

ABSTRACT

Since reemerging as a serious alternative to utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics has been dogged by the objection that, being agent-centered rather act-centered, it lacks the ability to provide adequate action-guidance. Virtue ethics has also been faulted for devolving into moral cultural relativism. Acknowledging that virtue ethics has little future as a normative ethical theory so long as these two objections stand, Rosalind Hursthouse attempts to ameliorate both with an action-based, naturalistic theory of virtue ethics. Despite its merits, I argue that Hursthouse's theory fails to successfully solve the problems associated with action guidance and relativism precisely because her attempt to provide a non-cultural basis for virtue ethics undermines the possibility of using virtue ethics to derive useful action-guidance. The action-guiding power of virtue is derived from culture; seeking to avoid the cultural grounding of virtue merely brings one back to the problem of how virtue ethics can provide action-guidance.

Relativism and Action-Guidance in Hursthouse's Virtue Ethics

Over the past fifty years virtue ethics has established itself alongside consequentialism and deontology as one of three major types of ethical theory.¹ Since doing so, however, it has faced numerous criticisms that cast doubt on whether it can succeed as an approach to normative ethics. Among the most prominent criticisms is that, since virtue ethics is agent-centered rather than act-centered, it cannot provide action-guidance. Another common criticism is that, since the meaning of the virtues is culturally and historically relative, virtue ethics is complicit with moral cultural relativism. In *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse acknowledges that virtue ethics will not fare well as a normative ethical option unless these criticisms can be met with an adequate response and consequently attempts to give one (Hursthouse 1999). In this paper I argue that she does not successfully deal with these criticisms inasmuch as her attempt to provide a non-cultural basis for virtue ethics undermines the possibility of using virtue ethics to derive useful action-guidance. This is so because the action-guiding power of virtue is derived

¹ The resurgence of interest in virtue ethics is generally attributed to G.E.M. Anscombe's 1958 essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy".

from culture; seeking to avoid the cultural grounding of virtue merely brings one back to the problem of how virtue ethics can provide action-guidance.²

In section 1 I present Hursthouse's account of virtue-based right action and add to it by beginning to clarify what *useful* action-guidance might look like from the perspective of virtue ethics. This involves drawing a connection between virtue ethics and Bernard Williams's account of 'thick ethical concepts'. I then argue, in support of Hursthouse, that virtue-ethics is capable of providing useful action-guidance given certain cultural conditions. In section 2 I elaborate the connection between virtue, action-guidance, and relativism, and then review the ethical naturalism that Hursthouse employs to counter charges of moral cultural relativism. In section 3 I argue that, while Hursthouse's ethical naturalism may ground virtue ethics in non-cultural terms it does so in a way that does not allow for virtue ethics to be usefully action-guiding. At best, she has swapped one problem for another; at worst she has given us reason to doubt whether virtue ethics could ever be usefully action-guiding without being complicit with moral cultural relativism.

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² Robert Johnson has also challenged Hursthouse's account of right action by questioning the extent to which an action actually is right iff it is what the virtuous person would do (Johnson 2003). My critique is distinct from his in focusing on the problem of moral cultural relativism and the idea of useful action-guidance. Other noteworthy criticisms include that charge that virtue ethics is self-effacing; that it is egoistic; that it cannot overcome the conflict problem; that it cannot overcome the justification problem; and that it has no good response to the social-psychological claim that there is no such thing as 'character'. For more on the nature and origin of these criticisms see: Stohr and Wellman 2002, and Hursthouse 2013. That this paper does not consider such additional criticisms should not be interpreted as a dismissal. Rather, given limited space, I focus on the criticisms associated with action-guidance and relativism because I believe them to be linked in an important way, and because they are the criticisms that Hursthouse is most eager to overcome and which pose an insufficiently considered threat to her project.

Virtue ethics is accused of being unable to provide action-guidance on the grounds that it is primarily concerned with the rightness of an agent's character rather than the rightness of an agent's actions. In other words, while virtue ethics might tell us how to be, it cannot tell us what to do.³ Hursthouse responds with the following virtue-based account of right action:

P1- An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

P2- A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues.

P3- A virtue is a character trait or a disposition that...

Acting rightly is acting as the virtuous agent would characteristically act under the circumstances, and a virtuous agent is someone who possesses and exercises the virtues.

For Hursthouse, all that remains to make virtue ethics action-guiding is to define virtue and enumerate the various forms it can take. This last task is likely to be difficult and contentious, but that merely informs us that virtue ethics will not be easy, not that it cannot be action-guiding.

