

# Rosalind hursthouse's view on virtue ethics

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When thinking about ethics, one would naturally assume that moral principles are what guide one's actions. For example, if one of my moral principles is that killing is wrong, then killing an individual would go against that moral principle and I would therefore make ethical decisions to avoid killing individuals. Rosalind Hursthouse argues in "Normative Virtue Ethics" that acting right is not simply a matter of following principles or set of rules but rather acting and knowing how to act at a proper mean between two opposite ends of a range of possibilities that stem from virtues themselves. In the text, Hursthouse initially asserts that a youth is not a suitable student of ethical studies because young individuals lack life experience, knowledge of culture, and are easily swayed by emotion. In doing so, Hursthouse eliminates the possibility of a child prodigy in the study of ethics. Eliminating the possibility of a child prodigy in ethical studies rejects ethical studies as a set of rule-based theories and asserts that utilization of moral education, knowledge, and wisdom result from ethical studies as a set of virtue-based theories.

Rule-based theories of ethical studies can be broken down into Utilitarian and Deontological ethics. Utilitarian ethics defines the ethically right choice to be the best possible choice resulting from a systematic set of decision making procedures. However, Deontological ethics defines the ethically right choice as one that is motivated by duty or obligation. In either case, both theories are "act-centered" in that the agent is subject to a set of rules that guide him or her to make the ethically right decision. Both theories also work against the "agent-centered" view of virtue-based theories of ethical studies

which state that the agent himself or herself makes judgments within the parameters of virtues to produce the ethically right choice.

A primary objection to eliminating the possibility of a child prodigy in the study of ethics is that if a young child is able to do carry out ethically right actions, then the acquisition of moral knowledge is not solely limited to elderly individuals. It then follows that if moral knowledge were able to be acquired by any individual, regardless of age, a child prodigy of ethical studies may exist. For example, a young child can assist an elderly woman across the road or pick up and return a wallet that a man unknowingly dropped. However, this objection seems to argue that doing an ethically right thing at a young age does not require knowledge of how to differ between ethically right or wrong choices. For example, the young child that assisted the woman across the road or picked up and returned the wallet to the man that unknowingly dropped it may have done so because his parents told him to do so, and he is simply following their instruction. By doing so, the individual does not make the choice between right or wrong, but still unknowingly or unwillingly carries out the ethically right choice. Therefore, we can assume that carrying out an ethically right choice does not necessarily open the possibility for young individuals to fully comprehend ethically right or wrong choices.

The major objection to eliminating the possibility of a child prodigy in the study of ethics is that the existence of child prodigies in subjects such as mathematics and science indicates that a child prodigy in the study of ethics is also possible. The reasoning behind this theory is that if child prodigies are simply individuals that learn information at a faster rate than other normal

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individuals, there may possibly exist some young individual that can quickly learn the intricacies of ethical studies just like any other subject. However, the biggest downfall of this theory lies in the difference of subject comparison. Specifically, quantitative subjects such as mathematics and science require that individuals learn absolute facts, such as laws and theories that are proven to be true. For example, all introductory physics students learn about Sir Isaac Newton's law of gravity. This is an accepted, testable, and true fact. Ethical studies, however, require that individuals draw upon abstract life experiences and broad generalizations. For example, a student of ethical studies may learn about moral particularism, which explains that moral principles do not exist and that moral judgment is found only as an individual decides particular cases. In addition, these particular cases require skill and experience for an individual to be able to tell between the normal choices and choices that deviate from the normal. As a result, understanding and applying moral particularism, and by extension many other topics in ethical studies, requires the ability to draw upon life experiences that a young child simply does not have.

Another possible argument for the existence of an ethical studies child prodigy is that in a world of seven billion people, there must be a possibility of a child that is able to learn the abstract concepts of ethical studies by somehow overcoming the necessity for life experience. For example, there may be an instance where an introductory physics student does not understand Newton's law of gravity. In such a case, a physics textbook could help the individual understand the concept of gravity through illustration, diagram, or description. Analogously, an ethics textbook could also supply

some sort of extensive illustration, diagram, or description that is able to bypass this life experience requirement. However, the biggest downfall of this argument is that this argument assumes that ethical studies is then simply a set of rule-based theories.

Rule-based ethical theorists assume that principles or rules guide the individual to make a right ethical choice. If one's principle were "do not kill others" the individual would not kill others simply because the individual is following the principle. Similarly, if ethical studies is then a set of rule-based theories, any individual would be able to learn the intricacies of the subject by following the procedure and learning the subject like any other. It then follows that if ethical studies is a composition of rule-based theories, then there should exist Utilitarian ethical child prodigies. An analysis of all child prodigies that are reported and known of in this world shows that none are prodigies in ethical studies. Therefore, we can rule out the possibility of a Utilitarian child prodigy in ethical studies because we can assume that ethical studies is not a strict set of guidelines that guide an individual to make the ethically right choice.

