# 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

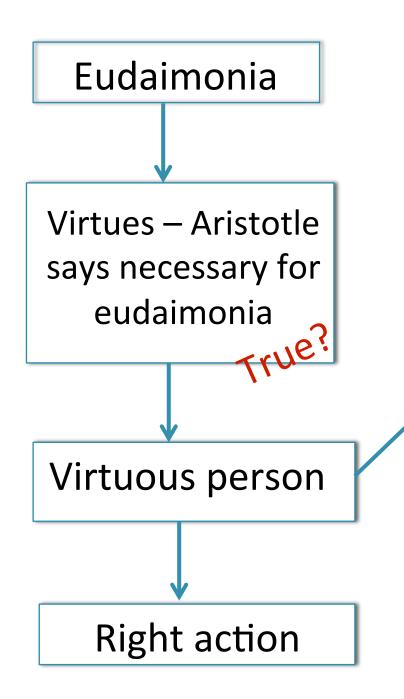
#### Structure of virtue ethics

#### 1. Premise 1: how to judge right action

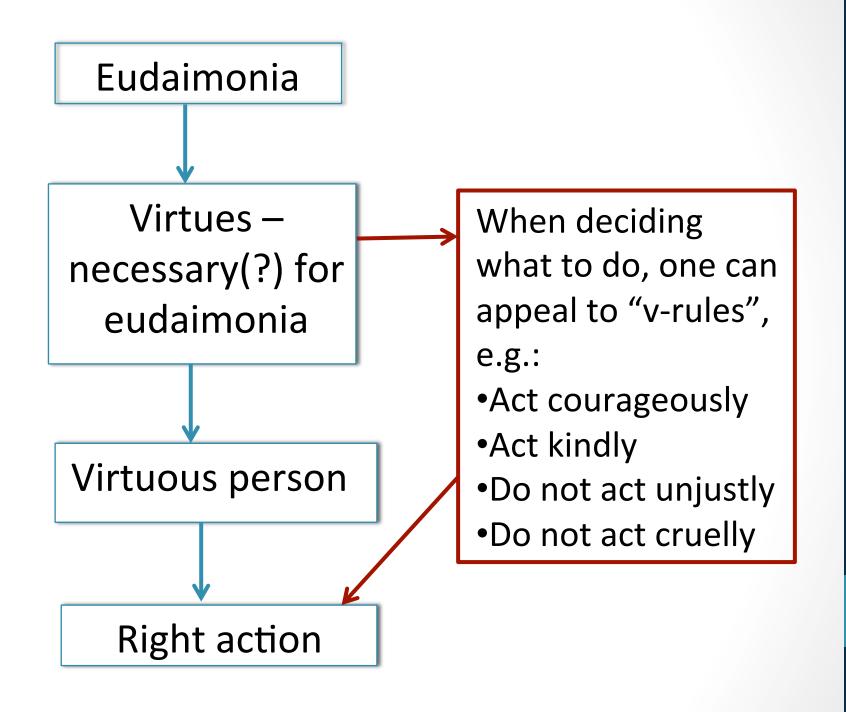
- "An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances" (225)
- "A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues" (225)

#### 2. Premise 2: further specify premise 1

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



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



## 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)

- 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 persective of VE? (p. 234)

- 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)

- 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)

 When might it be self-indulgent or lightminded 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?