy omits of further nuance (Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2022: 215). In their view, autonomy preserving ‘inspiring envy’ is the most valuable type of emulative envy, since it helps one acquire the ‘reflective and deliberative skills’ necessary for attaining ‘the good one aspires to in a personal, unique fashion’, and avoids the problems associated with literal ‘imitative envy’, such as conformism (Vaccarezza and Niccoli, 2022: 118). I agree with the central tenets of Vaccarezza and Niccoli’s argument, and see many parallels with my own position, yet I question whether framing both imitative and inspiring emulative ‘envy’ as forms of envy proper is giving too much weight to envy, and further question understanding these types of envy as mere emotions.

Other philosophers have also sought to clarify what is meant by the so-called ‘emotion of emulation’, in particular Kristjánsson, who categorises it initially as a freestanding ‘emotional virtue’ (Kristjánsson, 2006) and then a ‘virtuous emotion’ which is a component of other general virtues (Kristjánsson, 2018). As I problematise in depth why neither of these readings of emulation can fully account for what emulation is meant to accomplish in a previous paper (Henderson, 2022: 3–6), I shall just briefly reiterate my objections here. In short, the issue concerns how virtuous emotions are the main components of virtues, but distinct in that virtuous action is a necessary condition of virtue, but not of virtuous emotion – a point that is emphasised both by Aristotle and other eminent

neo-Aristotelian scholars numerous times (e.g. see Aristotle, 2009: *NE*, 1098b30–1099a6; Rorty, 1984: 535). As becoming virtuous involves putting virtuous emotions into practice by exercising virtuous action, and as emulation it is explicitly associated with *virtue development*, I suggest – in addition to virtuous emotion – that activity matters for the efficacy of emulation and therefore that the emulation of moral role models must include virtuous action (Henderson, 2022). I argue that Kristjánsson’s (2006) categorisation of emulation as an ‘emotional virtue’ – while compelling in many ways – is not logically coherent, because if some virtues are synonymous with emotions, then one cannot validly include the final explicitly behavioural component (Henderson, 2022: 4). In blurring the emotion-virtue boundary, Kristjánsson thus *over-defines* the emotion of emulation as an ‘emotional virtue’, negating the possibility of virtuous action, which seems essential to being emulous. From a different direction, I then argue that Kristjánsson’s (2018) account of emulation as a ‘virtuous emotion’ *under-defines* emulation, similarly because it also negates the possibility of virtuous action, as virtuous emotions include a *behavioural suggestion*, but not full *virtuous activity* (Henderson, 2022: 5–6). Given the necessity of action to the emulative process, as a matter of logical coherence, I suggest that emulation is better categorised as a virtue in its own right (Henderson, 2022: 6). Unlike understanding emulation as *merely* a virtuous emotion, understanding it as a virtue has the advantage of accommodating both the emotional and behavioural aspects of emulation under one conceptual umbrella, thus enabling emulation to facilitate the cultivation of virtuous emotion *and* virtuous action, that is, virtue proper, in the novice. Respectfully, I therefore propose that Aristotle is guilty of a category mistake when defining emulation merely as an emotion (Henderson, 2022).

All this said, while I hope that readers are persuaded by my account of emulation as a moral virtue, and acknowledge the benefits of reading it in this way, the argument I present in this paper is also intended to stand on its own two feet. As such, I am willing to acknowledge that *even if* one reads emulation as purely a virtuous emotion, this will not particularly weaken the argument in *this* paper, since it still serves to illuminate the methodology of emulation. The success of this paper should therefore not purely rely on whether my argument in 2022 is successful or not. I also concede that virtuous emotion comprises the central components of the virtue of emulation, and thus appeal to Kristjánsson’s comprehensive and persuasive account of virtuous emotions – which importantly includes appeal to Aristotle’s four causes – as a starting point for my present aim of devising a four-causal account of the virtue of emulation. However, unlike Kristjánsson’s previous accounts of emulation, my endeavour is focused on virtue proper and delves much deeper into what the four causes of virtue might be – details which will become apparent during the course of this paper.

Aristotle’s four causes

Quadripartite explanations of virtue are common in the empirical virtue measurement literature (e.g. Curren and Kotzee, 2014; Fowers et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2017), an observation which *prima facie* highlights the suitability of applying Aristotle’s four causes to virtue, and therefore the virtue of emulation. In particular, my position draws upon and synthesises the work of Morgan et al. (2017: 4) and Wright et al. (2020: 8)¹ in

order to operationalise virtue into, broadly speaking, four main components: the perceptual, cognitive, attitudinal (including motivational) and behavioural. Ultimately, this division of virtue into empirically supported parts is an instructive move designed to raise the initial credibility of my own four causal account of emulation. I shall now summarise Aristotle's four causes, before outlining Kristjánsson's similarly componential account of virtuous emotion which I draw upon for their temporal order.

