

12-1-2001

## Review of *On Virtue Ethics* by Rosalind Hursthouse

Margaret Urban Walker

Marquette University, [margaret.walker@marquette.edu](mailto:margaret.walker@marquette.edu)

---

Accepted version. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 41 , No. 4 (December 2001): 493-494.

DOI. © 2001 Philosophy Documentation Center. Used with permission.

Margaret Urban Walker was affiliated with Fordham University at the time of publication.

# Book Review of *On Virtue Ethics*, by Rosalind Hursthouse

Margaret Urban Walker  
*Fordham University*

*On Virtue Ethics*. By Rosalind Hursthouse. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 283. \$35.00.

This very engaging book is a steadily reasoned and pointed exploration of the logical structure and conceptual resources of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. The investigation falls into three parts: whether and how virtue ethics can "guide action"; whether and how virtue ethics can give an account of "moral motivation" and the role of emotions; and whether, how, and to what extent the characteristically rational nature of human beings as a kind can provide objective justification for a conception of certain character traits as virtues. Each chapter poses, explores, and answers a particular question and so has a satisfying kind of completeness.

Chapter 1 deftly defends the claim that virtue ethics provides action guidance, for each virtue generates a prescription and each vice a prohibition, and there are independent reasons not to expect more in the way of "codifiability" in ethics. Chapters 2 and 3 together offer a nuanced exploration of how virtue ethics guides or assesses action in hard cases or "dilemmas," resolvable or irresolvable. Tragic dilemmas, a distinct case, are not irresolvable even if they are resolvable only in

ways that mar nonetheless virtuous lives. Chapter 4 exposes a false contrast between Aristotle and Kant on the moral worth of acting from reason or inclination. The important difference between these philosophers is instead that Aristotle's moral psychology integrates emotions with our rational nature, as chapter 5 explains and illustrates with the apt case of racism. Chapters 6 and 7 offer an account of moral motivation, not as acting from a special kind of reason, but as acting on ranges of reasons characteristic of diverse virtues insofar as our dispositions to do so are fixed and permanent states. Yet virtue, Hursthouse claims, can be possessed to greater or lesser degrees. The "limited unity" of virtue means that the practical wisdom each virtue requires "cannot occur in discrete packs," even while it is not all or nothing.

I found the "unity" view strained and seemingly at odds with repeated references to the fact of "patchiness" in individuals' characters. The claim that virtues and the practical wisdom which each involves may be possessed in different degrees is consistent with (at least limited) unity and coheres nicely with a developmental view of moral education. But references to agents who are "exemplary with respect to some virtues but not all" and to those who are "pretty" virtuous but whose exercise of virtue is "patchy" (149) are not obviously so consistent, and when one comes to the claim that "being particularly well endowed with respect to some virtues inevitably involves being not very well endowed in others" (213) or that "the exercise of at least one virtue figures much more largely and even at the expense of the exercise of others" (216), the supposed unity seems more than "limited." Hursthouse denies that practical wisdom comes in discrete packages, but she does not show that it is not context or task sensitive, even specific; similarly, that reasons for acting characteristic of a particular virtue really "crop" up across the ranges for other virtues (154) to the point where they are "not independent" (155) is stipulated but begs examination, Hursthouse concedes that people are not of a piece, but contemporary social psychology seems to suggest that character and practical wisdom might be more loosely configured or disparately responsive than this aspect of her view requires.

The final four chapters argue that a neo-Aristotelian naturalism can provide arguably objective, though not ethically neutral, grounds for holding certain traits to be virtues. Following Philippa Foot's lead that a thing's kind determines the criteria of goodness of such a thing, Hursthouse extends the "structure" of naturalistic evaluation to the ethical evaluation of *rational* social animals, *i.e.*, human beings. Subject to some very important qualifications, we are "good human beings" when the traits of character that dispose our actions, emotions, and desires serve well our individual survival, the continuance of our species, freedom from pain and enjoyment characteristic of our kind, and the good functioning of our social group, all in the way characteristic of the kind we are. Our characteristic human "way" of living, however, is not one concrete way, given as it is for the other animals, but is already *normative*: it is "any way we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do" (221). Justification of reasons always proceeds from within a formed ethical outlook, significantly (but never completely) constrained by the ends our natural being sets, and is progressively self-correcting in a piecemeal, rather than wholesale, way (a "Neurathian procedure," 165, 193).

Hursthouse seems to assume a kind of normative functional unity of "the group"-a kind of natural teleology that adjusts the flourishing of individuals and groups to each other-so that groups function well which enable individuals to flourish (201-02). The final chapter, however, confronts the issue of "harmony" within and among us squarely (251). For Hursthouse, to reject the view that "human nature is harmonious, that we can flourish or achieve *eudaimonia*, that we can do it in the same way as each other, that we can do so together, and not at each other's expense" (264) is "moral nihilism." She sets up as her foil some remarks of Bernard Williams to the effect that Darwinism (that *other* naturalism) suggests that there is no teleology at all and that we are to some degree "a mess." I find this dilemma false: the alternative to teleology is not necessarily "a mess"; "ethical evaluation" itself does not collapse with the rejection of natural teleology, leaving practical reason with nothing "substantial or long-term to do" (262). The practical tasks facing our necessarily social rationality and our deeply social emotional nature are certainly daunting, and our capacities modest. Our individual and shared lives

may be scenes of inescapable negotiation, costly trade-offs, and unpredictable conflict. It does not follow that there are not better and worse ways to live together, as we must; nor does this preclude there being differences between reasons that can rightly be seen in common *among* us as reasons and others that cannot. In an interesting finale, Hursthouse has a belief in harmony as a kind of practical postulate and as an expression of the virtue of hope.

This book is exemplary for its lucid organization, clarity of style, straightforward argumentation, and consistently temperate and constructive tone. In the introduction Hursthouse expresses the hope that the book will be used as a text, "helping to familiarize up-and-coming students with virtue ethics' distinctive approach to a variety of problems and issues in moral philosophy" (17). The book she has written can serve that purpose nicely, but it is a substantial contribution to contemporary discussion not only of virtue ethics but also of ethical theory. It ranges over issues of moral psychology, moral education, the limits of codifying moral judgment, the nature of justification and objectivity, and the meaning of (one kind of) naturalism. It repeatedly sounds the Aristotelian theme "that we were all once children" (14) to good effect. As obvious as it sounds, this home truth is not often mentioned or honored in moral philosophy, but Hursthouse puts it to work at several points in her arguments concerning moral learning, emotions, motivations, and judgment. Hursthouse writes so clearly that this book can be read with great pleasure and deceptive ease; it is in fact densely argued, and its points are often challenging. Anyone interested in fundamental issues of moral philosophy will find this book a stimulating study; for understanding virtue ethics, it is essential.