

**Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 275.

Reviewed by Gilbert Harman, Department of Philosophy, Princeton University

Virtue ethics is a type of ethical theory in which the notion of virtue or good character plays a central role. This splendid new book describes a “program” for the development of a particular (“Aristotelian”) form of virtue ethics. The book is intended to be used as a textbook, but should be read by anyone interested in moral philosophy. Hursthouse has been a major contributor to the development of virtue ethics and the program she describes, while making use of the many contributions of others, is very much her program, with numerous new ideas and insights.

The book has three parts. The first dispels common misunderstandings and explains how virtue ethics applies to complex moral issues. The second discusses moral motivation, especially the motivation involved in doing something because it is right. The third explains how questions about the objectivity of ethics are to be approached within virtue ethics.

### **Structure**

Hursthouse’s virtue ethics takes as central the conception of a human being who possesses all ethical virtues of character and no vices or defects of character—“human being” rather than “person” because the relevant character traits are “natural” to the species.

To a first approximation, virtue ethics says that a right action is an action among those available that a perfectly virtuous human being would characteristically do under the circumstances. This is only a first approximation because of complications required in order accurately to describe certain moral dilemmas.

It is possible to be faced with a dilemma through having acted wrongly. In one of Hursthouse's examples, a man, promising marriage, gets two women pregnant. Given that there is no way to fulfill all of his promises, what is the right thing for him to do? Distinguish two senses in which a course of action might be right—an action-guiding sense and an action-assessment sense. Something will be wrong with whatever the promiser does, so there is no way for him to do what is all right, or right in the action-assessment sense. But there may be a best or right choice for him to make in the circumstances, a choice that would be right in the action-guiding sense.

What is right in the action-guiding sense cannot always be identified as the choice that a perfectly virtuous human being would make in the circumstances, because sometimes a completely virtuous human being could never be in the relevant circumstances. Hursthouse believes that virtue ethics is still applicable, because she thinks that virtue ethics provides rules that can apply to such a case. However, although I see how virtue ethics can provide rules, it remains unclear to me how the rules provided could handle this particular situation. She says that every virtue of character yields a positive rule of action and every vice or defect of character yields a negative rule; so, virtue ethics allows for such rules as that one ought to tell the truth, one ought to keep one's promises, one ought to be kind to others and and

one should not act meanly, lie, or break promises. Where these simple rules conflict, Hursthouse proposes to “fine tune” them by considering what a virtuous human being would do in various circumstances. Perhaps this yields the right rules for circumstances no virtuous human being could be in, but I do not understand how.

She also notes that the promiser might use something that sounds like the terminology of virtue and vice in reasoning what to do. “Perhaps it would be callous to abandon *A*, but not to abandon *B*. Perhaps it would be more irresponsible to abandon *A* than to abandon *B*. . . . Then marrying *A* would be the morally right decision.” But in this instance the vices of callousness and irresponsibility are characteristics of possible actions rather than character traits of the agent. (No matter what the agent does, the agent will continue to have a bad character.) So, it remains unclear how these remarks fit together with the overall theory.

In any event, Hursthouse also observes that a completely virtuous human being might find herself in a dilemma in which nothing that she does is right in the action-assessment sense. An example might be the situation in *Sophie’s Choice* in which a mother must choose which of her children is to be killed immediately and which possibly saved; if she fails to choose, they are both to be killed immediately. In such a case, there might be a decision that is right in the action-guiding sense—a decision that a fully virtuous agent would make in that situation—but the act cannot be a right act in the action-assessment sense, since it will not be all right.

The first part of *On Virtue Ethics* is concerned with the basic structure of

this sort of virtue ethics, with considerable discussion of moral dilemmas or one or another sort. Inevitably, Hursthouse is unable to discuss every aspect of this structure. She explicitly sets aside issues of justice, for example.

I would have liked to see discussion of the worry that the virtue ethical characterization of right action is trivial because a fully virtuous human being must have perfect practical rationality. (Virtue is not just a matter of having the right ends, as in St. Paul's or John Lennon's idea that "All you need is love," or Plato's idea that all you need is a properly ordered soul. Practical rationality is needed also.) The worry is that there is no good way to characterize perfect practical rationality so as to guarantee that the fully virtuous human being will do the right thing, on the one hand, while not, on the other hand, reducing the basic principle of virtue ethics to the trivial claim that what is right is what would be done by someone who characteristically does what is right. Again, it may be that virtue ethics is able to avoid this trivialization of principle, but I do not see how.

### **Motivation**

What is involved in doing something *because it is right*? Hursthouse answers that it is to act in the way a fully virtuous human being acts for the reasons that the fully virtuous human being acts on. She shows in marvellous detail that this answer agrees with common sense in a variety of cases.

Her answer also makes sense theoretically. A fully virtuous agent characteristically acts in a certain way precisely because the agent's character leads the agent to act in that way. But for the act to be right just is for the agent's

character to be such as lead the agent to do that act. So, it follows from virtue ethics that the fully virtuous agent does the act because it is right.

