Teaching by Examples in the Search for Intellectually Virtuous Students

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Introduction

Three cases have sparked my interest to investigate the roles of examples in education. They are the cases of Mother Teresa, the senior vice president of people operations at Google, and Diogenes the Cynic. All three share in potentially revealing moral or intellectual virtues like courage, open-mindedness, authenticity, and caring for truth. While virtues might be best taught by examples, behind this lingers the question of what can be learned from *a methodological use* of examples. This leads me to introduce the research method of examples, show its application in virtue epistemology, and use it to study Diogenes the Cynic. Finally, I conclude that examples, while essential to education, are rarely innocent.

Examples as Methodology

To appreciate the power of examples and explain my methodology, I present Davis's (2010) methodological use of examples. While he admits to "*work with a broad notion of 'example', where each case includes an assessment context, together with the cultural and political circumstances in which it is embedded*" (p. 55), the ways in which Davis uses examples are complex and varied. From specific examples, to out-of-research-area examples—including fictitious examples—, counter-intuitive examples, and opposing examples, Davis applies them to shed light, destabilize, and argue for a conclusion.

In thinking of Davis's uses of examples we must ask if *all examples are equal*. Is searching for an example of a virtuous

student like searching for an example of a triangle? No. Comparable exactitude cannot be expected; identification of the examples is a challenge; the argumentative roles of examples vary; and, the heuristic functions of examples differ.

Kotzee (2016) captures all of this in searching for the good student when he remarks that:

> intellectual virtues are learned by emulating intellectual role models and by practicing to be intellectually virtuous. [...] From the perspective of the teacher, giving instruction and modelling behaviour need to be accompanied by ways for the teacher to see whether the instructions and examples are having an effect. (p. 147)

But which examples? Which virtues? Who counts as a good example? Who counts as a *really good* example, like an exemplar? To what can a teacher refer? To approach these questions, let us turn to the origins of intellectual virtues theory.

Examples of Intellectually Virtuous Students

Over 2,000 years ago Aristotle established his notion of intellectual virtues. The morally and intellectually virtuous person is such that he is in "a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (Aristotle, trans. 1984, 1106b35-1107a2). As we can see, a lot depends on the person of practical wisdom. But where did she obtain *that* knowledge? Who was the first wise person? Are there any other wise persons? What if none are present? Was it admiration that led to someone pointing out "Now there goes a wise person!"? Admired for what? On what basis? In giving examples more happens than just illustrating intellectual virtues. There is case building, intuition developing, convention testing, and idea revising in ways that are not just heuristic. This is why the three examples

given in the introduction are so significant. They are argumentative, as we shall see.

The first example comes from the public's reaction during Linda Zagzebski's 2013 presentation of exemplarism during the Educating for Intellectual Virtues conference at Loyola Marymount University. When asked who would be a good example, an exemplar of a virtuous person, she responded that Mother Teresa might count. Negative reactions were swift. Counter examples, like Hitler and Stalin, were said to be also widely admired in their context (and for some, still today). Others asked about the hateful people Mother Teresa helped (see also Schultz, 2016). So are examples or exemplars heroes for some, villains for others? What if no agreement is possible? Are examples dangerous?

The second example concerns Baehr's (2015) appeal to a "senior vice president of people operations" at Google (p. 40). What struck me was the casualness with which Google is presented as a good example in the sense that:

> if we want to prepare our students for success in the workplace [like Google], it isn't enough that we simply impart to them a certain body of knowledge or set of technical skills. We must also address and attempt to shape who they are as thinkers and learners. (Baehr, 2015, p. 41)

It is true that Google's mantra *was* "Don't Be Evil" (Basu, 2015, para. 1). But Google has also questionably digitized millions of books, monetizes its users' information, and strains privacy rights. Does this count as "success in the workplace" (Baehr, 2015, p. 41)? Is it a good example?

The third example comes from a question asked during my PhD research project proposal defence: Was Diogenes the

Cynic a virtuous learner? This uncanny and provocative character, as we shall see in the next section, pushes the limits of the meaning of the virtuous learner.

From this we can gather that without a proper understanding of the roles of examples, the theory to which they refer and build, we bypass fertile grounds for research and limit teachable content. To illustrate this, let us examine the case of Diogenes the Cynic.

Diogenes the Cynic, a Good Example?

In *Cultivating Good Minds* Baehr (2015) presents a three-dimensional view of the virtuous student based on: ability, motivation, and judgement. For example, an intellectually virtuous student can be intellectually courageous, is motivated to be so by risking an idea, and appropriately judges when to do so. Baehr's (2015) theory states that:

> Virtue concepts like curiosity, intellectual humility, intellectual thoroughness, and intellectual tenacity are very well suited to provide a more concrete description of these important but elusive educational goals. Intellectual virtues are character traits that flow from a love of learning. An intellectually virtuous person, in an ideal form at least, is one who cares passionately about reaching the truth and acquiring deep knowledge and understanding. (p. 28)

With this outline in hand, let us see if Diogenes was a virtuous student.