Conceptualised as four sorts of explanations, Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes is commonly applied to substances, like artefacts (Falcon, 2022), and to natural changes, like respiration (Evnine, 2016). Irreducible and distinct, in both the *Physics* (1936: 194b21–194b35) and *Metaphysics* (1999: 1044a32–1044a34) he proposes that they comprise:

- The material cause: 'that out of which' something comes to exist;
- The formal cause: 'the form' that distinguishes one thing from another, and acts as a paradigm for something becoming that thing;
- The efficient cause: the catalyst or primary source of change; and
- The final cause: the end 'for the sake of which' something comes about.

In the *Metaphysics* especially, Aristotle (1999: 1001b29–1001b32) posits that since substances and natural changes are not the same, the four causes apply to them in different ways. Until recently, intentional human action – a natural change – has been treated as an exception to a four-causal explanation (Reece, 2019). For example, Aristotle's position was standardly taken to support an ordinary causalist theory of action, where intentional actions were distinguished from accidental combinations of movements because the former are brought about by the psychological attitudes of the agent, such as a desire or belief (e.g. see Davidson, 1963: 693).

However, Aristotelian scholar Bryan Reece, who focuses largely on the philosophy of action, argues that the natural change of human action can also be powerfully illuminated with reference to Aristotle's four causal procedure (Reece, 2019: 213). Given my previous argument supporting the necessity of action for virtue, this is a promising development, and relevantly analogous to my present aim of aligning the components of emulation to the four causes. Like Reece's interest in action more generally, I too seek to understand more about what virtuous action, a form of intentional action, is and how it is caused in the specific context of emulation. Yet virtuous action is more complicated, particularly because it is composed of virtuous emotion, which is itself componential. I therefore need to look beyond an analysis of pure action to establish how the four causes could apply to virtue and also ascertain the correct order of these causes.

As luck would have it, Kristjánsson (2018: 8–13) has devised a four-causal account of virtuous emotion, in which he suggests a potential temporal order. Reimagined, they encompass (Kristjánsson, 2018: 8–13):

- The efficient cause: the 'source' of an emotion – perception.
- The 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.

For example, for the virtuous emotion of gratitude, the efficient cause or ‘source’ would be the ‘perceived benefit to oneself provided by a benefactor’; the formal object ‘cognised benevolently intended benefaction from a benefactor’; the material cause or valance² would be ‘more pleasant than painful’; and the final cause the ‘acknowledgment and return of benefit’ (Kristjánsson, 2018: 186). Interestingly, I have observed that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle (2001) suggests we should explain emotions in three ways, or ‘under three heads’ (p. 55). For anger, he suggests that one must discover (1) the state of mind of the angry person; (2) who the anger is directed towards; and (3) the reasons for the anger. While not directly equivalent to Kristjánsson’s causes, and not temporally ordered, these could be perceived as similar in the sense that the efficient cause would be the source of anger and who it is directed towards, the formal cause the reasons for the anger, and the material cause the state of mind. This tripartite account could support my own argument in favour of virtuous emotions as components of virtue, with virtuous action providing the final cause. Inspired by this, I shall now offer a similarly temporal account of the virtue of emulation. I first expound what is meant by each cause as a component of virtue, before applying this to the virtue of emulation specifically. Since virtuous emotions largely comprise virtue, the first three causes – the efficient, formal and material – are also intended apply to virtuous emotion, meaning that the final cause – virtuous action – is reserved purely for virtue.

The efficient cause: The moral agent’s perception of the role model’s virtues as representative of a moral ideal

The first step in reaching explanatory adequacy for the virtue of emulation, requires investigating its efficient cause. To recap, according to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1999: 1044a32–1044a34) the efficient cause is the primary source of change, which in the case of virtuous emotion Kristjánsson (2018: 186) conceptualises as *perception*. However, it is worth mentioning that Aristotle (2009: *NE* 1139a31) denotes *choice* as the efficient cause of action, and further explains this choice as either ‘desiderative reason’ or ‘ratiocinative desire’, which originate in a person (p. 1139b5). Here, rational and ratiocinative both imply that they are *phronetically informed* by the rational intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, which is cognitive. However, if we refer back to Kristjánsson’s (2018: 8) ‘reasonably Aristotelian’ argument that virtuous emotions are essentially cognitions, we will see that these cognitions are first caused by perception. One does not simply jump straight to a cognition, understood as an evaluative thought, the moral situation must first be perceived. In this sense, if the *origin* of an evaluative thought is the perceiver, the source of a virtuous emotion is perception – which I argue also entails it is the source of virtue. In a similar vein, one does not jump straight from choice to virtuous action, it must first be perceived, cognised and physiologically felt before, on further *phronetic* reflection, a medial choice to virtuous action can be made. As regards Aristotle’s position that choice is the efficient cause of action, I therefore suggest that *temporally*, choice,

informed by ratiocinative desire and desiderative reason, is better understood as an element of the final cause, a point upon which I shall elaborate in Section 6. Returning to Kristjánsson's (2018: 8) account of perception, he suggests that how something appears, or is perceived, is informed by the 'who, what and where' of the perceiver, that is, their context. Perception then causes an evaluative thought, a *krisis*, indicating that perception is logically prior to cognition, and is a plausible efficient cause (Kristjánsson, 2018: 8).