Hursthouse claims that an ethical theory's ability to help us find answers to the moral question 'What ought I to do?' is a measure of its action-guiding ability. She argues that if virtue ethics can help us find answers to this question then it will meet the same conditions as its normative rivals: "When I seek action guidance, I am asking, 'What shall I do (in this situation in which I am, or with which I shall shortly be confronted)?' A normative ethics is supposed to provide me with the wherewithal to find

³ Hursthouse's account of action-guidance is meant as a direct response to these criticisms (Hursthouse 1999: 25). For an alternative response to this criticism see Slote 2000. Rather than trying to make the case that virtue ethics is action-guiding, Slote argues that virtue ethics can be action-evaluating (i.e., it allows us to assess the rightness of an act by examining an agent's motives) and that this may be enough for it succeed as a normative ethical theory.

the answers” (Ibid., 49). Note that she does not say the theory is supposed to give us the answers, only to give us the wherewithal to find them.

Hursthouse continues her virtue-based account of right action by completing P3 with an appropriate definition (which for her is an Aristotelian one)⁴:

P3- A virtue is a character trait or a disposition to act in a way that contributes to the flourishing or well-being of the agent.

Next we introduce and define a virtue term and see if it converges with our conception of virtue:

P4- Courage is the disposition to persist in a valued project despite the risk of injury or death.

P5- Courage contributes to an agent’s flourishing by helping her pursue and succeed in valued projects.

Conclusion - Courage is a virtue.

Hursthouse thinks we can now use the virtue of courage to guide our action. How ought we to act? As the virtuous person would characteristically act under the circumstances. How would the virtuous person act under these circumstances? Courageously (or in accordance with the appropriate virtue). What does acting courageously entail? It entails persisting in valued projects despite the risk of injury or death. Put this way, and assuming that we understand the terms involved, Hursthouse is confident that virtue ethics provides a moral theory that gives us the wherewithal to find answers to the question ‘What ought I to do?’ The answer in this case would be ‘Act courageously’ or ‘Do the courageous thing’.

⁴ Hursthouse defines herself as a neo-Aristotelian. For her, this means subscribing to the essence of Aristotle’s moral philosophy while maintaining that he is just plain wrong about some things, e.g., slavery, women, and physics (Ibid., 8-16).

Now there is a sense in which ‘Do the courageous thing’ is obviously, though trivially, action-guiding inasmuch as it instructs us to do *something*, to act one way (courageously) rather than another (cowardly); therefore it is fair to assume that the claim that virtue ethics cannot provide action-guidance means something more. It must mean something like ‘Virtue ethics cannot provide *useful* action-guidance’, i.e., ‘Do the courageous thing’ does not guide our action in a useful way; it does not give us the wherewithal to know what we ought to do.’ Hursthouse does not sufficiently consider what counts as useful action-guidance from the standpoint of virtue ethics; she does not clarify the kind of action-guidance that we should desire from virtue ethics, nor the kind of action-guidance virtue ethics should reasonably be thought capable of supplying. Some (though not all) of what I say in addressing the issue of useful action-guidance will apply to other types of ethical theory, though I stress that I am considering what might count as useful action-guidance from the perspective of virtue ethics, and not necessarily consequentialism and deontology.

We should not require useful virtue based action-guidance to take the form of a simple decision procedure such that anyone who follows it is reasonably assured to act rightly. (Aristotle understood this limitation. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is not an instructional pamphlet; it could not be subtitled ‘*Eudaimonia For Dummies*). Virtuous activity involves not just hitting the mean, but hitting the mean relative to us. Thus moderation with respect to food depends on whether one is a wrestler or a dancer, and further, on the age, gender, and health of the wrestler or dancer in question. Courage, to give another example, is the virtuous mean between fear and rashness, but the specific mean will be different for a soldier in her physical prime than it will be for a blind

septuagenarian. The virtuous mean between rashness and fear will not guide the same actions for both persons. An act that is courageous for the trained soldier is likely, though not certain, to be rash for the elderly blind man. An ethical decision procedure that attempted to guide virtuous action would not be able to account for each of the relative and constantly changing variables that must be taken into account when determining the mean relative to the individual (one that attempted to do so would become so unwieldy that it would likely result in action-confusion rather than action-guidance). Therefore, we should not require a usefully action-guiding virtue-based theory to be as easy to follow as, say, a back-of-the-box recipe.

