

CHAPTER 1

The Problems of Imitation and Human Exemplarity

The Great Man was always as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame.

—Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes,
Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*

INTRODUCTION

My life has been a mirror of the lives lived around me. I find myself becoming like the people I am exposed to; I reproduce their actions and attitudes. Only rarely, however, can I recall making a conscious decision to imitate. One of my teachers was such a towering personality that he radically changed the direction of my life, though I was scarcely aware of his influence at the time. Only long after did I recognize his imprimatur emerging on everything from my occupational decisions, to my views about religion and politics, and even to my preferences about where to go for lunch. I seem to have been passive fuel awaiting his incendiary presence. When I think about his influence, I wonder how it occurred and whether it has, on the whole, been a good thing for me to have learned in this imitative way. This book is, among other things, a personal attempt to answer questions about how I became who I am. It is an attempt to understand

how one human life can sway another and to better comprehend the meaning and value of this influence.

These questions, of course, are far from being of merely personal interest. The topic of imitative learning and human exemplarity is often present in discussions of human development in local and national communities, in scholarly circles, and in the mass media. People usually discuss the topic using the phrase “role models,” a term that is somehow intended to cover a wide variety of learning processes. Consider how often the language of role modeling arises in educational discourse. Conservatives place role models as central features in character education programs. Liberals, in turn, view the absence of role models for minority students as a major justification for affirmative action initiatives. Christian children are urged to do what Jesus would do, which is merely one manifestation of the tradition of *imitatio dei* shared by many world religions. Endless debate surrounds the status and value of celebrities and athletes as role models, while new teachers are urged to find and imitate experienced mentors during their first years of employment. Learning technologies are designed to help students imitate experts within particular domains of scientific practice. Clearly, the notions of modeling, imitation, and exemplarity are some of the central concepts in contemporary educational and social discourse.

Looking at the history of Western educational thought, one finds a similar emphasis on exemplars and imitation. The topic is emphasized by Platonists and Sophists, Skeptics and Stoics, poets and monks, 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 and educational theorists had to say about this topic? Not as much as one would think. In spite of their prominence in contemporary social discourse, questions of human exemplarity, modeling, and imitation have been largely ignored. Although flashes of insight sporadically appear, human exemplarity and imitation have not been the subjects of extended philosophical discussion and reflection. This neglect has left the continuous contemporary stream of assertions about human exemplars lacking a vitality and richness. We are left with little understanding of how one life shapes another.

This neglect may have arisen because questions about human exemplarity can quickly reduce to empirical questions and are thus considered the domain of psychologists or sociologists—after all, phi-

losophers often cannot or do not want to enter the messy world of empirical claims and counterclaims. The neglect may also have occurred because there seems to be little philosophical mystery involved with learning through human exemplars: We see somebody being successful, we observe the action closely, and then we attempt to replicate the actions we observe. At times it appears 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.

Under the apparent simplicity of human exemplarity and imitation, however, remain many unanswered questions. Indeed, the process by which human exemplars work their influence appears particularly mysterious. My own experience has told me that I usually do not choose to imitate my exemplars; it is more that the exemplars somehow choose me. The apparent clarity of human exemplarity often appears to be nothing more than the façade of a building occupied with theoretical obscurity. Contemporary discussions of role models, it sometimes seems, presume to know the answers to questions we still do not even know how to ask.

To illustrate the mystery involved with human exemplarity, one can turn to the field of medical education. In one study of medical schools (Wright, S.M., et al., 1998), students were surveyed to find out who functioned as their professional role models and exemplars. Students generally responded by saying that doctors who displayed enthusiasm, compassion, openness, integrity, and caring relationships with patients were their models (I will label these physicians as “people-oriented” physicians). When anthropologists observe the actual practices of medical students, however, there appears a gap between who students claim to hold as models and who the students actually appear to imitate. Instead of imitating the favorable traits of compassion and openness, students instead focus on “status-oriented” values. Paice, Heard, and Moss discuss the work of Simon Sinclair and worry about his finding that students imitate physicians who have responsibility, power, and prestige. The students, they find, were “not impressed by doctors who seemed to share their power and responsibility with other professionals.” They continue: “These observations suggest a divergence between the qualities that students and young doctors say they seek in their role models and the qualities that they actually emulate” (2002, p. 708). Indeed, if the students are honestly responding to the questions of the role model survey (and we have no reason to think they are not), and if they really do fail to take the people-oriented type of physicians as models, then something seems amiss. What explains this mismatch between who students think of as their models and

who they actually imitate? If the students are not intentionally choosing the examples to imitate, how are the examples selected?

