

Emotional Example in Aristotle: A Way of Teaching the Worth of Things

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Abstract

Aristotle's insight that refined feelings generate motivations for action has profoundly influenced psychology, yet the role of refined emotional example to teach virtue has remained largely unnoticed by his commentators. This paper offers a reappraisal of emotional example as integral to the formation of virtue, and attributable to Aristotelian insights. I note that Aristotle establishes preconditions for a role for emotional example: a focus on children in the earliest years, the role of imitation in learning, and refined emotional responses as appraisals or judgements. I offer a reading of two texts offering an appreciation of refined emotional example as a way teaching virtue and foundations of moral judgement. I note the presence of emotional example in childhood studies and suggest that this paper serves to inform childhood studies more precisely in the light of Aristotelian principles, and to correct omissions in Aristotelian commentaries.

Keywords: Emotion, Aristotle, Virtue, Example, Neurobiology, Parenting.

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1 PREAMBLE

1.1 *The Argument*

The importance of refined emotional and appetitive *responses* for virtuous actions are well documented in Aristotelian text and commentary. However, the prior

role of the *example* of refined emotional responses in parents and teachers has remained largely unrecognised in Aristotelian texts. This paper proposes that refined emotional example is implicit to Aristotle's teaching about how virtue is formed, and it highlights the contribution of emotional example specifically in fomenting refined feelings, and in 'calibrating' burgeoning capacities for moral judgement.

I define emotional example as the manifestation of one's emotional life for the sake of an observer. It is causal of emotional imitation or affective mirroring, has the potential to elicit the refined feelings at the heart of moral virtue, and, within an understanding of emotion assisting cognitive appraisal, has the capacity to impart direct moral judgements. It is a notion applicable especially to the manifest emotions of the parent or care giver.

That emotional example falls within an Aristotelian understanding of how virtue is fostered offers significant implications for moral education. Such emotional example serves both to foster virtue and teach the moral worth of actions. In other words, in response to certain situations and experiences, the evident joy or sadness of caregivers in their words and on their faces should assist in teaching a child *not only* to be habitually joyful or sad when confronted by such experiences *but also* impart lessons in distinguishing what is morally good, true, and beautiful. Long before a child is old enough to understand that something is good or bad, the joy or sadness of the caregiver has the potential to dispose a child towards or away from such experiences as provoke those emotions.

1.2 *The integral importance of emotion in forming character*

Aristotle accords a preeminent role to refined emotion in the state of virtue. He insists that the essence of good character is action in accord with refined emotional responses:

Virtue consists in rejoicing and hating and loving aright, there is clearly nothing we are so much concerned to acquire and to cultivate as the power of forming right judgements, and of taking *delight* (my emphasis) in good dispositions and noble actions.¹

At the heart of our hating and loving lie our habitual responses to pain and pleasure, as fundamental motivators for human action: "What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire."² Aristotle urged *appropriate* responses to pleasure and pain as the building blocks of virtue: "It is the

¹ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, (*Pol*) trans. by B. Jowett, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1885, bk. VIII, ch. 5, 1340a18.

²IDEM, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (*NE*) trans. by W.D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1925, bk. VI, ch. 2, 1139a21-22.

mark of virtue both to be pleased and to be pained at the right objects and in the right way.”³

This is the essence of what we call today character. Established free mastery, or lack of mastery, of one’s impulsive responses to pleasure and pain makes one good or bad, and differentiates one from the animals.⁴ To be virtuous is to have learned to pursue pleasure and be resilient in the experience of difficulties guided by one’s own practical reason, “within the limits of ‘as one ought to’, and ‘when one ought and ought not’.”⁵ This is what he called “the right rule.”⁶ The appetites (*epithumia*), pertaining to the cardinal virtue of temperance⁷ and emotions (*thumos*) pertaining to fortitude⁸ must be trained to accept this guidance of reason. For the purposes of this paper I will use the terms appetite, emotion, and feeling as interchangeable.⁹

2 SITUATING EMOTIONAL EXAMPLE IN ARISTOTELIAN COMMENTARY

2.1 *Emotional Example Differs from Aristotelian Emulation*

In the classic Aristotelian notion of emulation (*zelos*) the learner experiences “pain at the presence of honoured goods in others.”¹⁰ This pain at one’s own lack, leads to self-improvement; Aristotle presents it as an emotion in contrast to the envy characterising base persons.¹¹ In the classical understanding emulation aspires to objective *goods* and within the accepted Aristotelian commentary does not appear to include copying emotions, another’s emotional life, nor sharing the feelings of the other. Strictly speaking, ethical habituation appears distinct from *zelos*. Emulation properly refers to the appraisal judgement of what is virtuous and the desire to incorporate this quality within one’s character. It is inseparable from some phronetic judgement by or on behalf of the learner. Most of the literature about emulation focuses on the maturing capacities for reflection in a child: either the child’s own capacities for phronesis, or by the guidance of a parent’s or teacher’s phronesis. Most contemporary literature of emulation, focuses

³NE, bk. II, ch. 3, 1104b8-9.

⁴NE, bk. III, ch. 1, 1111b13-16.

⁵NE, bk. II, ch. 3, 1104b26.

⁶NE, bk. II, ch. 1, 1103b32.a

⁷NE, bk. III, chs. 10-12, 1117b-1120a.

⁸NE, bk. III, chs. 7-9, 1115a-1117a.

