0. Introduction.

- Hursthouse's aim in this essay is to defend “virtue ethics” against the following objection (phrased as an argument):

  1. Virtue ethics cannot tell us what we should do.
     Therefore,
  2. Virtue ethics does not tell us what we should do (from 1).
  3. A normative ethical theory tells us what we should do.
     Therefore,
  4. Virtue ethics is not a normative ethical theory (from 2 and 3).
     Therefore,
  5. Virtue ethics is not a rival to normative ethical theories such as deontology (e.g., Kantianism) and utilitarianism (from 4).

Hursthouse accepts the validity of all three inferences\(^1\) and accepts proposition 3. Since she rejects proposition 5, she must reject proposition 1. That is, she must hold that virtue ethics can tell us what we should do. Diagram and discuss the argument.

- Deontology (e.g., Kantianism) = duty-based. (*Deon* is Greek for “that which is binding, duty.”) The English word “deontology” (first used in 1826, by Jeremy Bentham) means “the science of duty.” *OED.*
  
- Teleology (e.g., utilitarianism) = end-based. (*Telos* is Greek for “end.”) The English word “teleology” (first used in 1740) means “the doctrine or study of ends or final causes.” *OED.*

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\(^1\) In other words, she agrees that proposition 2 follows logically from proposition 1; that proposition 4 follows logically from propositions 2 and 3; and that proposition 5 follows logically from proposition 4. To say that Y follows logically from X is to say that it is logically impossible for X to be true while Y is false.
The standard view of virtue ethics is that it is, at most, a supplement to normative ethical theory. Here are the (supposed) differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue Ethics</th>
<th>Normative Ethical Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent-centered</td>
<td>Act-centered</td>
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<tr>
<td>What sort of person should I be?</td>
<td>What should I do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good (and bad) character</td>
<td>Right (and wrong) action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being</td>
<td>Doing</td>
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According to the standard view, deontologists and utilitarians should supplement their normative theories with accounts of virtues (such as friendship, honesty, and loyalty) and vices. For a Kantian, the question is which traits of character conduce to the doing of one’s duty (as set out by the Categorical Imperative). For a utilitarian, the question is which traits of character conduct to the maximization of utility (as set out by the Principle of Utility).

On the standard view, virtue ethics is being revived (brought back to life) in order to give “a full account of our moral life” (645). Virtue ethics goes back at least to Aristotle (384-322 BCE). The Greek word ethos (from which we get “ethics”) means character, as in trait of character. Nations, as well as persons, can have characters.2

1. Right Action.

The It-Is-Merely Fallacy (my term, borrowed from Antony Flew):

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2 Abstract of Reino Virtanen, “French National Character in the Twentieth Century”: “Despite a long history as a political entity, France cannot be said to have developed a distinctive national character much before the seventeenth century—a peasant, artisan, bourgeois type of character, sociable but not hospitable, preferring a settled existence, and inclined to fall into routine. But this is only one pole of French character. There is the opposite pole of the aristocracy, with its penchant for glory. Memories of grandeur can still be revived, although modern conditions make a return to days of grandeur impossible. Salvador de Madariaga wrote one of the most suggestive analyses of French character, showing how the French tendencies toward rationalism, abstraction, and codification have been manifest in all fields of social life. These tendencies have been seen in the ‘stalemate society’ of the first part of the present century. There are many signs that the national character is undergoing basic modifications. The old emphasis on status is gradually changing. Even the traditional rationalism is becoming more flexible.” See also Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (1835, 1840).
1. Virtue ethics is concerned with good (and bad) character. Therefore,
2. Virtue ethics is concerned merely with good (and bad) character.

Compare:

1. Utilitarianism is concerned with good (and bad) states of affairs (true).
   Therefore,
2. Utilitarianism is concerned merely with good (and bad) states of affairs (false).

- Difficulty of fitting virtue ethics into the slogans “The good is prior to the right” (teleology) or “The right is prior to the good” (deontology).
- Virtue Theory (VT): “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” (646).
- Objection: “It provides no guidance whatsoever. Who are the virtuous agents?” (647). Hursthouse says the same objection can be made about act-utilitarianism and deontology (from page 646). “Utilitarianism must specify what are to count as the best consequences, and deontology what is to count as a correct moral rule, producing a second premiss, before any guidance is given” (647). All three theories are “in the same position” (647). This is known as an argumentum ad hominem (argument to the person); “my theory is no worse than yours.”
- Specification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account or specification of right action</th>
<th>Act-Utilitarianism</th>
<th>Deontology</th>
<th>Virtue Ethics</th>
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<tr>
<td>An action is right iff it promotes the best consequences.</td>
<td>An action is right iff it is in accordance with a correct moral rule or principle.</td>
<td>An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.</td>
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<td>Second premise</td>
<td>The best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized.</td>
<td>A correct moral rule or principle is one that . . .</td>
<td>A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues. A virtue is a character trait that . . .</td>
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<td>Completion of second premise</td>
<td>(i) is on the following list (and then a list does follow); (ii) is laid on us by God; (iii) is universalizable; or (iv) would be the object of choice of all rational beings.</td>
<td>(i) is on the following list (and then a list does follow); (ii) is useful or agreeable to its possessor or to others (the Humean approach); or (iii) is a character trait that a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well (the Aristotelian approach).</td>
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- Another objection: Deontology yields “a set of clear prescriptions which are readily applicable” (647), such as “Do not lie” and “Do help others.” Utilitarianism yields “a single prescription, ‘Do what maximizes happiness.’” Virtue ethics merely tells us to do what a virtuous agent would do, but what if I am not virtuous? I won’t know what to do! Reply: “[I]f I acknowledge that I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one, should this be possible” (647). We already do this! We seek out
those who are kinder, more honest, more just, and wiser than we are.

- Enumerated virtues. “[E]x hypothesi, a virtuous agent is one who is honest, charitable, just, etc. So what she characteristically does is act honestly, charitably, justly, etc., and not dishonestly, uncharitably, unjustly. So given an enumeration of the virtues, I may well have a perfectly good idea of what the virtuous person would do in my circumstances despite my own imperfection” (648).