These are not idle questions. The mystery of exemplars and their educational influence has important implications for public policy. One of the most contested areas of policy relates to concerns about media violence and how children might imitate the mayhem they are exposed to in films, television, or video games. Such worries are justified. There is, in fact, a well documented correlation between exposure to violent media and the performance of violent episodes later in life (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen, & Brook, 2002; Wilson & Wilson, 1998). There may even be a documented causal connection between the two (Huesmann et al., 2003). The relationship, however, must surely be complex. After all, most people who are exposed to violence do not reenact or imitate the *specific* sort of violence they see. Copycat violence does happen, of course, but it usually occurs in only a tiny fraction of people exposed to a specific representation of violence. Millions of people heard about Robert Speck's murder of eight nurses in 1966, but the incident only spawned one known imitator. Other violent acts, however, seem to have a greater imitative salience, and it is not entirely clear why this would be so. The school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 produced 20 known imitators—still only a tiny fraction of people imitated the violence, to be sure, but this crime seemed to fire the imitative imagination more than the Speck murders. There are also questions about the specific sorts of violent representations that spawn imitative violence. Is it more than just the usual suspects of movies and video games? What about the depictions of war or murder in the newspaper or television news? What about reading or watching the bloody scenes in a Shakespearean play? And what about those people who report that, after viewing a violent film, they have become even more nonviolent than before? In such cases the violent depictions appear to be taken as negative examples (the examples are repulsive) and this suggests that simply viewing media violence by itself does not seem to be enough to trigger imitation. There is a need, then, to better understand the process by which we are influenced by observing other human lives.

Fortunately, many recent studies allow us to gain a fuller understanding of exemplarity, imitation, and education. There has been an explosion of research in cognitive science on the topic of imitation, with several major research compilations published only recently (Dautenhahn & Nehaniv, 2002a; Hurley & Chater, 2005a; Meltzoff & Prinz, 2002). Philosophers, especially those concerned with human development and education, have not paid enough attention to these

new research developments. In an introduction to their volume on imitation, Susan Hurley and Nick Chater correctly assert that the new research on imitation has “yet to be assimilated” in social science and philosophy, even as it has become a topic of “intense current interest in the cognitive sciences” (2005b, p. 1).

This lack of interest is unfortunate because there are many ways in which philosophers can benefit from engaging with this research, as well as many ways in which they can contribute to a better understanding of human exemplarity and imitation. They can contribute by doing the obvious things that philosophers do. For example, they can specify the assumptions made in discussions of role models and imitative learning, and they can also work to assess the meaning, value, and genuine limitations of imitative learning. In addition, a little imagination reveals other possibilities of philosophical contribution. Philosophers, after all, have been actively working in the field of exemplarity for the past several decades. Nelson Goodman’s work in the 1970s introduced a flurry of interest in the topic among Anglo-American philosophers. More recently, philosopher Irene Harvey (2002) has published a book that claims on the cover to be “the first, comprehensive, in-depth study of the problem of exemplarity.” Harvey examines exemplarity from the perspective of continental philosophy and utilizes theorists such as Rousseau and Derrida. Thus, there is a continuing interest in exemplarity in both analytic and continental philosophy. It is possible that this research can contribute to the discussion about the framing of models and the production of imitative responses in a way that has been largely missing from the empirical literature on imitation. What I intend to do, therefore, is to examine these disconnected literatures on imitation and exemplarity, put them together where possible, and apply them in thinking about education and social policy.

Before proceeding, let me attempt to clarify some possible conceptual confusion. In this study, I will be using the terms human “example,” “model,” and “exemplar” interchangeably. These terms are, to be sure, slightly different. An exemplar or model is one type of human example that has achieved a kind of normative force. It is a specific manifestation of the more general idea of an example, much like a “car” is a specific manifestation of a “vehicle.” These differences, however, will usually be irrelevant for my purposes, and I will vary my vocabulary for stylistic purposes (just as one might want to legitimately vary the use of “car” and “vehicle”).

I will use the term “imitation” in its broad sense. Various distinctions have been proposed relating to the concepts of “imitation,” “emulation,” and “mimicry.” These distinctions are often built around a

framework of means and ends. In its more technical sense, “imitation” has come to mean reproducing a model’s action in a way that aims at the same goal as the model. That is to say, true imitation is an action that replicates both the means and ends of the model’s action. The action, it is also stipulated, must be novel—that is, a true imitation must be an action that the imitator has never done before. In contrast, “emulation” is said to occur when an observer attempts to attain the same ends as a model through different means, while “mimicry” takes place when an observer reproduces the means of action without sharing the model’s ends. In addition, there are also technical labels for behaviors that appear to reproduce the actions of a model but that fail to participate in any framework of means and ends. For example, “stimulus enhancement” is said to occur when a model’s behavior calls an observer’s attention to an object of interest, while “response priming” is said to occur with the transmission of simple behavioral reflexes—think of contagious yawning. These processes give rise to behaviors that often look like imitation, but do not involve reproducing the means or ends of intentional action.