Now let us consider what this implies for emulation. Ultimately, I suggest that the efficient cause is the moral agent's perception of the role model's virtues as representative of a moral ideal. I argue this necessitates a role model as an 'evoker' or prime mover to stimulate perception, and the move from moral potentiality to actuality. In terms of the 'immediate target', understood as the 'broad ontological object at which the emotion is primarily directed' (Kristjánsson, 2018: 9), Kristjánsson (2020: 148) proposes that emulation is *other-directed* towards the role model. However, I argue that while the *immediate target* is the role model, as the aim is to emulate the ideals represented by the role model, the *ultimate target* is better conceptualised as being *ideal-directed*. This is perhaps more in line with Kristjánsson's (2020) position, as he also argues that ideals rather than persons ought to be the source of emulation – '*exemplarity* rather than *individual exemplars*' (p. 138). That said, my position is slightly more moderate. This is because, while Kristjánsson claims that it is theoretically possible to be directly attracted to 'transpersonal ideals', meaning the virtue itself, through what he terms 'elevation' (Kristjánsson, 2020: 153; see also, 2017: 28–29), my account of emulation maintains that the role model is necessary for perceiving these ideals. Going further, I also suggest that even if it were theoretically possible to perceive ideals without a role model, this would be limited to the universalist 'thin' version of the virtue, meaning that a role model would still be required to furnish this perception with role and context sensitive 'thick' incarnations of it. While I agree that role models *represent* rather than *constitute* virtue, and that the aim is to emulate the represented ideal, my reconstructive neo-Aristotelian position requires a role model as a facilitator.

This stance helps overcome a common objection to role modelling which concerns conflating emulation with mere imitation: commonly problematised as the idea that, in holding up *persons* as models of virtue, moral learners are tempted to uncritically imitate or copy them, regardless of flaws, which results in blind hero-worship (Kristjánsson, 2006: 41, 2020: 139; Sanderse, 2013: 36; Vos, 2018: 6). Distinguishing imitation – which is primarily of the person themselves – from emulation – which concerns the *ideals* that a person represents, is thus vital (Kristjánsson, 2020: 141). This issue has been creatively reconceptualised by Kristjánsson (2006: 41) through Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma. Here Socrates asks, 'is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved?' (Plato, 2017: 55). Socrates sides with the first horn, that the gods appeal to an objective standard which they acknowledge as good, indicating that goodness is not relative to the gods. In a similar way, to overcome the issue of imitation, moral learners must recognise that role models represent rather than constitute virtue, and, while inspiring, are subordinate to the ideals of virtue. Yet if emulating ideals is the aim, one may question whether role models are superfluous? In response, I support Vos (2018: 7) in contending that a concrete role model is *required* to perceive ideals because abstract moral truths alone are insufficiently stimulating. This point supports my previous argument in

favour of the perception of ideals as the efficient cause of emulation. Importantly, because perception is logically prior to understanding, this cognitive process begins with the perception of these ideals, hence perception as the efficient cause of emulation.

The formal cause: The phronetically informed evaluation that these ideals are worthy of emulation and possible to acquire

The formal cause can perhaps be considered, along with the final cause, the most important explanation of moral virtue, primarily due to its association with *phronesis*. Explaining why requires first appealing to Aristotle, before expounding the formal cause as *phronetically informed* evaluative thought (cognition). Indeed, in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle conceptualises the formal cause as ‘the form’ that distinguishes one thing from another and acts as a paradigm for something becoming that thing (Aristotle, 1999: 1044a32–1044a34). For virtuous emotions, Kristjánsson (2018: 8–13) reconstructs this as their ‘intentional object’, which is specifically to do with evaluative thought, that is, cognition. In the case of pity, for example, it entails the ‘cognised deserved misfortune of another person’ (Kristjánsson, 2018: 15). This corresponds to Aristotle’s cognised theory of emotions, which entails ‘feeling one’s thoughts and thinking one’s feelings’ (2006: 43). In light of this, Kristjánsson (2018: 12) proposes that an evaluative thought develops and interprets the initial perception (the efficient cause).

While it is decidedly Aristotelian to posit the formal cause as that which gives something its identity conditions, extending this specifically to *cognition* in the case of virtue requires further justification. Recall that virtuous emotions are here understood as *phronetically informed* dispositions to medial feeling, with ‘*phronetically*’ referring to the intellectual meta-virtue of practical wisdom – *phronesis* – which, among other central functions, works to infuse emotions with reason, making them cognitive (see Darnell et al., 2019, 2022; Kristjánsson et al., 2022). This means they must be experienced medially, rather than excessively or deficiently, in terms of: ‘(a) occasions, (b) objects, (c) people, (d) motive (i.e. goal), and (e) way (i.e. degree)’ (Kristjánsson, 2018: 20). In addition to being medial, a virtuous emotion is a dispositional trait (Kristjánsson, 2018: 22) – contrast someone who frequently and consistently evaluates what they perceive medially, say in response to witnessing an injustice, to a fleeting one-off episode of doing so. Ultimately, *phronesis* provides the cognition necessary for emotions to be morally relevant, and in doing so enables us to be accountable and responsible for them.

