

Do virtue ethics offer
an account of being
right?



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This essay shall discuss whether or not virtue ethics offers a convincing account of what it is to be morally right. It shall focus on Hursthouse's version of virtue ethics, which shall be outlined first, and the positives of this argument: that it allows for different actions in different situations, and does not justify mass atrocities as a result. Four criticisms shall then be put against virtue ethics: that it is not action guiding; it does not explain cultural difference; it offers no guidance for virtue conflict; and that it relies on either a circularity or, at best, the argument being superfluous. With only one of these criticisms being answerable, it shall then be ultimately concluded that virtue ethics does not offer a convincing account of what it is to be right.

Hursthouse's argument of virtue ethics is an updated version of Aristotle's original work. She claims that an action is right "iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances" (Hursthouse, 1996: 646). Virtue ethics, then, makes an essential reference to the virtuous person, which Hursthouse claims is a person who "acts virtuously ... one who has and exercises the virtues" (Hursthouse, 1996: 647). It is a trivial truth that a virtuous person does what is right, according to all moral theories. However, virtue ethics differs from other arguments in that it claims that an action is right in virtue of it being what the virtuous person would do.

The concept of what is a virtue, then, must be established. In this, Hursthouse makes her claim to Aristotle, arguing that a virtue is "a character trait a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well" (Hursthouse, 1996: 647). This links to Aristotle's work *The Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he claims eudaimonia is living a flourishing, happy life, which he views as the ultimate end and goal of a person's life (Aristotle, 340bc). A

virtue is any trait which will make an addition to this flourishing life, arguably termed the “ positive traits”, such as kindness or charity.

Here, virtue ethics demonstrates a shift from the deontic concepts of deontology and consequentialism; not claiming that an action “ ought” or “ ought not” to be done. Instead, there is a justification of actions in terms of areteic concepts; claiming that an action is “ kind” or “ callous”, for example.

It can now be summarised what makes an action right according to virtue ethics. An action will be right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances. The virtuous agent would characteristically do the action in the circumstances iff the trait which leads to the action is a virtue. Finally, the trait which leads to the action will be a virtue iff it would increase the eudaimonia of the agent.

There are positive things to be said of Hursthouse’s argument for virtue ethics. Firstly, by stating an action is right “ iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances”, there is an allowance for variation in action dependent on the situation, which is more in line with our pragmatic moral practice. This escapes the rigidity and often counter-intuitive rules of deontology. Secondly, whilst it allows for variation in moral practice, it doesn’t allow for the atrocities which consequentialism justifies as a consequence of its situational variation. This is because virtue ethics’ argument depends on what the virtuous person would do and, arguably, it would be said that the virtuous agent would not act in the way consequentialism argues for, by allowing mass murder or torture under certain extreme circumstances, for example.

However, there are decisive criticisms against virtue ethics. The first criticism is that it does little to tell us exactly how to act; it is not action guiding. Virtue ethics states that we should act as the virtuous person would. This gives no other instruction than “ act virtuously”, which perhaps can be further developed into “ act kindly” or “ do not act callously”. However, there is no further instruction than this, and nothing to say whether an action will be kind or just; a person is left to rely on their pre-understanding and belief.

Hursthouse’s response to this criticism seems to be that this is all the instruction that we need. She argues:

“ We can now see that [virtue ethics] comes up with a large number [of rules] ... each virtue generate[s] a prescription – act honestly, charitably, justly.” (Hursthouse, 1996: 648).

When acting, we need only ask ourselves “ is this act just?” or “ is this act kind?”, and the response to the question, being either “ yes” or “ no”, will dictate whether or not an act should be done or not.

This response to the objection does little to answer the original concern, and leads to the second criticism. Hursthouse claims that in order to determine whether an act is just, or kind, or deceitful, a person should seek out those who they consider to be their moral and virtuous superior, and ask their advice (Hursthouse, 1996: 647-648). Not only does this rely on a preconception in measurement of virtue (in that we must have an understanding of what is just in order that we may decide which acquaintance is most just), it does little to recognise what is a second criticism for virtue ethics: the variation in morality between cultures.

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There is a variation in virtues for different cultures in three senses. Firstly, cultures may vary on which virtue is to take precedence in cases of virtue conflict (though this is a separate criticism in itself). In the second sense, cultures vary in their conception of whether a trait is, indeed, a virtue. Thirdly, cultures vary on what they believe the action would be which the virtue leads to. MacIntyre writes:

“ They [various thinkers and cultures] offer us different and incompatible lists of the virtues; they give a different rank order of importance to different virtues; and they have different and incompatible theories of the virtues.” (MacIntyre, 2007: 181).

