Some Problems with Virtue Theory[1]

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1. Introduction

Virtue ethics (VE for short) is currently so widely embraced that different versions of the theory can now be distinguished. Some of these are mapped out in Statman's useful introduction to his collection.[2] There are enough of these versions to constitute a family, and consequently what they share is a family resemblance rather than agreement to a defining set of necessary and sufficient conditions. What I propose to do, therefore, is to criticise one of the main versions of VE. Rosalind Hursthouse is the main proponent of the version which I will criticise. I choose her as a spokesperson, not because her version of VE is especially weak. On the contrary, it is because she is one of the leading protagonists of VE, and because her writings provide a lucid, powerful and elegant exposition of VE that her version of the theory is an appropriate object of scrutiny.

I will start by providing a brief overview of how VE is presented by Hursthouse, showing in passing how her account is entirely mainstream within VE. I will then suggest that the account is open to two interpretations, which I will label the constitutive and the instrumental. Hursthouse's formulation of her position in a number of places invites a constitutive reading, and I shall argue that so construed, virtue theory is implausible. But other passages both in her writings and in those of other virtue theorists, suggest that an instrumental reading is intended. I will argue that in the sense in which (perhaps) Hursthouse intends it, this too is untenable, but that there is (to paraphrase Marx) a defensible instrumental kernel within an indefensible virtuous shell.

[1] I should like to thank my colleague, Dr. Catherine Osborne, for some helpful discussions.

[2] Daniel Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

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2. VE outlined

VE starts with the assumption that in some sense (which I shall argue is not a clear one), we all want the same thing. Exactly what it is that we all want, or how it is to be described, is less clear, but roughly the thought is that all of us want to flourish, or to do well, or to live well, or to achieve (true) happiness, or to be *eudaimon:*

> One of the truths that determines the concept of *eudaimonia* is that it is something everyone wants, the way everyone wants to be. Someone who said that she did not want to be *eudaimon* would be incomprehensible.[3]

> We all want to flourish be happy/be successful; the very idea that someone interested in life should not want to 'make a go of it' in this way is deeply puzzling.[4]

The claim that we all want eudaimonia is emphasised in *Beginning Lives*, and although it is not given the same prominence elsewhere[5], it is not explicitly rejected, and I therefore assume that it is still in integral part of the theory. Further, it is a part which has an important role to play. If it were dropped, the consequence would be that VE gives no reason to think that everyone has a reason to want what conduces to their own flourishing, and hence no reason to accept that everyone has a reason to be virtuous. Hursthouse thinks that it is an important achievement of VE to show that everyone does have a reason to be moral. It is, she believes, a distinctive contribution by VE to the debate about whether morality is 'objective'.

VE, then, tries to answer the question, not 'What ought I (morally) to do?' nor even 'What ought I morally to *be*?', but rather a means-end sounding question 'Given that I want to flourish, what sort of person do I need to be in order to flourish, that is, in order to achieve what I want?'. So the assumption is that I have a certain goal, or end, or aim, that I want to achieve (namely, my own flourishing), and the question is about the most effective way of achieving that end.

[3] Rosalind Hursthouse, *Beginning Lives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 225.

[4] *Ibid*. 225.

[5] E.g. in Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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The answer given by VE to this central question 'How can I flourish?' is that I need to become a person with certain character traits.

> We can only flourish/be happy/successful by developing those character traits that are called the virtues ... This has to be argued for each character trait that is said to be a virtue.[6]
>
> A virtue is a character trait that human beings, given their physical and psychological nature need to flourish or to do well and fare well.[7]
>
> A virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well.[8]
>
> A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well. This premise forges a conceptual link between *virtue* and *flourishing* (or *living well* or eudaimonia. [9]

We should not think of these character traits simply as dispositions to action—they inform a wide variety of aspects of a person's life. In particular we can distinguish the following strands:

(a) There will be certain habits of action (not merely certain actions). It is not just that my actions will display certain features, such as being truthful, generous, etc. Rather, they will often be unreflectingly truthful, generous, etc. These ways of behaving will become second nature to me, so that often I do not even have to pause and think whether to do the truthful, generous thing—I will just do it automatically. And other modes of behaviour will become psychologically impossible for me. It won't even cross my mind to adopt them; and if someone else suggests them, I will know immediately that such a suggestion deserves no serious consideration.

(b) My actions will spring from certain kinds of motives and reasons. It is not just that I will be (say) regularly and

[6] *Beginning Lives*, 226.

[7] Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Applying Virtue Ethics', Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995), 57–75.

[8] *On Virtue Ethics*,169.

[9] 'Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion' in Philosophy and Public Affairs 20, 1991, 223–246, reprinted in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 219. Reprinted in Daniel Statman (ed), '*Virtue Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 227–244.

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unreflectingly truthful—I will be telling the truth because it is the truth—not because it will benefit me, or win me friends and admirers, nor even because it is my duty, but simply because it is the truth. Similarly, I will help the needy not to make myself feel good, or to gain approbation, nor even because it is my duty, but simply because they are needy, because they need help.