⁹An excellent overview of the understanding the educational role of emotional responses in virtue development may be found in: K. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Virtuous Emotions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

¹⁰ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric (Rhet)*, trans. by W. Rhys Roberts, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, bk. II, ch. 11, 1388a.

¹¹*Rhet*, bk. II, ch. 11, 1388b.

on emulation in children for whom the age of phronesis is already developing.¹² A classical Aristotelian view is to be found in Kristjánsson's presentation of emulation as a reason-informed emotional response to admire excellence in another person and aspiring to become excellent in a similar way oneself.¹³

Henderson's satisfying proposal of 'tangled phronesis' departs from the classical Aristotelian understanding as a virtuous emotion of pain at one's own imperfections, focussing rather on 'doing as the role model does',¹⁴ proposing emulation as a virtue in its own right requiring the phronetic input first of a role model while the child is in infancy, and later of the learner-child itself, in a two-step process. Steutel and Spiecker discuss the challenge of imparting virtuous sentimental dispositions also placing great weight on the guiding role of the parent or tutor in guiding the process of habituation of refined sentiment.¹⁵ Modelled emotions are included but not central to their discussion.

On the other hand, emotional example pertains to the teacher, mentor or parent, whereas emulation appears consistently as a quality of the learner. Emotional example requires no reflective or phronetically-guided response in the learner. Within the emotional example account the exemplar provides refined emotional example able to be imitated and which, secondly, serves to directly calibrate in a pre-cognitive manner the learner's grasp of what is right and valuable. The refined emotions of the exemplar teach in an *immediate* and as-if-intuitive manner the foundations of moral evaluations of situations and events. The emotional responses of the exemplar directly and immediately teach a small child the moral worth of a situation or experience. Most accounts of emulation do refer to the parent's or teacher's manifest approval and disapproval as a form of tutoring actions, but the emotional example account highlights the role not only of emotions of approval or disapproval, but the full spectrum of refined feelings that play a role in directly calibrating a small child's rudimentary moral understanding; refined responses of joy, sadness, compassion, anger, etc.

The emotional example account thus offers a more direct route for conditioning early emotional life and a consequent means by which the foundations for moral judgement can be established even in earliest childhood. This account finds support in neurobiological insights and seems aligned to emotion studies that suggest emotion is first imitated, even at the physiological level, as a path-

¹²In a recent collation focussed on emulation this was the case: «Journal of Moral Education», 53/1 (2024).

¹³K. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Emulation and the Use of Role Models in Moral Education*, «Journal of Moral Education», 35/1 (2006), pp. 37-49.

¹⁴E. HENDERSON, *The Moral Psychology of Emulation Through Entangled Phronesis*, «Philosophical Explorations», 2627186 (2026), pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2026.2627186>.

¹⁵J. W. STEUTEL, B. SPIECKER, *Cultivating Sentimental Dispositions Through Aristotelian Habituation*, «Journal of Philosophy of Education», 38/4 (2004), pp. 531-549.

way to depth of feeling and mature emotional development.¹⁶ In the process a further solution becomes apparent to Kristjánsson's "methodological problem" concerning how children can learn from exemplars.¹⁷ Of course this is not to denigrate in any way a focus on phronesis, for example in the recent literature on "virtue monism"¹⁸ or in emulative processes to develop phronetic competence. These comprise distinct issues.

2.2 *Absence of Reference to Emotional Example in Aristotle's Commentators*

Given the importance of refined feeling to an Aristotelian understanding of virtue (and given the investigations into emotional example in contemporary childhood and neurobiological studies, to be discussed below), it seems perhaps surprising that contemporary Aristotelian commentators pay scant attention to appropriate parental emotional example as primary means to foster virtue and to build capacities for moral judgement.

Below I refer to a number of representative texts and works of prominent commentators in the field to gain a perspective of prevailing views on Aristotelian character education. This review is by no means exhaustive, but it does suggest a significant lacuna in current studies. I look specifically to see whether consistent parental example of refined emotional responses appears in recent decades as an essential element of Aristotelian character education. We will see that this is essentially not the case. There are many fine overviews of what Aristotle has to say about the development of virtue, abundant reference to refined feelings and to the training of such feelings, but there is no focus on consistent parental emotional example in order to train refined emotional responses in a child.

Robb's early modern study of education in virtue, despite a brief subsection "The first seven years," only places "slight stress... upon the family as an institution or educational influence."¹⁹ The closest he gets to a discussion of Aristotle's advice to parents is a warning against bad example outside the family, but without analysis of the form of example.

Nor does Irwin, in a 1975 overview of the process of acquisition of virtue, discuss emotional example or put an age at which habituation should commence. He writes of "the virtues of character acquired by upbringing," habituations obtained

¹⁶E. PROCHAZKOVA, M. E. KRET, *Connecting Minds and Sharing Emotions Through Mimicry: A Neurocognitive Model of Emotional Contagion*, «Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews», 80 (2017), pp. 99-114.

¹⁷K. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Emulation and the Use of Role Models in Moral Education*, cit., pp. 37-49.

¹⁸A. NICCOLI, M. PIANTONI, E. RICCI, *Virtue Monism. Some Advantages for Character Education*, «Topoi», 43/3 (2024), pp. 1043-1051.

¹⁹F. C. ROBB, *Aristotle and Education*, «Peabody Journal of Education», 20/4 (1943), p. 211.

by practice in the appropriate kinds of actions which provide “the right desires for the right goals.”²⁰ These virtues of character are guided by the intellectual virtue offering “the right choice of ways to achieve” these goals. He alludes to parenting: “to be well brought up” means to live according to reason. However there is no reference to anything that might remotely suggest parental emotional example as a means of inculcating desires.

