Love isn’t all you need

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ON VIRTUE ETHICS
TLS 223. 0 19823818 5

Virtue ethics is a type of ethical theory in which the notion of virtue or good character plays a central role. This splendid new book by two major contributors to the programme for the development of a particular (“Aristotelian”) form of virtue ethics. It is intended to be used as a textbook, but should be read by anyone interested in moral philosophy. Hursthouse has been a major contributor to the development of virtue ethics, and the programme she describes, while making use of the many contributions of others, is very much her own. Its basic ideas are simple:

The book has three parts. The first dispels common misunderstandings and explains how virtue ethics applies to complex moral issues. The second discusses moral motivation, especially the motivation involved in doing something because it is right. The third explains how questions about the objectivity of ethics are to be approached within the virtue ethics framework. Although Hursthouse’s virtue ethics takes as central the conception of a human being who possesses all ethical virtues of character and no vicious or defects of character (“human being”, rather than “human nature” or “perspective”, because the relevant character traits are “natural” to the species). To a first approximation, virtue ethics says that a right action is an action which a virtuous person would do if he is given a situation in which he could choose which he should do. I agree that this view is true, provided he were in a situation where this agent was completely virtuous and free from any intrinsic motivations. It is possible to be faced with a dilemma through having acted wrongly. Hursthouse discusses Peter Geach’s example, where a man, promising marriage, gets two women pregnant. Given that there is no way to satisfy all his promises, what is the right thing for him to do? We need to distinguish two senses in which a course of action might be right – an action-guiding sense and an action-assessment sense. Something will be wrong with whatever the promiser does, so there is no way for him to do what is all right, or right in the action-assessment sense. But this may be a best or right choice for him to make in the circumstances, a choice that would be right in the action-guiding sense.

What is right in the action-guiding sense cannot always be identified as the choice that a perfectly virtuous person would make in the circumstances, because sometimes a completely virtuous human being could never be in the relevant circumstances. Hursthouse believes that virtue ethics is still applicable in such a case, because she thinks that virtue ethics provides rules that can apply to the case. However, although I see how virtue ethics can provide rules, it remains unclear to me how the rules provide good reasons in this particular situation. She says that every virtue of character yields a positive rule of action and every vice or defect of character yields a negative rule; so, virtue ethics allows for such rules as that one ought to be honest and not cheat, which ought to keep to one’s promises, one ought to be kind to others and one should not act meekly, lie, or break promises. Where these simple rules conflict, Hursthouse proposes a simple rule: do the right thing. But this does not always apply to avoid a trivialization of principle, but I do not see how.

Motivation. What is involved in doing something because it is right? Hursthouse answers that it is to act in the way a fully virtuous human being acts for the reasons that the fully virtuous human being acts on. She shows in marvellous detail that this answer agrees with common sense in a variety of cases. Her answer is consistent with the common sense theoretically. A fully virtuous agent characteristically acts in a certain way precisely because the agent’s character leads the agent to act in that way. But for the act to be right just is for the agent’s character to act in the way it does. So, it follows from virtue ethics that the fully virtuous agent does act because it is right. It is not that fully virtuous agents do what they do because they think it is right. They may simply think “She needs my help”. Doing something directly because it is the right thing to do is not something virtuous agents do, but doing something because it is the right thing to do: if others do a similar act explicitly motivated by the thought that this is what virtuous agents would do, they do what they do because they think the act is right and do not do the act directly because it is right in the way that virtuous agents do.

Hursthouse says that moral motivation of this sort is a matter of degree. Children with little or no experience of situations in which they have full moral character and capable of full moral motivation. Someone may be partly virtuous and partly not, in some ways virtuous and in some ways not. To the extent that an agent’s act results from a character that is relatively similar to that of a fully virtuous human being, we can allow that the agent does something because it is right. Fins may move in more or less virtuous character and so hide Jim from Jim’s slave owner because it is right to hide Jim, even though Hack thinks that it is wrong. On the other hand, Hursthouse says that virtuous agent is one who acts in a particular occasion does not do it because it is right, given the great distance between the Nazi’s character and the character of a virtuous human being.

Objectivity. The third, most difficult and richest part of the book discusses whether virtue ethics has resources to determine objectively what the human virtues are. Doubts arise about this, in part because different human beings in different cultures belonging to different traditions disagree about the virtues and about the relative importance of those virtues they agree about. For example, there are differences between Europeans and East Asians concerning the relative importance of prudential virtues of individual development as compared with social virtues of community. There are also disagreements about the virtues within a given society.

Can we reasonably suppose that these disagreements about objective matters of fact? Many believe not. Some think it is a matter of local convention what the right virtues are. Others think that one can choose what virtues to aspire to, where different human beings can be expected to have different virtues. But Hursthouse thinks that it may be possible to find an objective basis for a single set of human virtues of character within a generally Aristotelian approach.

In this approach, judgments of good and defective character are to be assessed in terms of the biological, social and rational nature of human beings. She begins her discussion of this approach with a comparison – judgments one might make about plants and animals. One might judge that a certain tree has good roots, that a particular tiger has a defective heart, that another tiger is a fine specimen, or that there is nothing wrong with a wolf that does not participate in the hunt with the other wolves. Hursthouse says such judgments are objective, in that they are the sorts of judgments biologists might make. The course of describing various plants and animals.

That is her first criterion. According to her second, the relevant features of plants and lower animals are to be assessed in relation to the continued existence of individual plants or animals and to the preservation of the relevant species. For animals capable of feeling enjoyment and pain, features can also be assessed in relation to their tendency to make lives better in that respect. Finally, in the case of social animals, features can be assessed in relation to their potential contribution to the functioning of the group.

The big question is whether such evaluation can be extended to human beings, who have a unique set of character traits that are in some sense “natural” to human beings that function well according to the same four criteria? Suppose that there is a unique set of character traits which are characteristic to human beings and such that, if everyone has them, it is generally true that an individual’s having them promises to contribute to that individual’s preservation, the preservation of the group, and the continued existence of the group, which the individual belongs to, and the flourishing of that individual and others. Then that set of character traits is the set of human virtues, according to this approach.

One way for this to fail would be that a satisfactory outcome for people would require some human beings to have one set of character traits and different individuals to have different sets. Nietzsche’s master and slave moralities (and somewhat as there are worker bees and queen bees). While Hursthouse thinks that this is a view that needs to be taken seriously within virtue ethics also thinks that we have not yet been given sufficient reason to give up on the existence of a single set of human virtues.

Another way in which the favoured approach can fail is to turn out that what distribution of character traits will promote the flourishing of all human beings. Hursthouse argues that we do not have to conclude that human beings are in this sense just a “masses”, because we will look in detail at why so many human beings are leading, and have led, such dreadful lives, we see that occasionally this is really bad, but characteristically, it is because of errors, and/or their fellow and adjacent human beings, are defective in their possession and exercise of the virtues on the standard list.

She adds in a footnote: I suppose that one of the reasons we find it so hard to come to terms with the Holocaust is that pre-Nazi German society looks so like our own at the same period, and we are forced to the conclusion that the Nazis could not possibly have done it except that because of lack of virtue in its members, we must have been similarly lacking and might have gone the same way.

On the other hand, it seems to me that thinking in this way is to turn out that abstract principles of character traits will promote the flourishing of all human beings. Hursthouse argues that we do not have to conclude that human beings are in this sense just a “masses”, because we will look in detail at why so many human beings are leading, and have led, such dreadful lives, we see that occasionally this is really bad, but characteristically, it is because of errors, and/or their fellow and adjacent human beings, are defective in their possession and exercise of the virtues on the standard list.

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