(c) I will be the sort of person who feels in a certain way—feeling emotions and emotional reactions like revulsion, admiration, etc. So, to elaborate on an example from Hursthouse, I won't just abstain from torture or cruelty to animals myself, and won't just try to persuade others to refrain—I will feel revulsion, abhorrence, detestation, for these practices.

So far, so good. I hope that what I have said thus far is an accurate and neutral account of what this version of VE is claiming. But I now want to argue that there are two ways of interpreting the seemingly bland version of VE which I have just given, the constitutive and the instrumental. The dominant and, as it were, official line that Hursthouse and other virtue theorists defend is the constitutive one. But under pressure, and to avoid great implausibilities, she moves (perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly) to the instrumental. My argument will be that although the instrumental reading can seem a crass misreading of VE and although it does give up much of what Hursthouse and other virtue theorists have wanted, it is only here that we can find a defensible element in virtue theory.

3. The constitutive reading

According to the constitutive reading, the claim that possession of the virtues is necessary for flourishing means not that such possession is a means to flourishing, but rather that it *is* such flourishing. To possess the virtues precisely is to flourish. Thus we find Statman, for example, saying that within VE:

> Virtues are viewed as necessary conditions for, or as constitutive elements of, human flourishing and well-being.[10]

[10] *Virtue Ethics*, 8, italics added.

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In spite of the instrumental-sounding language in some of her texts, Hursthouse too generally embraces this constitutive interpretation, for example in *On Virtue Ethics*. After imagining someone saying something with which she herself is evidently in full sympathy, she says that such

> a collection of remarks ... could come only from someone with a certain ethical outlook, one according to which the exercise of honesty ...is partially constitutive of what the speaker thinks of as flourishing or living well.[11]

But now the first problem emerges. VE tries to tie together three notions: what people want, flourishing, and the virtues. Those three concepts need two connections to tie them into a bundle of necessarily linked concepts; one connection to tie two of them together, and a second to tie the third to the first two. Even if one of those connections can be regarded as a truism, both of them cannot be so regarded. In other words, we might regard it as a truism that what people want is to flourish, in which case we need a substantive argument for thinking that flourishing is (is constituted by) possession of the virtues. Alternatively, we might agree (albeit rather less plausibly) that the link between flourishing and the virtues is a truism—but then we need some substantive argument for thinking that everyone wants to flourish. What we cannot do is to regard both of these connections as mere truisms, neither of which need any supporting argument.

In places, it looks as if Hursthouse is pursuing the second option. That is to say, it looks as if she regards the link between the virtues and flourishing as a truism, and hence needs to argue for a link between what people want and flourishing. Thus in she says:

> A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well. This premise forges *a conceptual link* between *virtue* and *flourishing* (or *living well* or *eudaimonia*).[12]

And in *On Virtue Ethics*, we find her saying that the claim that the non-virtuous cannot enjoy *eudaimon* is not 'a merely empirical remark'. Rather:

[11] *On Virtue Ethics*, 169, italics added.

[12] 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', op.cit. 219. first italics added, the rest in the original.

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> We are, in part, saying, 'That's not the sort of life *I* count as *eudaimon*, because it does not involve the exercise of the virtues'.[13]

More often, however, it seems that Hursthouse is pursuing the first option. In other words, she seems to think that it is the connection between wanting and flourishing which is truistic, and the connection between flourishing and virtues as needing argument. Thus we have the remarks quoted earlier that:

> We all want to flourish/be happy/be successful; the very idea that someone interested in life should not want to 'make a go of it' in this way is deeply puzzling.[14]

And she then recognises the need for argument to link the virtues with flourishing. After saying 'We can only flourish/be happy/successful by developing those character traits that are called the virtues', she at once adds:

> ... This has to be argued for each character trait that is said to be a virtue. [15]

This argument is what Hursthouse then begins to supply on pages 226–228 of *Beginning Lives* where she tries to show that given certain facts about the human situation, generosity must be one strand in a flourishing life, and courage must be too.

A critic of VE can concede that there clearly are some cases in which the virtues, as we ordinarily understand them, do contribute to our flourishing as we ordinarily understand that term. The difficulty facing the claim that the possession of the virtues constitutes flourishing is that there are also cases in which, by any normal criteria, my possession of the virtues is incompatible with my flourishing. Here are two examples to illustrate the problems. Suppose first that, inheriting a large sum of money, I use it to adopt a mode of life which suits my tastes and temperament very well. I then discover that something vitiates the inheritance procedure, e.g. I discover a later will which would deprive me of my fortune. Suppose I am the only person who knows of the irregularity, and that I can reliably predict that it is extremely unlikely that anyone else will come to know what I have discovered. Honesty requires that I should reveal that my fortune does not

[13] *On Virtue Ethics*, 179.
[14] *Beginning Lives*, 225.
[15] Op.cit., 226.