Nor does Nancy Sherman’s *The fabric of character* (1989) suggest any place for witnessed emotion in the inculcation of refined feeling. Sherman does talk about an early period in which affective capacities are cultivated but without detail about how that may be accomplished. In general her focus is on children of rational age. She offers a reading that draws attention to the intentionality that underpins the developing habituation and highlights a reflective awareness of one’s emotional responses thereby excluding infants and young children. She writes of the need for mild sanctions which do not “bypass altogether the engagement of reason,”²¹ making it apparent that she is discussing children in whom the capacity for reason is well on the way to development.

David Carr repeats the Aristotelian analogy of repetitive skill building. He advocates training in specific moral dispositions and practices, the discouragement of excess, and “systematic initiation via moral training into socially desired and approved rules and patterns of conduct.”²² However, in what that training consists is left unspecified.

Julia Annas’ *Intelligent virtue* and Kristjánsson’s *Aristotelian character education*²³ both maintain the focus on children for whom reason and the capacity for reflection is already developing, without reference to parental modelling of emotion. Kristján Kristjánsson asks what Aristotelian role-model education looks like in practice. He suggests two key ideas: “to highlight moral content,” stressing the cognitive element of emulation, and to offer an “emotionally driven demand for self-transformation” evoking “pain at their relative lack of the desired moral quality.” Any notion of immediate, consistent and refined emotional example to infants and small children is not discussed.²⁴

Annas also writes of role models, but in the context of encouraging children to reflect on the example that *behaviour* provides. We are directed to strategies for reinforcement by praise or blame, the importance of obedience, and the value

²⁰T. H. IRWIN, *Aristotle on Reason, Desire, and Virtue*, «The Journal of Philosophy», 72/17 (1975), p. 569.

²¹N. SHERMAN, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, p. 158.

²²D. CARR, *Character Education as the Cultivation of Virtue*, in *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, ed. by L. Nucci, D. Narváez, Routledge, London 2008, pp. 99-116: 106.

²³K. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Aristotelian Character Education*, Routledge, London 2015.

²⁴*Ibidem*, pp. 124-126.

of directing a child “to appreciate the rewards of virtuous activity itself.”²⁵ A sole explicit reference to small children, encourages them “to share their possessions, and (be) told stories where generosity is rewarded, and selfishness is presented as repellent.”²⁶ The emphasis again is on specific parental actions, rather than witnessed emotion.

Across the Atlantic, recent cross disciplinary books edited by Julia Annas, Christine Swanton, and Nancy Snow do draw attention to early childhood studies, attempting to enrich virtue ethics with empirical research.²⁷ Contributions by developmental psychologist, Ross A Thompson, and psychiatrist, Robert M Emde, are practical and quick to suggest possible alignments between early childhood research and the requirements of Aristotelian virtue.²⁸ In general, however, the philosophical contributors deal with frameworks, and not practical methodologies of fostering virtue, nor with parental example of emotion.

The practical work of the USA character education movement has almost exclusively focused on school-based approaches with the notable exception of Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist by training, who has now re-focused his work on parenting as the key domain of character education. His *How to raise kind kids*,²⁹ features an important chapter demonstrating the capacity for infants to act in *proto-moral* ways, and a further chapter on building family culture, but strategies in the book focus almost exclusively on later childhood and adolescence, with little reference to parental emotional example.

In summary, apart from commentary on emulation, emotional engagement of small children and infants has remained almost totally undiscussed by commentators looking to Aristotelian texts and approaches. There are no doubt good reasons for this. Aristotle does not spell out such strategies and commentators do not speculate. Some, seeking a true representation of Aristotle’s work, are loath to conjecture about what is not in the texts. Others have emphasised the integrative harmony of the habituation and educational phases of moral education, thereby precluding discussion of infants and youngest children. Others, siloed from recent developments in developmental psychology and moral philosophy, may have been blind to the possibilities. We should be aware too that character formation literature can sometimes prioritise moral reasoning over moral feeling, reflecting Kohlberg or Kantian approaches, so seeking to “create a metaphysics

²⁵J. ANNAS, *Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 81.

²⁶*Ibidem*, ch. 3, pp. 60–62.

²⁷*Developing the Virtues: Integrating Perspectives*, ed. by J. Annas, D. Narvaez, N. E. Snow, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016; *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. by N. E. Snow, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

²⁸R. N. EMDE, *From a Baby Smiling: Reflections on Virtues in Development*, in *Developing the Virtues*, cit., pp. 69–94.

²⁹T. LICKONA, *How to Raise Kind Kids*, Penguin, New York 2018.

of morals where reason alone remains the constant goal.”³⁰

3 THE IMPLICIT PRESENCE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF REFINED EMOTIONAL EXAMPLE IN ARISTOTLE

In this section I present arguments to support the view that parental example of emotion falls within the pedagogical vision of Aristotle. As necessary preconditions for such a conclusion I note his emphasis on attention to early childhood, on the role of parents, on imitation, and on the capacity for trained emotional responses to present goals for action.