On the assumption that the formal cause of virtuous emotion, and thus virtue, can be reasonably conceptualised as cognition, that is, *phronetically informed* evaluative thought, I will now consider what this means for the virtue of emulation. Stimulated by the efficient cause, the perception of the role model’s virtues as representative of a moral ideal, I argue that the formal cause involves the *evaluation* that these ideals are worthy of emulation and possible to acquire. This is in line with Aristotle’s (2001) definition of emulation in the *Rhetoric*, which concerns ‘good things that are highly valuable and are possible’ (p. 75). It is also directly inspired by Kristjánsson’s (2006: 45) account of the cognitive element of emulation: one must understand why the virtue displayed by the role model is morally worthy of being valued, before considering what reasonable steps

are required to acquire it for oneself. Acknowledging these influences, I aim to extend and deepen the cognitive aspect of emulation by specifically aligning it with *phronesis*.

Now reimaged as the formal cause, I propose that *phronesis* first works to identify the intentional object of emulation, which is best understood as the *cognised worthiness of role-model-represented ideals*. By ‘worthy’ I mean morally worthy, which in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics entails recognising that the ideal contributes to flourishing, or *eudaimonia*. In identifying this intentional object, *phronesis* defines the paradigm of emulation, thus distinguishing it from, for example, favourable but non-moral characteristics a role model might represent. From this cognition, flows a second round of *phronetic* reflection about whether and how these represented ideals can be acquired given one’s capabilities. That *phronesis* identifies the represented ideals as *possible* to acquire is an important caveat, since it is at this point that one might fail to be emulous if the ideals are deemed to be beyond one’s reach. This echoes Aristotle’s (2001: 75) claim that nobody aspires to things they consider impossible. Also known as the issue of moral inertia, unattainable ideals can disempower the learner and result in moral paralysis (e.g. see Kristjánsson, 2020: 139; Swanton, 2003: 212). I propose that this problem is specifically linked to the formal cause of emulation.

We now arrive at a specious paradox. First consider how emulation is a special kind of virtue – one concerned with the sphere of life to do with moral education and practised by the morally immature. The fully-virtuous, by contrast, have little need for emulation, having already cultivated *phronesis* which enables them to autonomously identify the virtuous response in any given situation. However, if the purpose of emulation is to facilitate virtuous character development in the morally immature, and *phronesis* is required for this to take place, as the those cited have not yet developed full *phronesis*, they cannot emulate, thus negating the purpose of emulation. Indeed, the idea that moral goodness ‘in the strict sense’ requires practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and practical wisdom requires moral virtue, is reinforced by Aristotle at numerous junctures in his writing (e.g. see Aristotle, 2009: *NE* 1144b30-23). If learners lack *phronesis*, then this calls into question whether emulation can facilitate their virtue development, and in turn whether it can reasonably be conceptualised as a virtue. To these objections I have two rejoinders which introduce and employ the newly devised concept of ‘entangled *phronesis*’. First is the *entangled phronesis rejoinder*, in which I propose that the role model’s *phronesis* acts as a substitute for the learner’s lack of *phronesis* while it is developing – a mechanism which enables a learner to be emulous by association. This echoes Kristjánsson’s (2022: 5) point that an Aristotelian account of reason assumes different forms depending on our developmental level. Initially we share in the reason of our role models (*pre-phronesis*), then progress to reasoning with them (*developing-phronesis*), before finally we independently apply *phronesis* (Kristjánsson, 2022: 5).

Going further, I propose the *varieties of entangled phronesis rejoinder*, which concerns how emulation operates differently according to one’s degree of *phronetic* development. I suggest that illuminating the emulative process requires dividing it into two types: ‘habituated emulation’ and ‘complete emulation’. In habituated emulation, the learner is in a *pre-phronetic* phase of development; here, the role model’s *phronesis* substitutes the learner’s lack of *phronesis* to provide direct moral guidance. In complete emulation, *phronesis* has begun to develop, which enables the learner and role model to

reason together by entangling their *phronesis* to different degrees – the more advanced a learner is the lower the degree of entanglement and vice versa. Returning to my point that emulation is a special kind of virtue, this is largely because it uniquely requires only *developing* rather than *fully-developed phronesis*, thanks to the mechanism of entangled *phronesis*. It is therefore practised prior to other virtues, in order to acquire them.