This still leaves open the possibility of a Deontological ethical prodigy. By definition, deontological ethics holds that an individual should make ethically right choices based on duty or obligation. Deontological ethics falls ambiguous when a duty or obligation becomes unbending at the expense of the original intent of the rules. For example, if duty or obligation must be followed or fulfilled, an individual can do extremely irrational or immoral things that contradict the original intent of the duty or obligation. This portrays how if duty or obligation can be unbending, the agent carrying out <https://assignbuster.com/rosalind-hursthouses-view-on-virtue-ethics/>

the action is subject to following the rules of the procedure until the duty or obligation is fulfilled. Although this type of rule-based decision-making is not as strong as a Utilitarian calculus sort of decision-making procedure, unbending duties or obligation in Deontological ethics still supply a systematic decision-making procedure. Again, an analysis of child prodigies proves that there are no child prodigies in ethical studies (or none reported to this day) and therefore shows how ethics is not a set of learnable systematic decision-making procedures, and therefore rules out the possibility of a deontological ethical child prodigy.

Disproving the possibility of a child prodigy in ethical studies allows us to make further implications about the nature of ethical studies as a set of virtue-based theories. Virtue-based theorists argue that instead of a systematic decision-making procedure, virtues themselves outline the ethically right decision. Because they argue that ethical decisions come from the act itself, they subsequently conclude that ethical decisions must then be a result of virtues and intuition on how to act, derived from a lifetime of moral education rather than a set of principles. In essence, if I wanted to make the best ethical decision in any situation, I would need use my best judgment in within the parameters of my virtues. Examining moral education allows us to conclude that the acquisition of moral education is present not only in virtue-based ethics but also rule-based ethics. For example, although Utilitarian ethics requires that agents follow a strict set of guidelines that produce the best good to make ethical decisions, the agents are still able to acquire moral education by interpreting and defining what the best “good” is. Similarly, although Deontological ethics requires that agents follow duties

or obligations to make ethical decisions, the agents are still able to acquire moral education by interpreting the duties or obligations they must fulfill.

Although the acquisition of moral education is possible by both rule-based and virtue-based agents, we can prove that the usage of moral education is unique to only virtue-based agents. First, Utilitarian decision-making calculus leaves out the possibility of utilization of one's moral education in the procedure if it does not produce the best good. Similarly, when morals or duties of a Deontologist become unbending, the Deontologist's acquired moral knowledge is inapplicable in decision-making as the individual must instead follow the systematic decision-making procedure to fulfill the duty or obligation. Conversely, virtue-based theories advocate for the usage of moral education along with virtues to make the best ethical judgment.

If utilizing moral education is unique to virtue-based ethical theories, it then follows that using moral education is not just accumulating practical skill, creativity, and acquired expertise, but also knowing when to apply it to different situations in life. Additionally, we can define moral education as the means of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is subsequently used to interpret virtues and make ethically right, or the best of possible, decisions. In essence, knowledge is the "intuition" acquired from accumulated moral education. Accumulated knowledge throughout one's life can then be defined as wisdom. In essence, wisdom and knowledge can be seen as a spectrum with low-level knowledge at one end and ultimate wisdom at the other. One would acquire wisdom by increments of knowledge by the process of perpetual moral education throughout one's lifetime. This spectrum of moral knowledge and wisdom and subsequent application to <https://assignbuster.com/rosalind-hursthouses-view-on-virtue-ethics/>

different scenarios in life further validates the assertion that ethical studies is virtue-based rather than rule-based.

A rule-based theorist may object, arguing that if ethical decisions were left to the individual's judgment rather than systematic procedure, a corrupt individual would be using his or her intuition to make ethically wrong decisions. However, virtue-based theorists would counter this objection by first stating that the judgment an individual utilizes is held within the parameters of the virtues defined. Virtue-based theorists would also argue that the utilization of moral education requires that one have the acquired expertise and practical wisdom to differ between ethically right and wrong choices.

An examination of all child prodigies in this world yield that there are none (or none reported) in the field of ethical studies. Hursthouse rejects the possibility of a Utilitarian and Deontological "moral whiz kid" by asserting that ethical studies is not a subject learnable by systematic procedure. In doing so, we can assume that ethical studies is then a set of virtue-based theories. Doing so allows us to conclude that understanding ethical studies requires acquisition and application of moral education accumulated throughout one's life. Moral education is the lifetime process of building moral knowledge to achieve a high level of moral wisdom. This moral education is used consistently within the parameters of virtues throughout one's life in ethical decision-making.