Generally speaking, I will not use these technical distinctions, largely because I have doubts about our ability to adequately differentiate means and ends in action—an ability that all these distinctions seem to require. What appears to be emulating an end or goal from one perspective (becoming a millionaire, just like a rich uncle) may also be a further means to something else (living a happy life, just like the rich uncle). In real life, ends in one framework are usually themselves means to further ends. Another problem has to do with imitative actions that are goal driven but occur even though the imitator does not share the same goals of the model (an imitator may, in fact, not even know the goals of the model). Consider a person who imitates members of a group, not to accomplish the group’s goals but to fit in socially with members of the group. This is surely not simple mimicry, but it does not fit the technical definition of imitation either. For these reasons and others, I will use the term “imitation” to designate an action that reproduces the behaviors, attitudes, or lifestyles of another person and that is, furthermore, instigated by the idea or perception of that person’s behaviors, attitudes, or lifestyles (rather than being instigated, say, by the presence of a rule saying that everybody should act in similar ways). Thus, I will be using “imitation” in its broad sense rather than in its technical sense.

Some may wonder why the concepts of imitation and exemplarity should be brought together in this study. It is true that the topics are, in many ways, distinct. But there are rich and complex relation-

ships between the concepts of “being an example” and “imitation.” Consider two questions that can be raised about the relationship between these concepts: First, if we say that somebody is serving as an example, do we imply that the person is necessarily being imitated? Second, if we say somebody is being imitated, is that person then necessarily serving as an example of something? With regard to the first question, it appears that most people do sense a conceptual relationship between being an example and being imitated. We often use such phrases as “following Jones’s example” when discussing imitative action. Not all examples of human life, however, are linked to imitation in ordinary discourse. Some examples are offered precisely because they are not to be imitated (“Jones is an example of what not to do”). This implies that not all examples of human life that influence human development do so by bringing out an imitative response, at least not in any obvious way. Thus, examples are often, but not always, linked to imitative actions. Although this book will discuss several forms of human exemplarity, even educational examples that are not imitated, those examples that do provoke imitation will be the central focus.

The second question does not ask whether exemplarity is always linked to imitation, but asks instead if imitation is always linked to exemplarity. That is, when we imitate people, do we always imitate their *example*? Answering this question will require a look at the nature of exemplarity (and of imitation, for that matter) and this will be the topic of subsequent chapters. On a superficial level, at least, we could say that imitation of human beings is always of a particular slice of the category of human beings. If by an “example” we mean any particular sample of a larger whole, then we almost always seem to imitate an example. That is, we usually do not imitate “human beings” in general.

On a deeper level we could say that imitation involves a conceptualization of the nature and goals of the observed action. It involves a categorization of what the observed action is, exactly, and this process of categorizing specific instances under general groupings is what it means to think of something as an example. This categorization is even linked to perceptual issues and plays a part in determining what we see. The processes of perception, in other words, seem to be closely related to exemplification. When we see a person doing something and ask what the person is doing, we can always place the action under many different sorts of categories. If I were somehow to watch Gavrilo Princip shooting the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, I might perceive the action in different ways.

I might see that action as moving the index finger, or pulling a trigger, or shooting a human being, or committing a crime, or assassinating a political figure, or striking a blow for Serbian nationalism, or starting World War I. This seemingly endless expansion of possible descriptions of an action has been called the “accordion effect” in philosophy. The action can be accurately conceptualized in all these different ways and probably many others.

In the process of observing any action we invoke categories to help us determine what we see. To see how perception is influenced by conceptualization, think of the famously ambiguous duck-rabbit drawings (Fig. 1.1). Whether we perceive a duck or rabbit is a product of how we are paying attention to the figure, and our attention is focused by our conceptual knowledge and expectations. This process of categorizing the particular thing we see into a more general group is the process of exemplification—moving from the general to the particular and from the particular to the general. When working with the concept of a duck, we look for those characteristics that exemplify a duck. When we want to see a rabbit, we do the same thing. The concept we “have in mind” changes what we see.