The material cause: Physically feeling the distress and admiration, associated with one's lack of the desired quality, that is, the role-model-represented ideal, which induces the motivational state of inspiration

Temporally, in my account of the four causes of virtue, the formal cause informs the material cause, which I shall now explain. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1999: 1044a32–4) specifies the material cause to be 'that out of which' something comes to exist. For natural changes, such as self-movement, he claims that this is the body, since this is the physiological substratum that undergoes the change (Aristotle, 1999: 1044b7–1044b20). While I acknowledge the integral physicality of the material cause, the motivation driving virtuous action is considerably more complicated, hence my appeal to the material cause of virtuous emotion. Indeed, despite the overarching cognitive emphasis, Aristotle saw emotion, to use Kristjánsson's (2018) terms, as 'necessarily embodied and concretized in the flesh' (p. 15). Aristotle's (2001: 55) material cause of emotion is thus rooted in our physiological substratum, and specifically concerns feelings of pain or pleasure. Mapping onto this, Kristjánsson (2018: 13) has proposed the material cause of virtuous emotion to be the 'physiological valance' – the tangible experience of pleasant or painful physical feelings. For example, gratitude is *overall*³ more pleasant than painful, whereas shame is more painful than pleasant. This account entails that the physical feelings associated with each virtuous emotion are necessarily caused by the prior formal cause (evaluative thought), a point which further entails that Aristotle should be interpreted neither as a pure cognitivist, nor a pure sensationist, when it comes to emotion (e.g. see Fortenbaugh, 2002: 12). These physical feelings therefore arise, differ and are medially felt in the right ways, primarily because of the influence of *phronetically informed* thought – the formal cause.

Turning our attention to emulation, in line with Aristotle (2001: 75), one may posit that while overall it is classified as negatively valanced, it is also largely mixed. Recall Kristjánsson's (2018) explanation that 'the pain in emulation, at one's inferiority vis-à-vis an admired exemplar, is partly offset by one's pleasure in cherishing the admired qualities of the exemplar' (p. 12). More specifically, he suggests that this pain is experienced as *distress* that the exemplar has characteristics which one lacks, in addition to *admiration* for these characteristics, which gives rise to the desire to cultivate these characteristics in oneself (Kristjánsson, 2018: 47). The pain of distress is thus tempered by the possibility of a cure (see Frede, 1996: 269). If we understand this distress as a kind of benign, rather than malicious, envy, there is some, admittedly non-moral, empirical evidence to support that this motivates one to improve by emulating a role model, in particular those that are perceived to be relatable (Van de Ven et al., 2011). An additional neuroscientific study established that admiration, specifically for virtue, also inspired

and motivated ‘a strong desire to lead better lives and to accomplish noble deeds’ (Immordino-Yang and Sylvan, 2010: 112). More recently, Protasi (2021: 49) – drawing upon another study by Van de Ven (2017: 197) – has argued that both admiration and ‘benign envy’ motivate emulation-type self-improvement. In a similar vein, I take these studies to provide preliminary support that it is a *combination* of positive (admiration) and negative (distress) feeling that is motivational, and influenced cognitively by the formal cause.

Before I delve deeper into the intricacies of motivation, particularly as concerns its link to *phronesis*, it is important to further define what I understand by ‘distress’ and ‘admiration’. Couched in Aristotelian terms, the pain of emulation is felt ‘not because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves’ – an evaluation which equates to the feeling of distress (Aristotle, 2001: 75). Importantly, while painful, this distress is not felt at the expense of the emulated role model, and is thus, according to Aristotle’s (2001) *Rhetoric*, ‘a good feeling felt by good persons’, as opposed to envy which conversely is ‘a bad feeling felt by bad persons’ (p. 75). In addition, I interpret admiration, which Aristotle (2001: 76) considers the opposite of contempt, to be distinctly pleasurable and elicited by the appreciation of moral excellence as represented by the role model – a feeling which is profoundly motivational. In light of this, I propose that the material cause of emulation can be summarised to concern *physically feeling* the distress *and* admiration, associated with one’s lack of the desired quality, that is, the role-model-represented ideal.

That this understanding involves two distinct but interrelated *feelings* is important, since it helps overcome a criticism levelled at Aristotle by Zagzebski (2015: 210–211). She objects that Aristotle was mistaken to combine within *zēlos* (emulation) two different emotions concerning (1) the pejorative conception of oneself given the role model’s relative excellence *and* (2) the positive conception of the role model, combined with the striving to become like them. Zagzebski adds that Aristotle (2015: 210) confusedly calls both these *emotions* ‘emulation’, when in her view it is predominantly the latter, the positive emotion of ‘admiration’, that leads to emulation. In this sense, Zagzebski focuses almost entirely on admiration, which she takes to be an emotion, in an attempt to explain emulation, another emotion (e.g. see Zagzebski, 2017: 135–139). In response, I defend Aristotle by arguing that Zagzebski overinflates the role of admiration in emulation and suggest this is primarily because she miscategorises admiration as an emotion, rather than, as I do, a physiological feeling.⁴ Notably, Aristotle calls neither distress nor admiration an emotion in the *Rhetoric*, perhaps because he wanted to avoid the logically problematic implications of trying to grapple with the concept of emotions within emotions, leading to further emotions. In contrast to Zagzebski’s position which champions admiration as (1) an emotion and (2) the sole cause of emulation, I therefore propose that admiration is better understood as an important, but comparatively minor part of the virtue of emulation – it being a physiological feeling associated with just the material cause.