In thinking about the requirements of useful action guidance, it is important to remember ‘guidance’ does not necessarily imply a guarantee of success. To be guided by something, even usefully guided, is not to be assured that all will come out well or that the *telos* in question will be achieved. Imagine that I am a climber who has undertaken to summit Mt. Everest. I’ve never been in the Himalayas before, so to help me achieve my goal I hire an excellent guide. I can be meticulous and diligent in following his advice, but none of this will guarantee a successful climb even if he does his job to perfection. The usefulness of his action guidance is not dependent on a successful outcome, for no matter how excellent his guidance he cannot climb the mountain for me; I must do most of the work myself. And if I am a true climber – one who is devoted to possessing and exercising the excellences internal to climbing – I would not have it otherwise.

The mountain guide cannot ensure success simply by giving more specific and meticulous advice, and even if he could this kind of guidance would be undesirable inasmuch as it would make it difficult if not impossible to achieve the particular goods

internal to mountain climbing. For a true climber, mountain climbing has no use-value other than the enjoyment one gets from the experience itself. It is its own end. In this way it is like the *telos* of leading a flourishing life. *Eudaimonia* has no end beyond itself. We aim to live-well and flourish for the sake of living-well and flourishing, and mountain climbers climb for the sake of climbing. If my only interest is reaching the summit regardless of how it is achieved, *then* I might desire a simple decision procedure or set of instructions that can almost certainly guarantee success without requiring, or encouraging the development of, the excellences associated with climbing.⁵

While a usefully action-guiding mountain guide need not provide me with simple recipe-like instructions, there is another kind of action-guidance he should avoid, and that is action guidance that is exceedingly abstract and void of content. If the only action-guiding instruction my guide provides is ‘Make smart choices’ or ‘Always do the right thing’ I probably won’t make it out of base camp. ‘Always do the right thing’ is action-guiding, but only inasmuch as by referring back to it I find myself trying to act in particular way, namely, in the way that does the right thing. This would not be usefully action-guiding for the purpose of climbing Everest, nor do I think it would be usefully action-guiding for the purposes of trying to live well or flourish, for the purposes of *eudaimonia*.

Firstly, abstract action guidance like ‘Always do the right thing’ would only be helpful if, for some reason, my actions had previously been guided by always seeking to

⁵ I am not suggesting that true climbers should never seek *any* kind of guidance, only that those who climb for the sake the climbing want a guide who will help them to develop the excellences associated with climbing. Again, if one cares nothing for climbing and only wants to get to the top, *then* one should seek out as much simple foolproof action guidance as possible, as one should in ethics if one cares only for consequences.

do the wrong thing. Secondly, ‘Always do the right thing’ does not proffer any useful action-guidance for the specific situation in which I find myself. Thirdly, it is the kind of action-guidance I could have received from most any one – there would have been no need to engage an expert. It is obvious that the actions which will lead to success in climbing Mt. Everest are going to be very different from the actions that will lead to a success in, say, swimming the English Channel, and yet ‘Always do the right thing’ is equally action-guiding for both climber and the swimmer (which is to say that it is not usefully action-guiding for either). A mountain guide who tells his climbers ‘Always do the right thing’ will not be much help, and neither will an ethical theory that, in trying to help us live well, only provides guidance that is similarly abstract and void of content.

I suggest that, from the standpoint of virtue ethics, useful action-guidance need not take the form of a decision procedure, but that it ought to present one with a range of acceptable actions, the performance of which is likely to encourage the flourishing of the agent by promoting the development of excellences needed to become a virtuous person. In order to do this, I believe that a usefully action-guiding virtue-based theory must employ virtue concepts that can operate as ‘thick ethics concepts’ in the sense described and endorsed by Bernard Williams.

Like many recent and contemporary philosophers, Williams expresses dissatisfaction with much modern moral philosophy for eroding the ‘substance’ of our ethical lives.⁶ He is dubious of deontological and utilitarian ethical systems, both of which he faults for seeking legitimacy by modeling themselves on the natural sciences. Such a mistake can delude us into thinking that our ethical beliefs are capable of the same

⁶ This dissatisfaction has been shared by G.E.M. Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum, among others.

high degree of convergence as our scientific beliefs.⁷ His position, like Aristotle's, is that we are unlikely to achieve the same kind of knowledge in ethics as we are in science and it is foolish to act as if we can. On Williams' account, ethics, and philosophy in general, would do well to stop imitating the natural sciences and try styling itself as a humanistic discipline. The notion of thick ethical concepts is linked to this idea.

'Thick' and 'thin' denote two kinds of ethical concepts. Both are distinguished from scientific concepts by having an evaluative component, yet thick concepts also have a factual component that thin concepts are lacking. Thin ethical concepts include good, right and wrongdoing; thick ethical concepts include courageous, honest, and greedy. The thought is that 'honest' makes a value judgment while also reporting something factual about the world in a way that 'right' does not; honest is both factually world-guided and ethically action-guiding: "Thus to apply a thick ethical concept in a given situation is, in part, to appraise the situation, but it is also to say something straightforwardly false if the situation turns out not to be a certain way" (Ibid., xi).