When we see an action, it is exemplification (or a process like exemplification) that governs how we conceptualize action. Exemplification could be said to determine what we see the action *as*. The

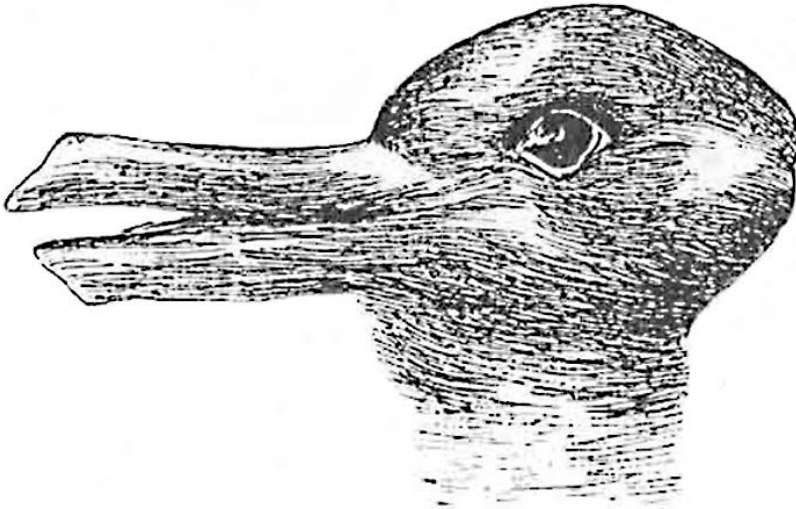


Figure 1.1. Ambiguous drawing by Joseph Jastrow (1899)

same holds true for other forms of perception besides vision. A Japanese speaker hears something different when Japanese is spoken than I do as a non-Japanese speaker, even though our eardrums are presumably all vibrating in similar ways. I hear the noises as structured unintelligible language (not gibberish, certainly, but still something incomprehensible). A native Japanese speaker, on the other hand, may hear an example of traditional Japanese poetry. Such obvious phenomena strongly suggest that perception is mediated by our conceptual understandings, and the process by which larger concepts subsume the particulars we encounter in experience is a process aligned with exemplification.

What this means is that the category of action that we draw from observing a model will influence the nature of the imitation that is produced, and this suggests a deep connection between imitation and exemplification. An imitative action we produce in response to Gavrilo Princip will depend on what, exactly, we “see” him doing—is he, for instance, an example of shooting a firearm or of engaging in political action? The first conceptualization might find me harmlessly imitating by sport shooting, the second by working for a political campaign. Both actions are legitimate imitations, but they are based on vastly different exemplifications. In short, what we imitate depends on the type of action that we perceive. In response to the question of whether all imitation is of examples, then, the proper response seems to be yes: Imitation always depends on exemplifications of actions. Given these connections between imitation and exemplification, philosophers who have discussed exemplification have much to contribute. This literature on “seeing as examples” is a missing piece in the cognitive science discussions of imitation.

THE MYSTERIES OF LEARNING BY EXAMPLE: AN OUTLINE

Besides connecting imitation with exemplarity, the initial contribution of philosophy comes through the traditional task of uncovering hidden assumptions; in this case, the assumptions that are implicit in the discourse surrounding modeling, imitation, and education. Contemporary discussions have doubtless been burdened with the presuppositions inherited from previous ages. To set up the important questions, then, I examine the assigned roles of imitative learning and human exemplarity in the historical tradition of educational thought. This investigation begins in chapter 2 with an analysis of how the discourse surrounding human exemplars has developed over time. By

looking at selections of educational writings from Homer to Nietzsche, I trace how positions on human exemplarity have evolved in the Western tradition and I assess the tradition's overall merits and limitations.

The great strength of the Western tradition is that it proposes many possible roles for human exemplars in education; it reveals, in other words, the scope of possibilities. While the sheer variety of proposals about the place of exemplars in human learning is an important achievement, to be sure, the survey of the educational tradition also brings out the significant and questionable assumptions that continue to influence contemporary discourse. These assumptions relate to mysteries involving (a) the process of example selection, (b) the development of imitative motivation, and (c) the nature of human reason as it relates to imitative action. Once these three assumptions are revealed, the next chapters analyze each of these assumptions with the help of groups of literature from philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. One of the goals of this book is to place groups of heretofore disconnected literatures together to see if they address the problematic assumptions of the traditional discourse surrounding imitation and human examples.