Now to the daunting task of explaining how the material cause includes the motivational state of inspiration, which when integrated with *phronesis*, will help negotiate the transition to the final cause: virtuous action. Psychologists Thrash et al. (2014) persuasively argue that inspiration is a motivational state involving, among other things,

approach motivation, which concerns feeling ‘compelled to bring one’s new idea or vision into fruition’ (p. 497). This is similar to the neuroscientific account of motivation which is ‘a state that appears to involve the body and the mind in a dynamic interaction that produces alertness, arousal, and a profound readiness to engage in meaningful action’ (Immordino-Yang and Sylvan, 2010: 114). I suggest that the cumulative effect of the efficient, formal and material cause ultimately leads to the motivational state of inspiration. Temporally speaking, as this state arises at the end of the material cause, I could restate the material cause of emulation as *physically feeling* the distress *and* admiration, associated with one’s lack of the desired quality, that is, the role-model-represented ideal, *which induces the motivational state of inspiration*. Yet there is more to it than this.

Recall how Aristotle (2009: *NE* 1139a31–1139a32) states that the ‘origin of action. . . is choice’, and that the origin of choice is ‘desire and reasoning with a view to an end’. Put simply:

Desire + Reason = Choice → Virtuous Action

Until now, I have largely glossed over this significant point. This was a deliberate move, since I seek to argue that the motivational state of inspiration which arises largely as a result of the physiological feelings associated with the material cause, effectively amounts to Aristotelian ‘desire’. Importantly, as these feelings are themselves *phronetically informed* by the formal cause, the desire which results is ‘ratiocinative’ (Aristotle, 2009: 1139b5), meaning that it is informed by practical wisdom. Now, if the efficient, formal and material cause constitute virtuous emotion, and desire/inspiration emerges as a result of this, then having the right desire reflects having a virtuous emotional disposition. This is important since, to use Kristjánsson’s (2022) explanation, it ‘enables the occurrent emotion to be reason-receptive, and so, friendly to wise deliberations that will issue in moral judgement and action’ (p. 10). Right desire can therefore be taken to reflect a correct ‘moral state’ (Aristotle, 2009: 1139a34), thus distinguishing non-rational habituated desires from rational *phronetically informed* ones. As for the other element which motivates choice, ‘reasoning with a view to an end’, I suggest that this reflects how *phronesis* also works to evolve a virtuous emotion into a virtue by facilitating the choice of a particular virtuous action (I here refer primarily to the integrative function of *phronesis*, see Darnell et al., 2019, 2022). This motivational process works to synthesise the material with the final cause, thus overcoming the infamous ‘knowledge-action gap’ (see Blasi, 1980; Darnell et al., 2019).

The final cause: Virtuous action concerning ends – Putting the role-model-represented ideal of virtue into practice

In line with the neo-Aristotelian model, I understand *phronesis* to be ‘an intellectual meta-virtue of holistic, integrative, contextual, practical reflection and adjudication about moral issues, leading to moral action’ (Kristjánsson et al., 2022: 240–241). Like Kristjánsson et al. (2022: 245), I agree the ‘immediate motivation’ to act is derived from the underlying moral virtue identified by *phronesis* to be the medially required choice in a specific context. I also agree that an agent’s blueprint of the good life provides an internal, albeit more general and background, motivation to act (Kristjánsson et al., 2022:

245). Importantly, the motivational force of this blueprint necessitates that *phronesis* also involves understanding and aiming at ends, a point which Aristotle (2009: e.g. *NE* 1139a31–1139a36, 1140a23–1140a30) emphasises numerous times. More precisely, the focus on ends entails that the moral agent has a blueprint of the good life, *eudaimonia*, to which deliberation must contribute – something which causes *phronetic* persons to adapt their moral identity in accordance with it, thus imbuing *phronesis* with further motivational strength⁵ (Darnell et al., 2019: 35).

Based on the assumption that *phronesis* unifies the efficient, formal and material with the final cause, I will now attend to the latter. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle (1999: 1044a32–1044a34) postulates that the final cause is that ‘for the sake of which’ something comes about, indicating that it unambiguously concerns ends. I propose that for virtue the final cause is explicitly behavioural: virtuous action. To more closely integrate my position with Aristotle, I add that the final cause, virtuous action, is (1) the product of *phronetic* means-end deliberation, (2) an end in itself and (3) further aims at and contributes to the ‘final’ end of *eudaimonia*. Each of these end-related clauses require further nuance.