To call an act honest is to praise the act, perhaps even to offer it as a reason for action, but it is also to describe the act as possessing certain factual characteristics (perhaps an attempt to report the truth) in a way that 'good' does not; 'Good' praises an act but does not tell us anything factual about the act itself. Furthermore, thick concepts have the ability to describe without *necessarily* evaluating: one can call an act honest and thus describe it as being a certain way without necessarily implying that one morally

⁷ Williams expresses his notion of convergence in the following way: "The basic idea behind the distinction between the scientific and ethical, expressed in terms of convergence, is very simple. In a scientific enquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope" (Williams 1985: 136).

approves of the act. ‘Good’ does not operate like this. It would be funny to call an act good and then say ‘But I morally disapprove of it.’⁸

Williams argues that much deontological and consequentialist moral philosophy has led to the thinning out our ethical concepts in accordance with dictates of reason. Williams wishes us to reverse course, believing that “far from trying to eliminate or reduce all ‘thick’ concepts in the name of rationality, we should try to hold on to as many as we can” because “it is precisely the use of ‘thick’ ethical concepts...that contributes to a more substantial type of personal ethical experience than theory is likely to produce” (Ibid., 48). I submit that one way thick ethical concepts accomplish this involves their ability to guide our action.

Williams is echoing Anscombe, who, in “Modern Moral Philosophy”, argued:

It would be a great improvement if, instead of ‘morally wrong’, one should always name a genus such as ‘untruthful’, ‘unchaste’, ‘unjust’. We should no longer ask whether doing something was ‘wrong’, passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once (Anscombe 1997: 34).

The thought is that thick ethical concepts (of which the virtues are paradigmatic examples) will add clarity and perspectival substance to action-guiding theories such that we might better possess the wherewithal to understand what we ought to do. The following historical example illustrates how ‘Do the courageous thing’ can be usefully action-guiding through the operation of thick virtue concepts. It is also an example that will present and motivate the charges of moral cultural relativism to which virtue ethics

⁸ For a detailed account of thick ethical concepts see: Dancy 1995.

has been subjected and against which Hursthouse offers a defense. Thus we will begin to see the way in which the problems of action-guidance and relativism are linked.

In *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear recounts the cultural collapse suffered by the Crow, an American Indian tribe, at the hands of the American government in the late nineteenth century (Lear 2006). On Lear's interpretation, the most tragic part of the collapse was the destruction of the forms of life that had given thickness and intelligibility to Crow virtues. When the virtues lost their thickness and intelligibility, they also lost their ability to be usefully action-guiding for both the individual and the group.

Before the collapse, the virtue of courage was of paramount importance for the Crow. Significant forms of Crow courage included planting a coup-stick, stealing an enemy's horse, and taking an enemy's weapon while he was still alive.⁹ Thus the virtue of courage was thick and usefully action-guiding concept for the Crow – factually world-guided by the Crow forms of life and ethically action-guiding such that the application the concept presented a range of options tending to promote the agent's flourishing by helping him persist in valued projects. Each member of the tribe knew that he ought to be courageous, and he also knew that to be courageous was to perform certain culturally and historically conditioned acts in certain circumstances in certain correct ways (though the specific actions differed for men and women, and courage, in the Crow context, was primarily a male virtue). This is not to say that all Crow possessed the skill or the practical wisdom needed to do the courageous thing, only that the command 'Do the

⁹ The coup-stick was a ceremonial marker that a Crow warrior would plant in the battlefield at a point that marked the boundary of Crow territory. It told the enemy 'Further than this, you shall not pass.' The warrior's job was to protect the coup-stick (and the border) with his life to show the enemy that the Crow would choose death before surrender.

courageous thing' would not have left an individual wondering what he was supposed to do.

Lear argues that when the forms of life that sustained the Crow's virtue concepts were destroyed, the actions that had traditionally been guided by these concepts lost their thickness and intelligibility. The virtue of courage illustrates the loss. After being moved to a reservation, the Crow's nomadic, hunter-warrior existence was replaced by one that was settled and agricultural. As a result, the act of stealing an enemy's horse lost its intelligibility as a courageous act – the value of horses and the importance of being able to show bravery in the face of an enemy tribe had waned. Stealing a horse shifted from a laudable act of courage into a pathetic act of criminality. A Crow man could still use the old thick concept and attempt steal a horse or plant a coup-stick, but these actions would no longer contribute to his well-being. Stealing horses and counting coup was more likely to lead to a prison sentence than a flourishing life as a Crow man. If, on the reservation, a Crow man tried to use 'Do the courageous thing' to derive useful action-guidance he would not have found himself with the wherewithal to know to know what to do in a useful way.

