

Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion” (1991)

PHIL 230, Fall 2014, Hendricks

Typical structure of moral theories

1. Premise 1: how to judge right action

- Act util: “An action is right iff it promotes the best consequences.” (225)
- Deontology: “An action is right iff it is in accordance with a moral rule or principle” (224)

2. Premise 2: further specify premise 1

- Act util: “The best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized.”
- Deontology: “A moral rule is one that ...” [how fill in for Kant?]

Structure of Rule Utilitarianism

1. Premise 1: how to judge right action

- An action is right iff it follows a rule that is part of an ideal moral code
- an ideal moral code is one that, if generally subscribed to, would produce at least as good consequences for a group as any other moral code

2. Premise 2: further specify premise 1

- Good consequences are production of pleasure and reduction or elimination of pain

Structure of virtue ethics

1. Premise 1: how to judge right action

- “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances” (225)
- “A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues” (225)

2. Premise 2: further specify premise 1

- “A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well” (226)

Eudaimonia



Virtues – Aristotle says necessary for eudaimonia

True?



Virtuous person



Right action

- Excellence in practical reason
- Desires, emotions, pleasures/pains in line w/reason
- Does v. actions b/c virtuous & from settled state of character

Eudaimonia



Virtues –
necessary(?) for
eudaimonia



Virtuous person



Right action

When deciding
what to do, one can
appeal to “v-rules”,
e.g.:

- Act courageously
- Act kindly
- Do not act unjustly
- Do not act cruelly

Objection: rules too vague?

- “Act justly,” “act courageously,” etc.—
specific enough to be action guiding?
- **Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (1999)**
 - Can give more specifics to what an “honest” person would do/not do, e.g. (pp. 10-12)
 - Saying “act as the honest person would” is shorthand for “do all these things/avoid these things” (or a rule saying that) (59)

Objection: rules too vague?

Hursthouse “Virtue Ethics & Abortion”

- Must moral theories give guidance for action that “any reasonably clever adolescent could follow if she chose”? (230-231)
- No: can’t act morally just by studying theory
 - need practice, life experience, to know what would count as “honest” or “courageous” in a particular situation (231)

Virtue theory & conflicts

What does the virtue ethicist do when virtues conflict?

- **Hursthouse, “VE & Abortion”**: this is a problem for Kantians too (229)
- **Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics***
 - Attn to circumstances can show that seeming conflict not really a conflict (52)
 - Don't try to rank the virtues b/c when applying to diff situations, diff rankings may be needed (57)

Virtue theory & abortion

- **The usual approach to this moral issue**
 - Right of mother to choose what to do with her body vs.
 - Status of fetus as a being that may not be killed (e.g., as a “person”), and thus has right to life
- **Why are these “irrelevant” from the perspective of VE? (p. 234)**

Virtue theory & abortion

- **Need to take holistic view of situation**
 - Don't abstract from entire set of biological facts, human relationships and emotions tied to these, to focus only on two competing "rights" (237)
 - Then look at whether fulfilling virtues in acting in that specific situation
 - In exercising one's "right" to one's body, one may be acting callously, light-mindedly, self-indulgently, etc. (238, 242)

Virtue theory & abortion

- **Sample times when it may not be unvirtuous to have an abortion**
 - If don't want to go through physical demands of pregnancy due to "poor physical health" (239)
 - If having another child would jeopardize capacity to be good parent to ones you have (241)
 - Young people who aren't ready for parenthood yet (242)

Virtue theory & abortion

- **When might it be self-indulgent or light-minded to have an abortion, then?**

Having children necessary to flourishing life?

- **Are we acting unvirtuously if we choose not to have children at all? No**
 - Parenthood can be considered “intrinsically worthwhile, ... [and] among the things that can be correctly thought to be partially constitutive of a flourishing human life” (241)
 - But there are many things that can constitute a flourishing human life; can choose others over parenthood & still be virtuous (242)

How determine what virtues are?

Not in this article; in *On Virtue Ethics* (1999)

- Virtues supposed to be the only “reliable bet” to flourishing (172)
- How could we determine what “flourishing” means, for humans, what it means to live well *as humans*?

How determine what virtues are?

(Chpt 9 of *On Virtue Ethics*) Four “ends” we have:

- Individual survival
- Continuance of species
- Freedom from pain & enjoyment of the types characteristic for the kind of beings we are
- Good functioning of the social group

Virtues, then, should be character traits that are a reliable bet to achieve these

- Any possible problems with this view?