Regarding (1), let me start by drawing attention to Aristotle’s (2009: *NE* 1144a6–1144a9) claim that ‘the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes the goal correct and practical wisdom makes what leads to it correct’. I interpret ‘work’ as virtuous activity, and consider *phronesis* necessary for both identifying, prescribing and facilitating the goal, that is, the medial action or choice. In addition, regarding (2), it is clear that Aristotle (2009: *NE* 1144a6–1144a9) intends that virtuous action perfects *phronetic* means-end deliberation by actualising it, thus making the ‘goal correct’. This supports a further claim made by Aristotle (2009: *NE* 1140b7), that ‘good action is itself an end’, indicating that it is intrinsically rather than instrumentally good. However, there is another level to this talk of goals or ends which I am yet to expound concerning (3). Indeed, Aristotle (2009) begins Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by highlighting how ‘all human activities aim at some good: some goods subordinate to others’ (p. 1094a). This hints to a hierarchy of ends, and thus a final end to which all goods aim (Aristotle, 2009: *NE* 1097a25–1097a35). Thus, while virtuous actions are ends in themselves, the *final end* which these virtuous actions contribute to and are constitutive of is *eudaimonia* (Aristotle, 2009: *NE* 1097a25–1097a35). Understood as flourishing, or objective well-being, it is ‘activity in accordance with virtue’, or more specifically, the ‘highest virtue’ (Aristotle, 2009: *NE* 1177a13–1177a15). Taking these interrelated aspects of ends into account, I thus extend my definition of the final cause of virtue to be: *virtuous action concerning ends*.

Applied to the final cause of emulation, I will now suggest that *virtuous action concerning ends* involves: *putting the role-model-represented ideal of virtue into practice*. Indeed, despite Aristotle’s arguably incorrect classification of emulation as merely an emotion, which I maintain excludes virtuous action, the idea that emulation does indeed entail action is perhaps the most intuitively appealing aspect of my multi-component account. Zagzebski (2015), for example, understands emulation as ‘a form of behaviour’ (p. 210), yet in doing so limits its scope to merely this. While I agree that emulation must include behaviour, I argue that embracing emulation as a virtue in its own right offers a

conceptually and methodologically richer account, because it enables us to dedicate just the final cause to virtuous activity. This activity, as emphasised above, must be *phronetically informed* and concern ends, yet because the moral learner, by definition, has not fully developed their *phronesis*, in emulation this will take a unique form. Here, *entangled phronesis* facilitates both the sharing in the *phronesis* of the role model and their blueprint of the good life, thus enabling a learner's 'virtuous' actions to 'aim at ends'. In habituated emulation, I suggest the blueprint is adopted non-deliberately by learners, largely through behavioural conditioning by the role model; whereas, in complete emulation this is more deliberate as learners become increasingly aware of how the represented ideals fit into the bigger picture of the good life. In essence, the role model's *phronesis* is entangled *both* to promote virtuous action and convey a blueprint – a vision which motivates the learner to adjust their behaviour to correspond to it. As a result, they begin to develop their own moral identity.

Given the complexity of this reconstructed four-causal account of emulation, at the close of this section, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which it represents a novel contribution to the literature. As such, I shall highlight four insights which significantly advance the current discourse. First, the robust conceptual foundation – of emulation as a moral virtue – upon which this argument is built ultimately provides me with a unique framework with which to extend the debate on the precise methodology of emulation. Second, synthesising what is empirically known about the quadripartite nature of virtue, and thus the virtue of emulation, with Aristotle's four causes has made visible the causal nature of this process and imbued it with explanatory power. Third, understanding better the motivational forces at work in emulation enables me to account for how it might operate during different developmental phases, something which has been alluded to in the literature (e.g. see Burnyeat, 1980), but rarely analysed in this depth or in the language of emulation specifically. Finally, the introduction of the concept of 'entangled *phronesis*' serves to highlight the centrality of *phronesis* to the emulative process – in order to be a role model, and thus the subject of emulation, an individual is required to have cultivated a sufficient degree of *phronesis*, which when entangled stimulates both the practice of virtue and cultivation of *phronesis* in the novice. Admittedly, this implication was left implicit as I add more detailed moral psychological contours to this process elsewhere. In plain English, then, my argument has demystified what emulation is and what it potentially involves.

Conclusion

Framed as an extension of a previous argument reconceptualising emulation as a moral virtue (rather than a mere virtuous emotion) (Henderson, 2022), I have argued that emulation should be understood to comprise the following:

- **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, that is, 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.