3.1 *Emphasis on the Earliest Years of Infancy*

Aristotle referred to training of appetitive responses from “the very start.”³¹ He wrote, “It is essential to begin early... It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance.”³² He advocated training emotional responses by a combination of repeated exposure and guidance, experiences, exemplars of behaviour, tales and stories, and imitation in play of future realities. He insisted that first impressions are most powerful: “We always like best whatever comes first.”³³

There is an explicit emphasis on the positive words of the caregiver and the negative impact of the words of others, and of negative visual stimuli.³⁴ Although there is no direct mention of emotional example, the power of tales and particularly comedies is noted,³⁵ as well as the importance of keeping all base things unfamiliar to the young, and especially those that involve either depravity or malignity.³⁶

3.2 *The Role of Parents is Implicitly Emphasised*

Parental responsibility is affirmed. Aristotle notes that illiberality is absorbed by a young child from what the child hears and sees.³⁷ Parents who do not provide “an

³⁰N. SHERMAN, *The Fabric of Character*, cit., p. 2. *Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336a19–21.

³¹*Ibidem*.

³²*Rhet*, bk. II, ch. 1, 1371b4–10.

³³*NE*, bk. II, ch. 1, 1103b.

³⁴*Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b13.

³⁵*Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b20–22.

³⁶*Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b31.

³⁷*Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b1–3.

example of how to live” will fail to raise children who grow up to be virtuous.³⁸ He insists on the need for purposeful training of children by parents in resilience and restraint.³⁹ Resilience refers to refined appetitive responses of fortitude, and restraint, of temperance. This training is a serious responsibility of caregivers and of obedience.⁴⁰

3.3 *Imitation is a Key to Moral Formation in Aristotle*

Aristotle sees imitation as natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and “learns at first by imitation.”⁴¹ He emphasised the automaticity of imitation in childhood and the delight that it gives us. He places an explicit emphasis on words and visual stimuli,⁴² and amusements should be imitations of “the serious occupations of later life.”⁴³

3.4 *Moral Virtues Establish the Ends for Action*

A virtuous character acts well. Simply put: be good to do good. Aristotelian texts explicitly teach that this moral formation is the result of training and education. The development of virtues, the internal capacity to pursue what is good for oneself, is a result both of training, understood as habituation, and education, moral tuition.⁴⁴ Habituation and teaching are distinct processes with separate timeframes.⁴⁵ Formation of refined emotion is central to the formation of moral virtue, most especially at the stage of ‘training’ when children are pre-rational, or in the earliest years of rationality. In contrast, education involves the development of rational understanding: acquiring the intellectual virtues, learning to reason well, learning ethical principles (the *logos* of virtue), instruction that cultivates the rational soul, and the integration of reason with previously trained emotions.

“Moral virtue ensures the correctness of the end, while practical wisdom ensures the correctness of the means to that end.”⁴⁶ The end is determined by what

³⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Economics (Oeconomica)*, trans. by E. S. Forster, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1920, bk. III, ch. 2, § 74.

³⁹ *Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1334b.

⁴⁰ *Pol*, bk. IV, ch. 11, 1295b16-25.

⁴¹ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, trans. by S. H. Butcher, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1895, 1448b4-5.

⁴² *Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b13.

⁴³ *Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336a25.

⁴⁴ *NE*, bk. X, ch. 9, 1179b20.

⁴⁵ *NE*, bk. II, ch. 1, 1103a15.

⁴⁶ *NE*, bk. VI, ch. 12, 1144a7-9.

appears desirable to a person of virtue.⁴⁷ The goals for action are established by the moral virtues. And as refined appetitive responses are at the heart of the moral virtues, it is these that propose the ends for action. Emotional formation is all but inseparable from right action.

Training takes place also by means of witnessed example. The early period of training involves repeated and disciplined experiences, exposure to tales and stories, and imitation, all shaping a child's emotional habits. Early formation in *logos* (ethical principles) falls within training during which a child requires external reason to guide him or her in the habituation of sensitive responses,⁴⁸ as the child's deliberative capacities are "in an underdeveloped form."⁴⁹ And so we see that refined emotion is a key to education in right judgement.

Hence, in the mind of Aristotle temperance and fortitude establish the goals for action and are therefore reflective of what is of value in the world. It is the moral virtues, according to Aristotle that propose ends; the intellectual virtue of prudence proposes means alone. Appropriate pain and pleasure are the very means by which a child is habituated to a preconception of the very worth of things.

4 THE PRECISE ROLE PLAYED BY APPROPRIATE EMOTIONAL EXAMPLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER

As further evidence demonstrating that appropriate example of refined emotion falls within the Aristotelian vision of fostering virtue and forming a child's capacity for moral judgement, we examine two texts: from the *Politics* and the *Ethics*.

- (a) "Youth should be kept strangers to all that is bad, and especially to things which suggest vice or hate."⁵⁰

Note that the object eliciting the emotional response is the focus of this quotation, hence is a reflection on the impact of emotional example. Exposure to the emotional example of destructive or unnatural hatred is damaging to a child.

Aristotle attends to that which is eliciting the emotional response. This is an important distinction. Other references draw attention to the refined feelings at the heart of virtue. In this text however he acknowledges that the example of the negative emotion of hatred replicates in the child the same emotion. This is not simply a reflection on the undesirability of hatred per se or within one's character. It is exposure to the example of hatred that is the problem.

⁴⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. by W. D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1925, bk. II, ch. 6, 1223a7-15.

⁴⁸ *Pol*, bk. I, ch. 13, 1260a34; bk. I, ch. 13, 1260b3-8.

⁴⁹ *Pol*, bk. I, ch. 13, 1260a13-14.