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Hursthouse's virtue-based account of right action is supported by Lear's study of the Crow: 'Do the courageous thing' provided useful action-guidance for a Crow warrior inasmuch as it promoted actions constitutive of a flourishing Crow life and the development of a characteristic necessary to become a virtuous Crow man. However, the fact that virtue concepts provided useful action-guidance for the nineteenth century Crow

does not mean that they can or do provide similarly useful action-guidance in contemporary, pluralistic Western society.

As a neo-Aristotelian, Hursthouse's position is that the *telos* of virtue is *eudaimonia*, human flourishing or well-being. This is how she completes Premise 3 in her account of right action. Yet even if we grant that virtue is a characteristic disposition to act in a way that encourages *eudaimonia*, we are only raising further questions: What is *eudaimonia*? What does it mean to flourish? What constitutes well-being? But we can bracket these questions for the moment, imagine that they have been dealt with, and that courage has in fact emerged as a virtue. Even now it seems we might still be unsure what action the virtue of courage was supposed to guide. No one today will understand courage as a virtue that guides us to plant a coup-stick. That specific content was added by the particularities of Crow culture and history. If we cannot find a neutral viewpoint, an Archimedean perch from which to judge competing cultural conceptions of virtue and flourishing, then the way is paved for moral cultural relativism.

Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy is sensitive to this difficulty (MacIntyre 2007). He argues that virtue ethics only makes sense within a particular framework of traditions. If the virtues are divorced from their corresponding traditions – traditions that in turn are sustained by practices that arise in and through culture and history – they lose their grounding and their rationale (Ibid., 222). In such a case, it is difficult to conceive how they could continue to provide useful action-guidance given that virtue is not supra-cultural; it does not occupy a neutral standpoint. Rather, it is always part of a particular culture in a particular place at a particular time (Ibid., 144, 174). MacIntyre sees the

perspectival nature of virtue ethics as an advantage rather than a weakness, an opinion shared by Bernard Williams. As Williams puts it:

Even if it were possible to give an account of the world that was minimally perspectival, it would not be particularly serviceable to us for many of our purposes, such as making sense of our intellectual or other activities, or indeed getting on with most of those activities. For those purposes – in particular, in seeking to understand ourselves – we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world (Williams 2006. 483-484).

Yet MacIntyre notes that the good functioning of virtue ethics requires the kind of cultural and ideological consensus and agreement that is only likely to be found in homogenous communities, or as Williams calls them, hypertraditional societies. Virtue ethics will not be able to provide usefully action-guiding ethical concepts where there is not a widespread consensus in the community about the meaning and *telos* specific virtues (MacIntyre 2007: 252). And even in a situation in which there is agreement as to the *telos* of virtue – *eudaimonia* rather than, say, the greater glory of God – there still must be widespread agreement on what constitutes a flourishing life and which characteristic dispositions are to be included in a catalog of virtues meant to help us achieve that life. If such a consensus does exist, it is unlikely that a virtue conception of ethics would have difficulty providing the concepts necessary for useful action-guidance.¹⁰ Flourishing and virtue were well-defined consensus concepts in the

¹⁰ This must cause us to question whether virtue ethics can be usefully action-guiding in a contemporary pluralistic society in which the virtues lack thick, uniform intelligibility. Unlike the Crow man, a contemporary American can use courage to justify joining the army *and* dodging the draft. This is not meant as an argument against pluralism, nor is it an attempt to engage in ethical nostalgia for simpler, more homogenous times. Still, virtue ethics must consider the extent to which it can operate in a pluralistic society in which individuals are encouraged to choose or even create their own valued projects, forms of life, and conceptions of flourishing. In such a world, the virtues of tolerance, authenticity, freedom, and sincerity start to seem like the only virtues that one can universally endorse inasmuch as they are concerned with the individual being true to his or her self, regardless of what self the

hypertraditional world of the nineteenth century Crow. Courage could not be used to justify throwing down one's weapon and offering the enemy a fraternal embrace because the Crow conditions and forms of life would not have allowed for such an action to be interpreted as a valued project. There may have been virtuous reasons for refusing to fight or for initiating a truce, but the Crow notion of courage would not have been one of them.¹¹

What MacIntyre's study of virtue suggests is that virtue ethics can operate as a usefully action-guiding normative ethical theory, but only within the culture and corresponding traditions in which the virtue concepts are grounded and from which they derive their meaning. The concern is that by pointing this out, MacIntyre is exposing virtue ethics to charges of moral cultural relativism.¹² His argument ties virtue so closely to culture that the former seems to be a part of the latter. If virtue is just another aspect of culture, and if relativism is to be applied to judgments about culture (styles of dress, cuisine, etc.) as I think it must, then it is difficult to see how judgments about moral virtue can avoid being relative as well.