Expounding this process also involved introducing three original concepts. Entangled *phronesis*: the moral-psychological mechanism which drives emulation by enabling a role model to rationally communicate with a learner in developmentally sensitive ways; habituated emulation: a form of emulation in which the role model's *phronesis* directly supports very elementary learners in the practice of 'virtue' even before their *phronesis* has begun to develop; and complete emulation: a form of emulation where the role model's *phronesis* and the learner's emerging *phronesis* combine to stimulate virtuous action. Reconstructing Aristotle's four causes and applying them to the virtue of emulation is educationally beneficial because it clarifies how emulation can be *phronetically informed* and aim at ends while the learner's practical wisdom is developing; and because it highlights the normative salience of role models by making visible how emulation, as an inherently educational virtue, is required for the acquisition of other moral virtues. Furthermore, as establishing the four causes of emulation necessitates first expounding the four causes of virtue, my account also enables us to better comprehend how virtue comes about in a way that can be considered both sympathetic to Aristotle's metaphysics and an extension of contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. While it is tempting to immediately apply this theorising to the practice of character education, I here exercise caution, since in order to delineate what the precise implications are for practitioners, a number of pressing educational, philosophical and psychological questions need answering. For example, since my account of emulation requires entangled *phronesis*, and thus for role models to be (ordinary, i.e., good enough) *phronomoi*, as many teachers will not reach this moral threshold, this leads to the question of how they might be rehabilitated in virtue, to help them transform into role models for pupils? It also remains an open question whether the concepts of entangled *phronesis*, habituated emulation and complete emulation are psychologically realistic? Which will involve evaluating how they accord with current research in fields such as developmental psychology and cognitive science. Since answering these questions lies beyond the purview of this paper, I here return to my argument and suggest – as a final takeaway – that together the four causes, as described, can be considered individually necessary and collectively sufficient for adding explanatory adequacy to emulation *qua* role modelling.

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Notes

1. I here direct the reader to my previous paper where I explain these influences in more depth (Henderson, 2022: 9–10).
2. Kristjánsson employs the terms ‘positively valanced’ and ‘negatively valanced’ to illuminate how Aristotle (2018: 12), in proposing that all emotions were accompanied by feelings of pleasure or pain, was not a pure cognitivist about emotion. Importantly, this does not mean morally positive or negative, since all virtuous emotions and virtues are in essence ‘positive’, but refers to how they feel (Kristjánsson, 2018: 12). Compassion, for example, denotes a negatively valanced emotion; while *schadenfreude* a positively valanced emotion (Kristjánsson, 2018: 12). Going further, there is some debate regarding whether Aristotle thought most emotions could be categorised either as pleasant or painful – as seems to be the case in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or if they contained a mixture of both – as emphasised in the *Rhetoric* (e.g. see Frede, 1996). Like Frede (1996), I am persuaded by the mixed-valance assumption, which suggests that even if overall Aristotle categorises an emotion as pleasant or painful, the ‘majority incorporate a mixture of pains/disturbance/frustration and pleasure/restoration/gratification’ (Kristjánsson, 2018: 12).
3. The ‘overall’ caveat is important since it reflects my sympathy with the aforementioned mixed valance assumption (Frede, 1996). In addition, the idea of physiological valance endorsed here must be distinguished from contemporary psychological accounts. The latter, in categorising emotions as either positively or negatively valanced, negates the possibility of internal ‘mixing’ within the same emotion; whereas, for the neo-Aristotelian account, that potentially all emotions are *also* mixed is central factor (Kristjánsson, 2018: 13).
4. As noted in Section 1, Zagzebski’s overemphasis on admiration has also been critiqued by other scholars including, Irwin (2015: 247), Kaftanski (2022), Vaccarezza and Niccoli (2019: 333).
5. I support Darnell et al. (2019) in advocating that a more accessible conception of the good life, a blueprint, is a sufficient end goal. However, I am aware of Snow et al.’s (2021) objection to this blueprint proposal which argues that even this is too demanding as an end vision. Their reasons are twofold: first, they claim it does not allow a role for *phronesis* for those without a fully developed blueprint; second, they wish it to be applicable also to those who have not been ‘raised well’ – those who have developed vices yet nonetheless later acquire virtue by reflecting on the sort of person they wish to be (Snow et al., 2021: 73–75). These are valid concerns, to which I have two rejoinders. First, if we accept my entangled *phronesis* proposal, then we can argue that *phronetic* reflection is accessible even to those whose *phronesis* is developing, though association with the role model’s blueprint. Second, I suggest that developing from a place of incontinence (vice) to continence (self-control) by reflecting on who they ‘want to become’ (Snow et al., 2021: 75) is made possible by the role model’s *entangled* *phronesis*, and thus their blueprint of the good life, because it can inspire a learner to adjust their moral self accordingly. I thus consider the reduction of the blueprint to ‘reflections on

one's life as a whole' (Snow et al., 2021: 73) a superfluous neo-Aristotelian concession. For additional rejoinders to the blueprint objection, see Annas (2011: 110). However, it is beyond our present scope to explore this further.

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Emerald Henderson is a PhD student in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham. She holds a BA in Philosophy and PGCE from King's College London, and an MA in Applied Ethics from Utrecht University. Prior to embarking on her academic career, she taught for nine years – as Head of Philosophy and Head of Eudaimonia – an experience which informs her present research focus: moral exemplarism and *phronesis* in neo-Aristotelian character education. Specifically, her work concerns the philosophy and psychology of emulation *qua* role modelling and its implications for virtuous character development. She applies this theorising to professional contexts, such as teaching.