Diogenes the Cynic lived from 404-323 BCE. He was born in the Milesian colony of Sinope, in Greece. Exiled in his early thirties on account of fraud, Diogenes moved to Athens where philosophy changed his life. As Hard (2012) reports:

> He is popularly known for having lived in a barrel or tub and for his barbed utterances. But Diogenes was more than a picturesque eccentric, and it is only when such stories are considered in their wider context, as part of the very full surviving record of what Diogenes was supposed to have said and done, that it becomes apparent that *he was trying to convey a serious message through his disconcerting behaviour and caustic wit* [emphasis added]. (Introduction)

Part of Diogenes' life includes barking like a dog to passers-by, eating scraps of food like a beggar, and masturbating in public. Surely, he is an unlikely candidate to be a virtuous learner.

To understand his motivations we can look at what he was fighting against. Rebuking the customs and values of his adopted city meant that Diogenes saw something fundamentally wrong happening. Questioning the values of seeking wealth and security, as well as intellectual pride, he adopted a radical approach. Lucian captures Diogenes's view through this exchange: "BUYER: This life that you talk of is revolting and inhuman. DIOGENES: Ah yes, but it is a very easy one, my friend, and practicable for all to follow. For you will have no need of any education" (as cited in Hard, 2012, part 1,1). How can a life be inhuman and easy to follow? How can it require no education, as well as mental and physical training, as Diogenes states elsewhere (Hard, 2012, Introduction)?

During Diogenes's journey towards philosophy, we also learn from Diogenes Laertius that "Diogenes won his way through persistence" (as cited in Hard, part 1,2). However, is this a virtue put to good use? It is a question that arises when we see that Diogenes asks listeners to:

> assume an alien mode of speech and snarling voice, just like the yapping of a dog, and assume a sullen expression, and a manner of walking that is in accord with your face; in short, everything about you must be bestial and savage. Away with all modesty, decency, and moderation, and wipe off any blushes from your face once and for all. (as cited in Hard, 2012, part 1,1)

Beyond persistence and courage, complete humility and authenticity best capture Diogenes' journey. Accepting shame, being called a dog, and begging for food calls for great humility, one that is, by many standards, disturbing, as well as humiliating.

We see that Diogenes does not share others' values, and yet seeks truth. As a biographer notes:

> Such was the way in which he would argue and he certainly seems to have acted accordingly, re-stamping the currency in very truth, by not ascribing the same worth to merely conventional values as to those that accord with nature; and he thus maintained that his way of life was of the same stamp as that of Heracles, in so far as he set freedom above all else. (as cited in Hard, 2012, part 1,5)

This re-stamping, which was hard won, supports the idea that "Cynicism is a short cut to virtue" (Diogenes Laertius, as cited in Hard, 2012, part 1,5). But is such gruff freedom the only virtue?

Diogenes's life exemplifies joining theory and practice. Were it only so, why should he still be of interest? As Hard (2012) states "the Cynic way of life was so closely associated with Diogenes, anyone who adopted it must have run the risk of appearing to be no more than a pale imitation of him" (Introduction). Arguably, few would model him today. Diogenes is

so violent by example that citizenship education might see him as vicious. Even Socrates, as Noddings (2012) explores, might not be well received in today's educational settings:

> If you were to follow Socrates' example, you would certainly have to explore highly sensitive questions with your students. Would you be allowed to do so? Should the school district or state forbid you to discuss certain topics? Or consider the charges against Socrates that he did not believe in the states' gods. Do we hear similar charges hurled at various public figures today? (p. 7)

So, what are we to do with Diogenes, a "Socrates gone mad" according to Plato (as cited in Hard, 2012, part 1,5)? Keep him as a funny, base, vulgar, and caustic historical character to be laughed at and wondered about?

If it is a worry that examples are moving targets, differing according to time, geography, culture, and circumstances, Diogenes was a moving target as such. But what if virtues are stable and unstable? Furthermore, Diogenes's transition from vice to virtue embodies moral progress, and perhaps even the idea of the need for a misadventure (like fraud) for one to be put on the road to virtue. This made Diogenes a virtuous learner. Finally, should a teacher present Diogenes, it can be a provocative strategy to illustrate the breadth of ways of being and learning in a society where education equals indoctrination or commodification, rampant conformity looms, or questionable values are followed.

Conclusion

At the outset I aimed to show with arguments and examples, the methodological significance of understanding the consequences of using examples in the context of illustrating a theory and teaching virtues. Kotzee, Baehr, and Zagzebski show

that examples give something extra when teaching virtues, yet we still wonder how examples affect our understanding of virtues as such. The casualness with which some examples are presented betrays the fact that some are quite contentious. Without a full understanding of examples and exemplars we are short-changed of the contribution they offer in the quest to understand, model, and nurture virtuous learners. Examples are rarely innocent.

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