⁵⁰ *Pol*, bk. VIII, ch. 3, 1336b35.

Virtue education empowers us not for specific behaviours, but for actions of a certain moral quality. An important quality of virtue is its transferability to previously unexperienced contexts. Virtues are different from mere behaviours that may be learned by imitation; virtues are transferable to unrelated contexts. The goal is not imitation for its own sake; the lever of virtue is moral feeling; hence appropriate example of feeling disposes for future judgments and actions. Aristotle is not just pointing out the possibility of children imitating an emotion so that they adopt or avoid that same disposition in their sensitive appetites. Nor is this primarily about a young person developing capacities for rational thought unimpeded by self-serving impulses and aversions, although this is certainly an end benefit of the state of virtue. Rather, in this case we see that poor emotional example, corrupts nature in some way, and corrupts its capacities for moral judgement. By implication, refined emotional example, teaching moral appraisal, is a foundation of right judgement. The parent is forming an appetitive motivational substrate for the child's own future actions.

(b) "In educating the young, we steer them by the rudders of pleasure and pain; it is thought too that to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought has the greatest bearing on virtue of character."⁵¹

At first reading this text suggests that parents and carers use pleasure and pain instrumentally to train children; utilising actions of reward or punishment. Such a reading accords with other texts, for example he advocates the need for a system of rewards and punishments,⁵² but also it stands in contrast to passages where he argues that "It is the mark of virtue both to be pleased and to be pained at the right objects and in the right way."⁵³ In this second instance, the pleasure and pain are not merely instrumental but somehow constitutive of virtue.

I suggest that this text may also be read as advocating appropriate parental emotion as a means of assisting a child in developing refined attitudes to pain and pleasure. Such a reading is founded on the use of the first person, implicitly drawing attention to the parent's own emotions and character juxtaposed to the task of "steering" a child in the formation of the child's character. The use of the first person plural: "to enjoy the things we ought..." requires a reflective contextual examination. The parent's own emotions are engaged in the task of "steering" a child in the formation of the child's character, in conjunction with appropriate rewards and punishments.

It is clear that the purpose of Aristotle's observation is to further an understanding of how character is formed in a child. The first sentence makes this clear. Therefore the reference to "character" at the conclusion of the quotation may be

⁵¹*NE*, bk. x, ch. 5, 1172a24.

⁵²*NE*, bk. x, ch. 9, 1179b20-1180a32.

⁵³Such as *NE*, bk. iv, ch. 1, 1121a4.

reasonably understood as the child's *own* character as a product of the parent's own refined feelings.

Such an alternative reading refers not only to the refined feelings of a parent "to enjoy ... and hate" appropriately, but to the value of parental emotional example as a pedagogical instrument. Note that habituation with respect to pain and pleasures is not merely emotional, or corrective of appetites. In the mind of Aristotle it is reflective of what is of value in the world. So fomenting appropriate pain and pleasure are the very means by which a child is led to grasp the very worth of things. By this reading, parental emotional example 'calibrates' a child's developing moral understanding, the development of character.

5 CORROBORATION IN LITERATURE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT.

Experience, childhood studies, neurobiology, and parenting education all point to a role for emotional example from parents and carers in healthy child development.

In the following section I draw attention to the current cross-disciplinary recognition of a role for emotional example. The purpose of this section is not to draw attention to new material, but to reflect a broad consensus that parental emotion is empirically important. Taken in concert with the previous section arguing that emotional example may reasonably be included within Aristotle's vision of how virtue may be fostered, I suggest that emotional example as a means of fostering refined feeling and calibrating moral judgements should be attributable to Aristotle.

5.1 *Parenting Experience*

Although anecdotal by its nature, parenting experience time and again convalidates the importance of appropriate emotional example from those involved in moral education. Let this simple testimony highlight the dominant presence of parental emotion in a small child's world.

My small daughter drew a picture of my wife and myself one night at home. It gave me much to reflect upon: mum was a smiley face but I was a circle with a frown. This was how my daughter sees me!⁵⁴

I accord a preeminent role to facially expressed emotion in this paper. This is not to say that emotion is not taught in other ways to small children,⁵⁵ but facial

⁵⁴This example is drawn from discussion following parenting seminars conducted by the author.

⁵⁵K. HOEMANN, F. XU, L. F. BARRETT, *Emotion Words, Emotion Concepts, and Emotional Development in Children: A Constructionist Hypothesis*, «Developmental Psychology», 55/9 (2019), p. 1830.

communication of emotion is a most direct and effective means of communication with a small child, and its importance continues through childhood.

5.2 *Childhood Studies*

In this section I offer a glimpse into several vast fields ascertaining the discussion of emotional example in these fields. Studies in emotional development, affective education, socialisation of emotions, pro-social education, attachment, and neuroscience all support a role for emotional example in the early years. I will deal briefly with each of these areas in turn. My aim is not to present new information, but to draw attention to disciplines that serve to benefit should a coherent link between emotional example and virtuous character development be established.

