

Reading Guide #15

Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion"*

1) It has been thought that virtue theory cannot actually help us make moral decisions. Instead, it simply tells us to do as a virtuous person would do without explaining who this virtuous person is or what the virtuous person would do. As Hursthouse admits, the advice, "Do as Socrates (or some other favorite virtuous person) would do" is spectacularly unhelpful when given to a teenage girl faced with the option of having an abortion. However, argues Hursthouse, virtue theory is not alone in being unhelpful at this level of description. All three major normative ethical theories are alike in first stating a purely formal premise which cannot yield any advice. They must each be supplemented by a second premise which specifies and explains the key term that appears in the formal premise. What are the formal premises of the other theories of deontology and Consequentialism, how would a Kantian deontologist fill in the second specifying premise, and how would a Utilitarian consequentialist fill in her second specifying premise.

2) What is wrong with a moral theory that "any clever adolescent can apply"?

3) According to Hursthouse someone who believes that the fetus is not a person is committed to saying "What a fuss about nothing!" to a potential mother grieving about her miscarriage, and someone who believes that the fetus is a person from conception is committed to saying "What a tragedy" to a mother of 3 who accidentally gets pregnant, and loses her unwanted child due to miscarriage in the first few weeks. Both of these attitudes, according to Hursthouse, are inappropriate. Why are they both inappropriate? (Hint: the answer has nothing to do with the rights of the fetus. In the first case, the person is callous and insensible to a certain value. In the second case, the person is insensitive to a certain fact. What is the value in the first case and the fact in the second?)

4) What is wrong with someone who spends all their time checking/updating their facebook page to the point where they neglect their friends and career is not that they are violating someone's rights, but that they place too much value on the unimportant things and not enough on the important things. Similarly, for Hursthouse, sometimes a mother's decision to abort a fetus reflects a character flaw—she does not appreciate the things that are really important, and she has insufficient appreciation of how important motherhood is to having a rich and full life, where other times aborting a fetus does not reflect a character flaw. Give an example of each case. Do not use cases involving rape, teen pregnancy, hard economic circumstances, or cases where the life of the mother is threatened.