In chapter 3, I explore the first questionable assumption in the discourse surrounding human exemplarity; namely, the question of what an example is and how an example is selected. Examples not only seem to possess certain features, but they must communicate those features as well. In other words, an example must be a "telling" embodiment of a trait or quality. But how, exactly, does something become such a telling embodiment? In response to this question, I describe two processes by which this communicative aspect of examples is created. These processes of exemplarity demonstrate that examples are rooted in the concrete practices of particular communities and are dependent on structures of similarity and difference within social contexts. Human examples are not created through a simple interaction between the intentions of a teacher and the raw attributes of a model. Examples live, work, and have their being only insofar as they exist within certain social structures. This has important implications for education institutions, teaching practices, and the questions of media violence.

Chapter 4 analyzes the assumptions of the historical tradition by focusing on the mystery of how exemplars produce an imitative response. The chapter focuses on the assumptions revealed in the historical survey about how we become motivated to imitate examples. This question is essential because, while we must acknowledge that imitation is almost always a part of social interaction, it is clear that

not every positive example of human life triggers a repetition. I may happily admit that Albert Einstein had an exemplary mind that I admire, but I do not find myself imitating him. I may be exposed to images of violence, but not act on them, or I may see them as examples of what not to do. Why do some examples bring out imitation while others do not? The chapter attempts to grapple with precisely this question and aims at constructing a more satisfying theory of how imitative action is produced or motivated.

The fifth chapter initiates a consideration of the assumptions about the relationship between imitation and human reason—a task that continues in the next two chapters. Chapter 5 also begins an examination of the value of imitative action and continues the task of applying relevant literatures in examining problematic assumptions of the discourse. One of the first steps in assessing the place of imitation in human reason and the value of imitation is grasping the meanings that imitative actions can bring to a social situation. The practices of “being an example” and “following an example,” after all, have meaning in social contexts. Imitation can be, among other things, a sign of flattery, mockery, humility, worship, or dependency. In short, imitation can be a language that shapes and reshapes communities. Once we recognize that imitation has social meaning, perhaps the most intriguing mystery that arises is what imitation has to do with forming communities of practice and inquiry, or in other words, with forming educational communities.

The development of these social meanings of imitation continues to play a central role in chapter 6, where the discussion turns to questions dealing directly with the value of imitation and learning by example. In these sections, I enter the debate surrounding the contested place and prominence of human examples in moral education. Critics have argued that imitative action contradicts autonomous human reason and also that learning by imitation is unsuited to a world of rapid change and development. Although learning by example may have worked well in more stable societies, learners in today’s world need to be able to “think for themselves”—that is, they should think creatively and produce independently justifiable reasons for their actions. Learning by example should therefore be deemphasized, some say, and a more rational, philosophic education should be put in its place. Against those who argue for this view, however, I will offer several arguments relating to the place of examples in human reason. Many of these arguments are based on the more social understanding of exemplarity and imitation developed in the previous chapters. Each argument attempts to undermine the alleged dichotomy between learning

by imitation and a philosophic type of education where people “think for themselves.” The purpose of this discussion is to begin to reconcile the value of imitative learning with the demands of critical reason.

The seventh chapter continues the discussions of criticality and imitation, but focuses specifically on the mystery of how we can think critically, not only in a general way, but specifically about the exemplars themselves. It is difficult to step outside of the influences of human examples. Even when we want to think critically about our examples, it seems that exemplarity constructs at least a part of our knowledge of what it means to do critical thinking. Since it is difficult to step outside of exemplarity, and since exemplarity is driven by social forces beyond our control, it is unclear how we might engage in an intelligent way with our normative models. Using the ancient Pyrrhonian Skeptics, however, I argue that an intelligent engagement with exemplars is possible, but it is a particular sort of engagement. I present one strategy for thinking about a difficult problem: How can we critically examine our examples, while not pretending to somehow remove ourselves from the influence of examples?

The last chapter highlights the central goal of this book: creating a better understanding of human exemplarity that will be useful in educational theory, educational practice, and larger social policy. My aim in gaining this understanding is not necessarily to argue for a greater emphasis on exemplars in educational institutions—indeed, current discussion surrounding role models suggests that the idea of learning from examples is hardly lacking in proponents. Rather than simply cheerleading for more use of role models in education (whatever that would mean), we would be better served by a more sophisticated theoretical discussion of how we are actually influenced by human lives and the value that we should attach to this influence. Assumptions about the functioning of human exemplarity exist in many different areas of educational thought, and, to put it bluntly, many of these assumptions are either wrong or underdeveloped. This is something that must change. Change must first begin by looking backward, though, and examining in detail the traditional assumptions of human exemplarity in educational thought.