An abiding theme is that we learn emotions from the example of others. Longitudinal and intergenerational studies all support the view that emotional development in very small children is a result of modelling in addition to guidance and direct instruction. Children's emotion related behaviours are directly affected by maternal expressions of emotion, and maternal responses to infant emotion and it is recognised now that very young children are capable of deep and intense emotion.⁵⁶

The earliest foundations for emotional development are evident immediately after birth. In 1977 Meltzoff and Moore documented the remarkable capacity for newborn infants, within hours of birth, to imitate facial expressions.⁵⁷ Interaction with parents and primary care givers is shown to be crucial for the healthy development of emotion and motivational systems.⁵⁸ Seeing and experiencing parental expressions of emotion assist even the youngest of children (up to 3 years of age) in developing their own emotional repertoire. Children as young as four months copy the emotions of their parents, and this copying is proposed as the primary mechanism for the learning emotion, for possessing one's own emotion repertoire of response.⁵⁹ By 12 months infants demonstrate the capacity to associate emotion with people, or aspects of their environment,⁶⁰ and to react with the

⁵⁶R. A. THOMPSON, K. LAGATTUTA, *Feeling and Understanding: Early Emotional Development*, in *The Blackwell Handbook of Early Childhood Development*, ed. by K. McCartney, D. Phillips, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, pp. 317-337.

⁵⁷A. N. MELTZOFF, M. K. MOORE, *Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates*, «Science», 198/4312 (1977), pp. 75-78.

⁵⁸R. A. THOMPSON, *Early Sociopersonality Development*, in *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, ed. by W. Damon, N. Eisenberg, vol. 3, Wiley, New York 1998⁵, pp. 25-104.

⁵⁹D. P. MONTAGUE, A. S. WALKER-ANDREWS, *Mothers, Fathers, and Infants: The Role of Person Familiarity and Parental Involvement in Infants' Perception of Emotion Expressions*, «Child Development», 73 (2002), pp. 1339-1352.

⁶⁰A. T. PHILLIPS, H. M. WELLMAN, E. S. SPELKE, *Infants' Ability to Connect Gaze and Emotional Expression to Intentional Action*, «Cognition», 85 (2002), pp. 53-78.

same emotion they have witnessed.⁶¹ Small children are shown to be capable of refinement, training, in their emotional responses.⁶² The sight of emotion on a parent's face is more instructive than hearing a voice or seeing a gesture with emotional content.⁶³

Eisenberg *et al.* suggest, in work on socialisation of emotions, observe three ways of cultivating emotion: reactions to children's emotions, discussion of emotion, and parental expression of emotion.⁶⁴ Not all emotional example is of course positive. Studies consistently show that poor self-regulation of parents carries through to negative emotionality in children.⁶⁵ Negative maternal anxieties are readily communicated.⁶⁶ Infant emotional engagement with television before three, appears to have the potential for life-altering developmental effects.⁶⁷ A great number of studies also note the significant effect of aggressive emotional example on small children.⁶⁸ Parenting intervention programs recognise the positive benefits in children's self-regulation flowing from parental emotional regulation.⁶⁹

Although uninformed by notions of virtue, prosocial research offers a glimpse of the power of emotional example to teach moral values. Small children are influenced by the emotional example they receive not only to form their own emotions, but to evaluate their environment and manifest refined behaviours that are regarded as precursors to deliberate acts of virtuous service, generosity, cooperation or compassion. Infants and small children, even prior to a capacity to reflect

⁶¹D. L. MUMME, A. FERNALD, *The Infant as Onlooker: Learning from Emotional Reactions Observed in a Television Scenario*, «Child Development», 74/1 (2003), pp. 221-237.

⁶²D. M. STACK *et al.*, *Parental Effects on Children's Emotional Development Over Time and Across Generations*, «Infants & Young Children», 23/1 (2010), pp. 52-69.

⁶³J. J. CAMPOS *et al.*, *A Functionalist Perspective on the Nature of Emotion*, «Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development», 59/2-3 (1994), pp. 284-303, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1166150>.

⁶⁴N. EISENBERG, A. CUMBERLAND, T. L. SPINRAD, *Parental Socialization of Emotion*, «Psychological Inquiry», 9/4 (1998), pp. 241-273.

⁶⁵Cf. D. J. BRIDGETT, N. M. BURT, L. M. LAAKE, K. B. ODDI, *Maternal Self-Regulation, Relationship Adjustment, and Home Chaos: Contributions to Infant Negative Emotionality*, «Infant Behavior and Development», 36/4 (2013), pp. 534-547.

⁶⁶M. KAITZ, H. R. MAYTAL, N. DEVOR, L. BERGMAN, D. MANKUTA, *Maternal Anxiety, Mother-Infant Interactions, and Infants' Response to Challenge*, «Infant Behavior and Development», 33/2 (2010), pp. 136-148.

⁶⁷D. A. CHRISTAKIS, F. J. ZIMMERMAN, D. L. DIGIUSEPPE, C. A. MCCARTY, *Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children*, «Pediatrics», 113/4 (2004), pp. 708-713.

⁶⁸Cf. C. A. ANDERSON, W. A. WARBURTON, *The Impact of Violent Video Games: An Overview*, in *Growing Up Fast and Furious: Reviewing the Impacts of Violent and Sexualised Media on Children*, ed. by W. Warburton, D. Braunstein, The Federation Press, Hobart 2012, pp. 56-84.