Hursthouse herself acknowledges that the concept of virtue and the characteristics that count as the virtues are culturally and historically variable, and that without a non-cultural grounding, virtue ethics will remain "open to the threat of moral cultural relativism, or, even worse, moral skepticism" (Hursthouse 1999: 164). In a way, this

individual chooses to be true to or the conception of flourishing one adopts. For more on the modern priority of tolerance, sincerity, authenticity, and freedom see: Murdoch 1998.

¹¹ This is part of what Lear argues. The Crow concept of courage was a useless defender against the unending onslaught of white soldiers and settlers. On Lear's account, the virtue which saved them from annihilation was not warrior courage, but a kind of Kierkegaardian 'radical hope' that became thick and action-guiding by operating within Crow traditions, practices, and forms of life.

¹² For a discussion of this point see Wachbroit 1985: 1559-1565.

concern was presaged by Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy”. After making after making the case for the desirability of a virtue conception of ethics, Anscombe notes the following difficulty: “There is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human actions, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing’. *And it is the last concept that appears the most doubtful*” (Anscombe 1997: 34, italics mine). Hursthouse’s appeal to ethical naturalism is an attempt to fill this ‘gap’.

Ethical naturalism “hopes to validate beliefs about which character traits are virtues by appeal to human nature” (Hursthouse 1999: 198). The idea is that an understanding of human nature will lead to an understanding of human flourishing, and once we understand human flourishing we will be in a position to identify the characteristic dispositions that promote it. These characteristic dispositions will be the virtues, and they will have been derived in such a way that they are insulated against charges of moral cultural relativism.¹³

Hursthouse’s begins by clarifying what it means, naturalistically, to be a good human being. She follows Peter Geach in believing that ‘good’ is an attributive adjective just like ‘small’ (Ibid.,195. See also: Geach 1967). ‘Good’ does not suddenly start behaving in a new way when it is used to make ethical evaluations. Furthermore, ‘good’ must be interpreted in conjunction with a corresponding noun or noun phrase. For example, the kind of cat picked out by ‘good’ cat depends on the noun phrase that follows. This could be something like ‘a good cat for an elderly grandmother’ or ‘a good cat to help us catch mice in the barn’. In each case the kind of cat to which ‘good’ refers

¹³ The framework of Hursthouse’s ethical naturalism (as she acknowledges) was developed by Philippa Foot. See: Foot 2001.

will be different because what it means to be ‘good’ is different in each case. In the first case a good cat might mean one that is quiet and likes to be in the house, while in the second case a good cat might mean one that is energetic and enjoys the out-of-doors. The same is true for human animals. ‘A good person for my soccer team’ is not necessarily the same as ‘A good person to perform my heart surgery’. We can only evaluate something as ‘good’ if we know what it is supposed to be good for.

Hursthouse argues that a good human being, like a good tree or a good cat or any other living thing, is one that is characteristically well-fitted or well-endowed with respect to certain natural aspects. In the case of a tree, these aspects amount to its parts and operations: a good tree is one that is well-endowed with respect to parts like branches, roots, and leaves and operations like photosynthesis and drawing water from the soil. A good human being requires more. Hursthouse’s position is that human beings ought to be evaluated on the following five aspects:

- (1) Parts
- (2) Operations
- (3) Actions
- (4) Emotions and desires
- (5) Reasons

Thus to say that a given person is a good human being *qua* human being is to say that he or she is characteristically well-fitted or well-endowed with respect to these five aspects.

But how do we know if a human being is characteristically well-fitted or well-endowed with respect to these aspects? Hursthouse’s answer is that a human being is well-fitted or well-endowed depending how well the five aspects listed above serve the following four ends:

- (i) Individual survival.
- (ii) Continuance of the species.

- (iii) Characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment.
- (iv) Good functioning of the social group in the ways characteristic of the species.

These ends are taken to be the natural *telos* of the human animal, the constitutive elements of human flourishing: “To be a good human being is to be well endowed with respect to the aspects listed; to possess the human virtues is to be thus well endowed. The human virtues make their possessor good *qua* human being, one who is as ordinarily well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way” (Hursthouse 199: 208).

