

## Reading Guide #12

Foot “Virtues and Vices”

Hursthouse’s “Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*”

1. Hursthouse argues that our lives go better on the whole with the virtues than without these virtues.
  - a. Explain why she thinks this is true using the virtue of honesty as an example.
  - b. But isn't it just true that sometimes, at least, being honest could ruin your life and telling a lie can avoid this ruin? Does Hursthouse acknowledge this possibility? [Hint: yes she does acknowledge this.] What is her response to this possibility?**
  - c. Suppose that telling a lie will most likely save Andre's career whereas telling the truth will most likely ruin it. Suppose further that Andre has the virtue of honesty but that at least one of the reasons that Andre has cultivated this virtue is that he has been convinced by Aristotle and Hursthouse that an honest life will lead to a flourishing life. Will Andre lie to save his career? [Hint: the answer is 'no'. Now explain why this is the right answer given that Andre has only cultivated this virtue because he wants his life to prosper?]
- 2. Hursthouse considers the possibility that it is not virtue but power that secures a good life. She claims that even if this is so, very few of us would prefer to live a powerful but vicious life over a life of virtue with limited power.**
  - a. What about the few people who don't prefer this life? What according to Hursthouse can we say to them? [Hint: we can't say anything to them, now explain why not!]**
  - b. But if virtuous people already agree that the virtues lead to the best life and vicious people cannot be convinced that the virtues lead to the best life, then to whom, according to Hursthouse, is Aristotle's theory addressed?
3. According to Foot, strength and beauty are not virtues because they are not things that we can do anything about—they are not things that we can do intentionally. This might suggest that the virtuous person is the person with a perfect will, i.e. someone who always forms the correct intentions given the situation. Ultimately, however, Foot says that forming the correct intention is not always enough. Sometimes, you must also have the correct innermost desires as well as intentions and these innermost desires are not something that we can control. Give an example of a situation where someone forms the correct intention, but fails to be virtuous because their innermost desires are not correct.
- 4. On page 323, Foot distinguishes between cleverness and wisdom. What is the distinction? Give an elaborated example of a situation in which wisdom, rather than cleverness, is required. Give an example of a situation in which cleverness rather than wisdom is required.**

5. On page 326, Foot argues that virtues are only necessary as correctives. That is to say, we only need to have virtue in a domain in which our desires are not “good guides to conduct throughout life.” Can you think of an area where our desires ARE a good guide to life? Is Foot right that there is no virtue that governs this area?
6. Recall the example of Felicity from our discussion of Kant. (She was the person so kindly constituted that she always WANTED to help people). Now remember that Kant said that Felicity’s behavior had no moral worth. Foot disagrees with this on page 329. Basically, her disagreement is that while difficulties of external circumstances can indeed make an action more virtuous, difficulties of internal motivations don’t make the action more virtuous. Explain her point here and its relevance to Felicity.
7. According to Foot it is not possible for a villain to perform a courageous act while pursuing his villainous ends. Imagine, therefore, that a vengeful murderer must do many a bold act to get to her victim. Why does Foot say that although this act “took courage” it was not a courageous act? [Hint: use her analogy to poison that does not always act as a poison in certain situations.]