⁶⁹Cf. L. J. LENGUA, E. J. RUBERRY, C. MCENTIRE, M. KLEIN, B. JONES, *Preliminary Evaluation of an Innovative, Brief Parenting Program Designed to Promote Self-Regulation in Parents and Children*, «Mindfulness» 9/5 (2018), pp. 1-12.

on verbal communication, are able to adopt refined emotional responses to situations if such emotions have been modelled for them. Pro-social studies of infants between 12 and 24 months who comfort and help others demonstrate that other-oriented behaviours in part appear driven by infant capacity to infer and assess another's desires and emotional cues. Such motivation surpasses simple imitation and is neither reward dependent nor a consequence of direct instruction.⁷⁰ Infants of 14 months would, for example, pick up a marker dropped accidentally by an adult with arms full and needing help, but they will not assist if the marker is intentionally thrown down.⁷¹ In a later delightful series of experiments,⁷² three-year-olds but not two-year-olds will share preferentially with someone whom they have first seen sharing. This further demonstrates the capacity of children, prior to any evident capacity for reflection, to form appetitive motivations and desires based on observed desires.

Parental emotional example can effectively teach moral judgement: parents who read stories with facial and vocal emotion and offer approval of prosocial actions will have children who are more likely to act prosocially, by independent measures.⁷³ While these experiments and many others similar do not, in themselves, refer to formation of virtuous habits, they appear to demonstrate the presence of refined feelings that could, after time and consolidation by repeated practice, become sufficiently established to underpin one's own reflective choices.

Thompson's work on maternal sensitivity and shared intentionality is impressive. He finds that emotional facial expression aligned with verbal cues reinforce refined feelings.⁷⁴ RN Emde has identified elements of maternal attention that may deliver moral education. He draws attention to the *REV* functions: reciprocity, empathy and valuation which he describes as "proto-virtues" supported by parental example and guidance.⁷⁵

Attachment studies too suggest that emotional example leads to long term learning outcomes. The sources of a developing capacity for self-regulation lie in

⁷⁰P. BROWN, M. W. CORRIGAN, A. HIGGINS-D'ALESSANDRO, *Handbook of Prosocial Education*, vol. 1, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2012; C. A. BROWNELL, *Early Development of Prosocial Behavior: Current Perspectives*, «Infancy», 18/1 (2013), pp. 1-9.

⁷¹F. WARNEKEN, M. TOMASELLO, *Helping and Cooperation at 14 Months of Age*, «Infancy», 11/3 (2007), pp. 271-294.

⁷²IDEM, *The Emergence of Contingent Reciprocity in Young Children*, «Journal of Experimental Child Psychology», 116/2 (2013), pp. 338-350.

⁷³P. W. GARNER, *Prediction of Prosocial and Emotional Competence from Maternal Behavior in African American Preschoolers*, «Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology», 12/2 (2006), pp. 179-190; P. W. GARNER, J. C. DUNSMORE, M. SOUTHAM-GERROW, *Mother-Child Conversations about Emotions: Linkages to Child Aggression and Prosocial Behavior*, «Social Development», 17/2 (2008), pp. 259-277.

⁷⁴D. J. LAIBLE, R. A. THOMPSON, *Mother-Child Discourse, Attachment Security, Shared Positive Affect, and Early Conscience Development*, «Child Development», 71/5 (2000), pp. 1424-1440.

⁷⁵R. N. EMDE, *From a Baby Smiling: Reflections on Virtues in Development*, cit., pp. 69-94.

the parent's own capacity for affect attunement. These studies demonstrate the significance of mother-infant affective communication and affect attunement in mother-baby interactions.⁷⁶

Imitation precedes affect attunement, but it is affect attunement that appears to assist the infant in predicting parental actions.⁷⁷ The mother's initiative of sharing affective states by her own imitative behaviours of an infant (from approximately 2 months) appears to aid the establishment and regulation of primary intersubjectivity.⁷⁸ Schore argues for the efficacy of refined emotional example, in the form of positive affect towards the infant, at the attachment stage.⁷⁹ Longitudinal Romanian orphan studies demonstrate that orphans adopted by Canadian families in early childhood, were more compromised than control groups in regulating their attention and activity through childhood and adolescence.⁸⁰

In summary, these fields consistently recognise the importance of emotional example.

5.3 *Development of Emotion and the Neurobiological Mechanisms of Imitation*

Facilitating all learning at the neurobiological level are mechanisms of neuronal plasticity. 'Use-induced plasticity' supports the formation of intentional or pre-intentional habitual behaviours, the consolidation of motivational pathways triggered by neurotransmitters, attentional responses, the consolidation of imitative responses, and linkages between sensory inputs and emotional responses, either as memories or expressions of emotion. We have an increasingly clearer understanding of the mechanisms of intentional habit formation that consolidate neuronal pathways by repeated use and activated connectivity with other neurons. We now understand the mechanisms by which emotion experiences and antici-

⁷⁶G. O. GABBARD, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington, D.C. 2014⁵; K. KELLY, A. SLADE, J. F. GRIENENBERGER, *Maternal Reflective Functioning, Mother-Infant Affective Communication, and Infant Attachment*, «Attachment & Human Development», 7/3 (2005), pp. 299-311.

⁷⁷C. O. JONSSON, D. CLINTON, M. FAHRMAN, G. MAZZAGLIA, S. NOVAK, K. SÖRHHUS, *How Do Mothers Signal Shared Feeling-States to Their Infants? Affect Attunement and Imitation During the First Year of Life*, «Scandinavian Journal of Psychology», 42/4 (2001), pp. 377-381.

⁷⁸C. TREVARTHEN, *Emotions in Infancy: Regulators of Contact and Relationships with Persons*, in *Approaches to Emotion*, ed. by K. R. Scherer, P. Ekman, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale 1984, pp. 129-157.