It is not that the fully virtuous agent does the act because he or she *thinks* it is right. The agent may think, for example, “She needs my help.” On the other hand, if someone else does a similar act motivated by the thought that this is what the virtuous agent would do, the other human being does it because she thinks the act is right and does not in the same way do the act directly because it is right. Doing something directly because it is the right thing to do is not the same as doing it because one thinks it is the right thing to do.

Hursthouse says that moral motivation of this sort is a matter of degree. Children with little or no moral character gradually become adults with full moral character and capable of full moral motivation. Someone may be partly virtuous and partly not, in some ways virtuous and in some ways not. To the extent that an agent’s act results from a character that is relevantly similar to that of a fully virtuous human being, we can allow that the agent does something because it is right. Huck Finn may act from more or less virtuous character traits and so hide Jim from Jim’s slave owner because it is right to hide Jim, even though Huck thinks that it is wrong. On the other hand, Hursthouse says that a confirmed Nazi who does the right act on a particular occasion does not do it because it is right, given the great distance between the Nazi’s character and the character of a virtuous human being.

## Objectivity

The third, most difficult and richest part of the book discusses whether virtue ethics has resources to determine objectively what the human virtues are. Doubts arise about this in part because different human beings in different cultures belonging to different traditions disagree about the virtues and about the relative importance of those virtues they agree about. For example, there are differences between Europeans and East Asians concerning the relative importance of prudential virtues of individual development as compared with social virtues of community. There are also disagreements about the virtues within a given society. Can we reasonably suppose that these are disagreements about objective matters of fact?

Many believe that such disagreements are not objective. Some think it is a matter of local convention what the right virtues are. Others think that one can choose what virtues to aspire to, where different human beings can be equally justified in choosing different virtues. But Hursthouse thinks it may be possible to find an objective basis for a single set of human virtues of character within a generally Aristotelian approach.

In this approach, judgments of good and defective character are to be assessed in terms of the biological, social, and rational nature of human beings. She begins her discussion of this issue by considering simple cases—judgments one might make about plants and animals. One might judge that a certain tree has good roots, that a particular tiger has a defective heart, that another tiger is a fine specimen, or that there is something wrong with a wolf that does not participate in the hunt with the other wolves. Hursthouse says such

judgments are objective in that they are the sorts of judgments biologists might make in the course of describing various plants and animals.

She further says that the relevant features of plants and lower animals are to be assessed in relation to the contribution the features can be expected in general to make to the continued existence of individual plants or animals and to the preservation of the relevant species. For animals capable of feeling enjoyment and pain, features can also be assessed in relation to their tendency to make lives better in that respect. For social animals, features can be assessed in relation to their expected contribution to the functioning of the group.

The big question in this approach is whether such evaluation can be extended to human beings, who have rationality and act on reasons. Are there character traits that are in some sense “natural” to human beings that function well according the same four criteria?

Suppose that there is a unique set of character traits which are natural to human beings and such that, if everyone has them, it is generally true that an individual’s having them promises to contribute to that individual’s preservation, the preservation of the human species, the function of social groups to which the individual belongs, and the flourishing of that individual and others. Then that set of character traits is the set of human virtues in this approach.

One way for this to fail would be that a satisfactory outcome for people would require some human beings to have one set of character traits while others had a different set, as in Nietzsche’s master and slave moralities, and

somewhat as there are worker bees and queen bees. While Hursthouse thinks that this is a view within virtue ethics worth that needs to be taken seriously, she also thinks that we have not yet been given sufficient reason to give up on the existence of a single set of human virtues.

Another way in which the favored approach can fail is for it to turn out that no distribution of character traits will promote the flourishing of all human beings. Hursthouse argues that we do not have to accept the conclusion that human beings are in this sense just a “mess,” because, “When we look, in detail at *why* so many human beings are leading, and have led, such dreadful lives, we see that occasionally this is sheer bad luck, but characteristically, it is because either they, and/or their fellow and adjacent human beings, are defective in their possession and exercise of the virtues on the standard list.” She adds in a footnote, “I suppose that one of the reasons we find it so hard to come to terms with the Holocaust is that pre-Nazi German society looks so like our own at the same period, and we are forced to the unpalatable conclusion that if it happened there because of lack of virtue in its members, we must have been similarly lacking and might have gone the same way” (264).

On the other hand, it seems to me that thinking about this and related examples (Bosnia, Somalia), and about research in social psychology about the relative explanatory importance of individual character versus the situation in which a human being is placed, suggests that the very natural human tendency to think in terms of character traits may lead us in the wrong direction. It would seem that, to the extent that we are interested in improving the lot of mankind it might be better to put less emphasis on moral education and

on building character and more emphasis on trying to arrange social institutions so that human beings are not placed in situations in which they will act badly.

I doubt that Hursthouse would dispute this conclusion. I am sure she agrees with the need to set up the right social institutions. So, perhaps the best way to think of her program in this respect is to claim that there are attainable institutions which would, if in place, encourage in participants the development of the relevant character traits, where these traits would tend to sustain and be sustained by the institutions.

Alas, I have been able only to skim the surface of the many interesting issues discussed in this excellent book.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to John Doris for helpful comments.