Hursthouse believes that her ethical naturalism provides a non-cultural, minimally perspectival, fact-based method with which to complete Premise 3 in her virtue-based account of right action. Right action is doing as the virtuous person would do, and the virtuous person is the person endowed with characteristic dispositions to act in ways that encourage and promote the achievement of humanity’s four natural ends.

To be sure, much of this is ethically irrelevant. Having healthy teeth and functioning kidneys is part of what counts as being well-fitted with respect to human parts and operations, and both contribute to at least one of the four ends: characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain. Neither, however, should be used to judge whether an individual is a *morally* good human being. Teeth and kidneys concern our parts and operations; ethical evaluations concern our actions, reasons, desires and emotions. Moral virtue is thus a matter of how well our actions, emotions and desires, and reasons promote the success of the four natural human ends.

3

The main problem with Hursthouse’s ethical naturalism is its reliance on the notion of ‘characteristic’ as it is applied to human beings. Naturalistic evaluations of plants and

animals all rely on the idea that there is a characteristic way of being that can be used to say what makes something a ‘good tree *qua* tree’ or a ‘good cat *qua* cat’. The idea of a ‘good human being’ is similarly reliant on the idea that human beings have a characteristic ways of being and doing. But the truly characteristic thing about human beings is that they have no characteristically natural way of going on in the way that plants and non-human animals do. Human beings are characteristic only in that they can decide what their characteristic ways of being and doing are. Some humans live alone, some live with blood relatives, and some live in communes. Some humans are celibate, some are monogamous, and some have as many sexual partners as possible. Moreover, it is not uncommon for contemporary human individuals to adopt several different ways of going on over the course of a lifetime so that their characteristic ways of being change from decade to decade. The only essentially characteristic way of going on that humans have is the characteristic ability to reflectively decide *how* to go on.

Part of what this means is that we can decide what flourishing means for us in a way that trees and cats cannot. Because we can choose what flourishing means for us or our group, flourishing itself is likely to mean different things to different people (e.g. Mormons as opposed fascists). In some cases the virtues of each group will overlap – most will probably agree that courage is a virtue, though the demands of courage, the action that it guides, will differ, sometimes radically and incommensurably, depending on the conception of *eudaimonia* adopted by the individual or the group. In certain cases, though, different groups will have very different virtues (piety for Mormons, absolute obedience to the state for fascists).

Hursthouse believes that an account of human nature that leads to a human *telos* can in turn lead to an illumination of the virtues. But the idea that human beings have an absolute *telos* with ethical significance is an idea that must be rejected. As Williams puts it: “The first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no such teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play, still has to find its way into ethical thought” (Williams 1995: 110).

It might be argued that two of Hursthouse’s natural ends – individual survival and continuance of the species – are likely to be present in every conception of flourishing irrespective of culture. Yet the idea that continuance of the species *qua* species is an aspect of individual flourishing lacks a compelling argument from the standpoint of virtue ethics, thus it is difficult to make the case that it has a proper place in virtue ethical considerations. Each of us possesses a conception of ‘me and mine’ that includes the people who form an essential part of our identity and well-being, and excludes those who do not. While care for and the continuance of ‘me and mine’, however broadly or narrowly conceived by an individual, seems to constitute as aspect of individual flourishing, few of us base our conception of ‘me and mine’ exclusively, or even primarily, on biology and genetics, and it is not obvious that we should. Utilitarians and deontologists *may* be able to justify the equal consideration of all human beings with appeals to overall utility, human dignity, and absolute duties, but the egoistic nature of Hursthouse’s virtue ethics means that she must explain why continuance the species beyond the extent needed to preserve ‘me and mine’ (however conceived) is, or ought to

be, an aspect of a flourishing life, or why ‘me and mine’ ought to include the human species *qua* species.¹⁴

Second – even if Hursthouse can explain why continuance of the species *qua* species ought to be an aspect of individual flourishing – individual survival and continuance of the species are the barest aspects of flourishing; as such, they give rise to the fewest difficulties for virtue ethics, and they do not help in the derivation of thick ethical concepts. We must live in order to flourish, but we do not flourish simply by living. The richness of human flourishing lies in the other two ends: enjoyment and freedom from pain, and good functioning of the social group. These two ends give rise to the majority of our ethical disagreements about virtue because, as the locus of our thick ethical concepts, they are the key to human flourishing. To get *them* right is to live well. And there is no naturalistic way for them to supply and objectify thick ethical concepts for a usefully action-guiding virtue ethics.