⁷⁹A. N. SCHORE, *Attachment, Affect Regulation, and the Developing Right Brain: Linking Developmental Neuroscience to Pediatrics*, «Pediatrics in Review», 26/6 (2005), pp. 204-217.

⁸⁰K. AUDET, L. LE MARE, *Mitigating Effects of the Adoptive Caregiving Environment on Inattention/Overactivity in Children Adopted from Romanian Orphanages*, «International Journal of Behavioral Development», 35/2 (2011), pp. 107-115.

pation trigger dopamine pathways. We have an understanding at the neurobiological level of receptivity to first impressions, emotion and novelty.⁸¹

A likely mediator of direct, extra-intentional imitation is found in the mirror neuron system, which has also been proposed as the system that mediates the development of emotion.⁸² Autism studies also point to the demonstrated lower incidence of mirror neurons in autistic children as an explanation for their difficulties in grasping emotional cues.⁸³ Various other mechanisms for immediate imitation may also be considered: mechanisms of affect transfer, emotion contagion, or conserved embodied cognition.⁸⁴

Hence, emotional example is understood not as a hypothetical, perhaps non-causal association with certain effects, but as a causal mechanism whereby one party produces changes in a second party. All this accords with the close relationship that is shown to exist between emotion and physiology.⁸⁵

6 CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this paper has proposed that refined emotional example should be considered as implicit to Aristotle's teaching about how virtue is formed. In support of this view we have looked at the integral contribution of emotion to virtue, and at the emphasis Aristotle placed on developing refined emotional responses. In the light of his insights on the importance of earliest years and sound parenting, on imitation and the role of refined emotional responses as an appraisal of events and experiences, we considered two texts which suggest an implicit appreciation of the role of refined emotional example. Although there appear no explicit and patent references to emotional example in the Aristotelian texts that are extant, we should bear in mind that much of Aristotle's pedagogical detail has been lost.⁸⁶

⁸¹A. MULLINS, *What Does Self-Control Look Like? Considerations about the Neurobiology of Temperance and Fortitude*, «Conatus: Journal of Philosophy», 10 (2025), pp. 165-191.

⁸²E. A. SIMPSON, L. MURRAY, A. PAUKNER, P. F. FERRARI, *The Mirror Neuron System as Revealed through Neonatal Imitation: Presence from Birth, Predictive Power, and Evidence of Plasticity*, «Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences», 369/20130189 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2013.0289>.

⁸³Cf. N. B. ROOT, L. K. CASE, C. J. BURRUS, V. S. RAMACHANDRAN, *External Self-Representations Improve Self-Awareness in a Child with Autism*, «Neurocase», 21/2 (2015), pp. 206-210.

⁸⁴Cf. E. TRONICK, *The Transfer of Affect Between Mothers and Infants*, in *Affective Development in Infancy*, ed. by T. Field, N. Fox, Ablex Publishing, Norwood 1985, pp. 11-25; R. NEUMANN, F. STRACK, 'Mood Contagion': *The Automatic Transfer of Mood Between Persons*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 79/2 (2000), pp. 211-223; P. M. NIEDENTHAL, *Embodying Emotion*, «Science», 316/5827 (2007), pp. 1002-1005, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1136930>.

⁸⁵*Ibidem*.

⁸⁶K. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Aristotle, Emotions, and Education*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2007, p. 42.

I have suggested that such refined emotional example not only models emotional responses desirable in children but serves the development of moral awareness whereby a parent's or carer's manifest emotional responses can lead a young child to grasp, without reflection, the moral worth of events and experiences. In this view, habituated appetites propose goals to reason, and such an approach can and should serve to introduce small children to what is good, true and beautiful in this world, providing a foundation for future moral choices in a way preceding cognitive appreciation.

This paper offers a reappraisal of emotional example as integral to the formation of virtue, and directly attributable to Aristotelian insights. At stake is greater precision in moral education. Recognition of the important role of emotional example can serve to better align Aristotelian studies with contemporary childhood studies, and lead childhood and parenting research to a greater appreciation of Aristotelian concepts of virtue and moral judgement. We should be advocating not only for 'parental example' but for 'parental *emotional* example' if we wish to raise children in virtue. It sharpens the focus on ways that Aristotelian studies can better inform contemporary moral education.

The insights of Aristotle into virtue and its formation appear to be validated in the light of recent neurobiological knowledge, as touched on above. Convalidation of his teachings on virtue is also apparent in the explorations into virtue by contemporary psychology. This discussion of the presence of emotional example in Aristotle and its convalidation in contemporary studies, may be viewed against this broader ratification of virtue, further opening paths of study by which the insight of virtue as the basis of character can better inform the contemporary world.

These insights may also serve to draw the interest of contemporary Aristotelian scholarship back to the years of infancy and early childhood as times most suited for the awakening of moral sensibility through parental example of refined feeling. We should appreciate more clearly *how* moral education commences in the earliest years and what we have to do to improve it: *how*, not just *that*. At stake is not just an authentic reading of the spirit of Aristotle, but a timely contribution: "Aristotelian character education needs to be rethought for each era and each society."⁸⁷

Cross disciplinary studies could fruitfully explore how foundations for responsibility may be directly associated with the emergence of relationality at the emotional level: "... the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation... the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."⁸⁸ How

⁸⁷IDEM, *Aristotelian Character Education*, cit., p. 162.

⁸⁸E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969 [1961], p. 201.

tantalising to consider new methodologies for such early formation in goodness!

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