

ETHICS AND SOCIETY: ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS
PHILOSOPHY 150: HANDOUT 7

Rosalind Hursthouse’s “Virtue Theory and Abortion”: Part I—Framework of Moral Theories

1. For Kantian ethics (deontological theory), there is a link between *right action* and *moral rules*, and then between *moral rules* and *rationality*.
2. For utilitarianism, there is a link between *right action* and *consequences*, and then between *consequences* and *happiness*.
3. For Aristotelian ethics (virtue theory), there is a link between *right action* and *the virtuous person*, and then between *the virtuous person* and *Happiness (eudaimonia)*.

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4. Misplaced Criticisms
 - a. *Problem of defining eudaimonia*—Hursthouse responds by saying that defining rationality and happiness is just as difficult as defining *eudaimonia*.
 - b. *Problem of vicious circularity* (that is, virtue theory is supposed to specify right action in terms of the virtuous person, and then immediately to specify the virtuous person in terms of right action)—Hursthouse responds by saying that this is not true; virtue theory characterizes the virtuous person in terms of *the virtues*, and then characterizes the virtues in terms of *certain character traits*.
 - c. *Problem of answering “What should I do?” and not just “What sort of person should I be?”*—Hursthouse responds by saying that virtue theory answers both questions.
 - d. *Virtue theory lacks rules or principles, in that it says that we can decide what to do **only** by imagining what a hypothetical virtuous person would do*—Hursthouse responds by saying that we “may employ [our] concepts of the virtues and vices directly, rather than imagining what some hypothetical exemplar would do.”
 - e. *Virtue theory is committed to reductionism (that is, to defining all actions in terms of virtuous agents)*—Hursthouse responds by saying that virtue theory relies on a number of significant moral concepts, for example, *benevolence, good and evil, worthwhile, advantageous and pleasant*.
5. Problems Faced Both by Virtue Theories and by Kantian Theories
 - a. *Which character traits are the virtues? This is open to much dispute*—Hursthouse responds by saying that the question, What exactly are our duties?, is also open to much dispute.
 - b. *How do we reconcile conflicts between virtues?*—Hursthouse responds by saying that the question, How do we resolve conflicts between absolute (or strong) duties?, is also a serious problem for Kantian theories.

6. Major Criticisms of Virtue Theory

- a. *Virtue theorists have to assert that certain actions are virtuous or vicious, and “this is often a very difficult matter to decide”*—Hursthouse responds by saying that this criticism relies on a mistaken *condition of adequacy* for moral theories, namely, that any adequate moral theory must make it *easy* for us to make moral decisions. But this is **not** a correct condition of adequacy.
- b. *Virtue theorists have to rely on concepts like ‘worthwhile’*—Hursthouse responds by saying that this criticism, too, relies on a mistaken condition of adequacy, namely, that any adequate moral theory must answer moral questions without appealing to “what is worthwhile, or [to] what really matters in human life.” But this is **not** a correct condition of adequacy.

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7. “The morality of abortion is commonly discussed in relation to just two considerations: first, ... the status of the foetus ... ; secondly, ... women’s rights. ... [V]irtue theory quite transforms the discussion of abortion by dismissing the two familiar dominating considerations as, in a way, fundamentally irrelevant.”
 - a. I can do something vicious even in exercising a moral right.
 - b. The status of the fetus is an issue that calls for “fancy philosophical sophistication,” while the sort of wisdom that the virtuous person must have is **not** supposed to be sophisticated. Thus, “the status of the foetus ... is, according to virtue theory, simply not relevant to the rightness or wrongness of abortion (within, that is, a secular morality).”

8. Features of a Virtue-Theory Approach to Abortion

- a. The familiar biological facts
- b. The premature termination of a pregnancy connects with all our thoughts about and emotions in relation to human life and death, parenthood, and family relationships

9. Whether Abortion is Right or Wrong in a Particular Case Depends on *the Nature of that Case*

- a. Acts of abortion can be non-virtuous.
- b. Acts of abortion are not always non-virtuous; there are cases in which abortion can be the right decision.
- c. Having an abortion can be the right decision and still demonstrate a lack of virtue.