He gives the example of Homer, who claimed that physical strength was a virtue. This, MacIntyre claims, would never be accepted as a virtue in modern society and, consequently, the difference in Homer's idea of a virtue or an excellence is vastly different to that of ours (MacIntyre, 1981: 27). Though this demonstrates that one trait may be accepted as a virtue by one culture and not by another, it also highlights the third sense of cultural difference: that different cultures can accept the same trait as a virtue, but what constitutes an act being virtuous may be varied. For example, all societies believe justice to be a virtue, yet one might consider capital punishment to be just and therefore virtuous, whilst the other may hold capital punishment to be unjust and therefore not virtuous.

To the defence of virtue ethics, Hursthouse claims that the problem is one which is equally shared by deontology, arguing:

“ Each theory has to stick out its neck and say, in some cases ‘ this person/these people/other cultures are in error’, and find some grounds for saying this.” (Hursthouse, 1991: 229)

Yet this causes concern for virtue theory. Hursthouse is here claiming that some cultures are wrong in believing that certain traits truly lead to an increase in eudaimonia, and are therefore wrong about them being virtues. This presents a circularity in reasoning for virtue ethics.

Before the circularity criticism is discussed, a defence can be made of one aspect of conflict: when two virtues are in conflict, not across cultures, but with one another in a situation. The third criticism is that situations are easily imagined in which two virtues can be in conflict in this manner. For instance, a police officer may apprehend a robber. On hearing the robber’s story, it turns out that he stole food in order to provide for his starving children. The police officer must then decide whether to act on the virtue of justice, and arrest the robber who, despite the circumstances, has committed a crime, or to act on the virtue of sympathy and charity, and allow the robber to take the food and feed the starving children. Hursthouse claims that “ in such cases, virtue ethics has nothing helpful to say” (Hursthouse, 1991: 229).

However, a response can be contested. The degree of conflict can be very broad, dependent on the circumstances. In some situations, the correct answer is obvious; in the above case, it would be hard to justify not allowing a man a stolen loaf of bread to feed his starving children. In other situations, the degree of conflict can be much narrower, making the decision much more difficult. In keeping with the argument of virtue ethics, the correct

decision is going to be the one which adds to eudaimonia. If both traits will lead to an increase in eudaimonia, the correct choice will be the one which adds most to eudaimonia. As the difference in the amount of increase narrows, the choice becomes harder, but the moral recompense in choosing wrongly will be less. Ultimately, if both virtues will increase eudaimonia equally, then they are equally the correct choice.

However, the most decisive criticism is that the argument which virtue ethics puts forward for what is morally right rests on a circularity. This is brought forward when it was demonstrated that virtue ethics necessitates the existence of some other criterion being the case in order that it can be said some cultures are right and others wrong in their approach to the implementation of virtues and what it is that they hold to be a virtue.

If virtue ethics is to explain why some cultures are wrong in their implementation of the virtues, then their argument must work as follows: a culture is wrong because what they are advocating as right would not be done by the virtuous person. It would not be done by the virtuous person because the trait which leads to the action is not a virtue. The trait which leads to the action is not a virtue because it would not add to the person's eudaimonia. The reason, then, that a culture is wrong, is because they are mistaken in assuming that the trait which would lead to the action is a virtue, because it will not add to the persons' eudaimonia.

It must therefore be considered what it takes for a trait to lead to an increase in eudaimonia. To this end, it must be claimed that a trait can only add to eudaimonia, and therefore be a virtue, because of something about the trait:

if it is morally right. Herein is the circularity. Virtue ethics states that an action is right iff it is what the virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation. However, it has already been shown that there must be something about a trait which is morally right in order that it can add to eudaimonia and therefore be a virtue, so that the virtuous person may act on it. To avoid the circularity, for a trait to be morally right, there must be a criterion of rightness other than it is what the virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation. If such a criterion exists, virtue ethics' argument becomes superfluous to explain what is right.

In conclusion, the argument for virtue ethics' account of what it is for an action to be right has been set forward. Firstly, the positives to this argument were shown: that it avoids the rigidity of deontology and the atrocities of consequentialism. It was then criticised with four arguments: it is not action guiding; the difference in cultures' morality; concerns when two or more virtues come into conflict; and the necessity for another criterion of rightness which, if accepted, renders virtue ethics unnecessary or, if rejected, leads to a circularity in virtue ethics. Therefore, it is concluded that virtue ethics does not offer a convincing account of what it is for an action to be right.

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