For a young Crow man, characteristic freedom from pain did not include the pain associated with spending several days alone in the wilderness without food as he waited for the Great Spirit to contact him in a dream. Yet a modern American community that urged its youth to undergo a similar ordeal would be vulnerable to charges of child abuse because the ordeal involves a genre of pain we believe young people should characteristically be free from. However, we have no moral reservations about letting

¹⁴ One might appeal to other-regarding virtues like benevolence and charity, but again this will only help if one can make the case that benevolent action towards members of a species *qua* species is constitutive of a flourishing life. It is telling that the people who usually become indignant and proactive towards human rights violations are the people who have visited the refugee camps, seen the mass-graves, and met the starving children, or at least watched a vivid documentary. In other words, the people suffering the human rights violations have become a part of an individual’s conception of ‘me and mine’ such that the well-being of these people has become an aspect of an individual’s flourishing.

our children endure the physical pain associated with sports like wrestling, football and rugby; for us, that pain is characteristic. The Crow would have thought that allowing children, especially female children, to endure grueling training and physical pain merely for the sake of sport (rather than as a culturally prescribed test of manhood, or a rite of passage, or as training for war) was to expose them to uncharacteristic pain.

Uncharacteristic Crow pain, yes – but not uncharacteristic contemporary Western pain.

I agree with Hursthouse that a flourishing life requires freedom from pain, enjoyment, and good functioning of the social group. What I deny is the possibility that these ends can be understood as characteristic of human beings without being rendered so abstract that the virtue concepts we adopt to achieve them are void of thickness and incapable of providing useful action-guidance. In “A False Doctrine of the Mean”, Hursthouse herself makes the point that virtuous activity, hence flourishing, is necessarily about the content and not just the form or degree of one’s actions (Hursthouse 1980-81: 57-72). To be courageous is to hit the mean between an excess called rashness and a deficiency called fear, but, as she points out, the doctrine of the mean is not just about too much or too little – it is also about too much or too little towards the right object. I could show perfect moderation with regards to food, never eating too much or too little. But if the moderate amount of food I eat is of the wrong kind I will not be acting virtuously. Think of a moderately appetitive man who eats a moderate amount of human baby at each meal, neither stuffing himself nor denying himself proper nourishment. Surely we want to say that there is no such thing too much or too little with regard to eating babies. Any amount is too much.

The article reminds us that virtuous activity is not just about hitting the mean between excess and deficiency. It is also about hitting the mean at the right time, in the right way, and in regards to the right object. The present paper has attempted to show that the right object, the right time, the right way, and the right amount have no thick determining factor outside of culture. The virtue of appetitive moderation does have some thin object standards for human beings: eat too much of *any* kind of food and you will become obese in a way that threatens your ability to flourish, if only by threateningly your ability to live; ingest even teaspoon of arsenic and you will be unable to flourish because you will be dead. But in and of itself appetitive moderation is neither thick nor usefully action-guiding. It does not provide practically useful action-guidance to any real person trying to flourish in a substantial and perspectival way (and is there any other way to flourish?). It is a skeletal concept that must be thickened and made usefully action-guiding by culture.¹⁵

Conclusion

I have argued that while Hursthouse's appeal to ethical naturalism may defend virtue ethics against charges of moral cultural relativism, it does so by undermining the ability of virtue ethics to provide useful action-guidance by making it impossible for the virtues to operate as thick ethical concepts. As MacIntyre points out, virtue ethics can only help me "...answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (MacIntyre 2007: 201). These stories are the products of culture rather than facts of human nature, and the world-guided substance

¹⁵ To give an example: for the traditional Polynesian cultures that value heavy, rounded, fleshy body types, the instruction 'eat moderately' is going to guide a very different kind of eating than it would for contemporary Western cultures that value being slim, muscular, and having a low body mass index.

and content makes that thick ethical concepts valuable must necessarily be derived from a particular culture existing at a particular time and place in history.

If it is the case that virtue ethics cannot provide useful action-guidance without falling prey to moral cultural relativism perhaps we should say so much the worse for virtue ethics and turn our attention to other types of ethical theory. Alternatively, one could seek to show that moral cultural relativism is not as worrisome as most moral philosophers have believed; or one could argue for an understanding of useful virtue-based action-guidance that would not require the presence of culturally grounded thick ethical concepts; or one could agree with Michael Slote that virtue ethics doesn't need to be action-guiding (Slote 2001). These options deserve consideration, though it is not my intent, however, to recommend abandoning the hope of establishing virtue ethics as a viable, action-guiding normative theory. Rather, I have tried to draw attention to a particular problem concerning virtue ethics, action-guidance and relativism and to argue that the best available attempt to deal with the problem does not succeed. Christine Swanton rightly notes that "virtue ethics in its modern guise is still in its infancy" (Swanton 2001: 32). We should therefore reserve judgment as to whether this problem will prove unresolvable.

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