

Rosalind Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics can focus on particular actions and evaluate them as right & wrong, can formulate moral rules to guide action, & help us to resolve practical or applied moral issues such as whether abortion is morally permissible. In this article she discusses 9 criticisms that demonstrate an inadequate grasp either of the structure of virtue theory or what would be involved in thinking about a moral issue in its terms. She argues for a robust theory of morality that grounds rightness in good character traits & draws upon a sort of built-in indexicality involving practical reasoning, right attitude/truths, actions/passions, thoughts/reactions of the virtuous/non-virtuous, network of relationships, etc all within the context of what constitutes a good human life (*eudaimonia*). Moreover, one must ask, "What is the mark of having of having the right attitude to these facts & what manifests having the wrong attitude to them?" For her, abortion is conditional upon a certain state of affairs (e.g., situational setting, reasons, goals, purposes, & consequences), grounded in good character traits & related in virtue-vice terms [Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory & Abortion" in *Virtue Ethics*, eds. R. Crisp & M. Slope (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 217-38)].

"Virtue Ethics and Abortion"

Outline of Virtue Ethics:

1. An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances;

1a. A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, i.e., one who has & exercises the virtues.

2 A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well.

What is essential is to note the conceptual link between virtue & flourishing (living well or eudaimonia).

Responses to 8 Misconceptions (I've collapsed 9th criticism into 8):

1. VE does not have a peculiar weakness or problem in virtue of the fact that it involves the concept of *eudaimonia*. While *eudaimonia* is hard to grasp, it is no more obscure than the concepts of "rationality" and "happiness."
2. VE is not trivially *circular*; it does not specify action in terms of virtuous agent & then immediately specify the virtuous agent in terms of right action. Rather, it specifies her in terms of the virtues, & then specifies these, not merely as dispositions to right action, but as the character traits (*which are dispositions to feel & react as well as act in certain ways*) required for *eudaimonia*.
3. VE does answer the question "What should I do?" as well as "What sort of a person should I be?"
4. VE generates rules/principles-for every virtue generates a positive instruction (e.g., act justly, kindly, courageously, honesty, etc) & every vice a prohibition (do not act unjustly, cruelly, like a coward, dishonestly). So, one does not need to imagine what some ideal exemplar would do in order to know what one should do in a given situation.
5. VE is not committed to any sort of *reductionism* which involves defining all our moral concepts in terms of the virtuous agent. Rather, VE *relies on a lot of very significant moral concepts* (e.g., charity/benevolence is the virtue whose concern is the good of others; good is related to the concept of evil or harm, & they are both related to the concepts of the worthwhile, the advantageous, & the pleasant).
6. VE is said to be subject to the threat of moral skepticism, 'pluralism', or cultural relativism. This is too a problem for both utilitarianism & deontologists, esp. in view of their second premises.
7. VE is said to have unresolvable conflict built into it. While she agrees this is a problem, it is not a problem peculiar to VE.
8. VE (most major criticism) is that it can't get us anywhere in real moral issues because it is bound to be all assertion & no argument; the best VE can come up with in the way of action-guiding rules are the ones that rely on virtue/vice concepts (e.g., act charitably). This criticism manifests a failure to (a) understand what an adequate normative theory is. Does an adequate normative theory truly have (1) easy rules one (esp. adolescent) one can follow & (2) clear guidance on what ought to be done? This is implausible. (b) Critics drastically underestimate the variety of ways in which virtue/vice concepts and others, such as that of the *worthwhile*, figure in the discussion.

Two very difficult charges which VE will need to address:

- (1) VE has to argue against moral skepticism, 'pluralism', and cultural relativism;
- (2) VE has to find something to say about conflicting requirements of different virtues.

Deontological Elements:

2 Essential Premises:

1. An action is right iff it is in accordance with a moral rule or principle.

2. A moral rule is one that is (a) laid on us by God, (b) required by natural law, (c) laid on us by reason, (d) required by rationality, (e) would command universal rational acceptance, or (f) would be the object of choice of all rational beings.

What is essential is the link between right action, moral rule, & rationality.

"The relevant condition of adequacy should be that the practical conclusions of a good normative theory must be in part determined by premisses about what is worthwhile, important, and so on" (pg. 225).

Act-Utilitarianism:

2 Essential Premises:

1. An act is right iff it promotes the best consequences;

2. The best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized.

What is essential to note is that it forges a link between consequences & happiness.

"There are youthful mathematical geniuses, but rarely, if ever, youthful moral geniuses, and this shows us something significant about the sort of knowledge moral knowledge is." ~ Rosalind Hursthouse cf. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1142a12-16

In their introduction, Roger Crisp & Michael Slote, observe that Hursthouse grounds rightness in the notion of good character traits & the latter, in turn, in the idea of *eudaimonia* or happiness; it is reminiscent of two-tiered moral theories like rule-utilitarianism (*individual actions are evaluated, in theory not just in practice, by whether they conform to a justified moral rule, & the utilitarian standard is applied only to general rules*). They suggest that since rule-utilitarianism is open to familiar forms of criticism, there is a need to consider whether similar difficulties arise like that of Hursthouse (Ibid., 21-2).

"The character traits that virtue theory emphasizes are not simply dispositional to intentional actions, but a seamless disposition to certain actions and passions, thoughts and reactions" (pg. 230).

Dr. Hursthouse shows how it is possible for VE to claim that right actions are actions a virtuous person would perform in the relevant circumstances, without falling without falling into circularity. It is possible, because the concept of a virtuous person can be unpacked in terms of the notion of particular virtues, & these latter, in turn, can be understood as traits human beings need in order to live well, to achieve *eudaimonia*. She also equates right actions with actions that display no vice, & that equivalence doesn't in fact follow, from indeed, seems to run contrary, to the rest of her view. Could not an action that exhibited cowardice or ignorance somehow turn out to be exactly what the wise, courageous person would also have chosen? But even if such a thing is possible, Hursthouse offers a defense of rules in the context of virtue ethics that seems to survive pretty well (Ibid., 21).