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properly belong to me; but at least on the face of it, depriving myself of a lifestyle which suits me so admirably cannot be constitutive of my flourishing.

Here is a second example. Terrorists are in search of a friend of mine, an outspoken critic of their activities, whom they intend to kill. They capture me in error, but they know that I know where my friend is in hiding. They threaten very credibly to torture and kill me if I do not betray my friend. Loyalty and courage require me to resist totally the threats of the terrorists, even at the cost of incurring a certain and grisly death for myself. But again, it is not easy to see how a course of action which leads directly to my death (to a protracted, painful, and terrifying death) can constitute my flourishing.[16]

What is the VE theorist to say in response to such cases? In *Beginning Lives*, Hursthouse considers the challenge that the virtuous can suffer, and suffer because of their virtue. She discusses three lines of reply to this challenge, a preliminary one which in effect she agrees will not work, and two others which she takes seriously. According to the preliminary reply, the combination of virtue and suffering will occur less often that we might think. This is because 'Built into each concept of a virtue is the idea of getting things right' (ibid.). So, generosity requires you to give (to give generously, in fact). But it does not require you to allow yourself to be ripped off, or to be a sucker.

This is an unpromising line of reply. It is true that 'getting things right', where that is meant to describe an acceptable middle way between two extremes, may enable us to steer between, for example, being mean and being a sucker. But there is no comparable middle ground when it comes to betraying my friend or losing my life. I cannot half-betray him, or sacrifice only half my life to save him. Equally in the inheritance example, honesty does not require me merely to half-reveal that I am not the rightful owner of the inheritance, or to give up some of the inheritance. Honesty requires me to reveal totally the whole truth about the inheritance, and to be fully prepared to surrender the whole of the fortune which I have wrongly inherited.

Hursthouse, I think, would accept this criticism of the first reply, since she does allow that there are possible cases in which it can be

[16] The American comedian, Richard Pryor, recalling the tough area in which he grew up, remarked crisply 'If you were sensitive in my neighbourhood, you were food'. How could turning myself into 'food' in an environment of predators constitute my flourishing?

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foreseen that one's virtue does lead directly to one's downfall where 'downfalling' cannot count as form of flourishing. My courage, she says, may lead me to go to the defence of someone being attacked in the street but to no avail and with the result that I am killed or maimed for life, while the coward goes through her life unscathed.[17] So the VE theorist needs something better than this first reply.

Hursthouse puts forward two further lines of reply. Since they appear to be incompatible, it is unsatisfactory for a VE theorist to appeal to them both. But since I will argue that both of them fail, we need not decide which presents the better (the less bad) line of defence for VE.

The first line of reply (to the objection that the virtuous can suffer because they are virtuous) is simply to deny that the objection is true. Contrary to appearances, the honest person never suffers as a result of her honesty; the brave person never suffers because of his bravery; and this is so, even if the honesty or bravery has cost the person her life. This is what Hursthouse says:

> To be virtuous *is* to flourish, to be (truly) happy or successful; nothing counts as being harmed except doing evil, and nothing counts as genuine advantage, or being better off, than doing what is right.[18]

and of such a view, she says that although the view seems 'absurd', in fact 'there is more than a grain of truth in this view'. In entertaining this line, she has been followed by other VE theorists. McDowell, for example, has claimed that 'no sacrifice necessitated by the life of excellence ... can count as a genuine loss'.[19] But this view not only seems absurd, it really is absurd, and it is absurd within the terms of VE itself.

There are three aspects to this absurdity. First, if my own impoverishment, followed by a painful and grisly death is to count as my flourishing, we have lost all grip on what flourishing is meant to be. We need to have the VE theorist spell out for us explicitly what *flourishing* or *living well* means, if painful and grisly deaths count as a form of flourishing. Secondly, recall that flourishing is meant to be by definition something that all of us want. If flourishing is equated with e.g. straightforward happiness of a kind

[17] Op.cit., 29.

[18] *Beginnng Lives*, 229.

[19] John McDowell, 'The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics', A.O.Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 359–376. Quoted in *On Virtue Ethics*, 182).

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equally accessible to the saint and the sinner, there is at least some plausibility in the idea that everyone wants to flourish. But if flourishing is meant to cover impoverishment and death, there is no plausibility in the idea that we all want to flourish. At best, we might concede that we all want some forms of flourishing, while very much wanting to avoid other forms of flourishing. Thirdly, if we say with this view that 'nothing counts as being harmed except doing evil', we have lost the resources to say what wrong is done to the virtuous person who is suffering because of their virtue. Suppose I am the virtuous person who goes to the aid of an innocent person who has been set upon by a band of robbers. As a consequence, I am badly beaten. It is surely right to say that the robbers have done wrong partly because they have harmed me. It would be bizarre (indeed 'absurd' to use Hursthouse's word) to say that they have not harmed me, they have harmed only themselves.

The second line of reply which Hursthouse considers (to the objection that the virtuous often end up worse off because of their virtue) is that VE says only that the virtues are a more-or-less reliable route to flourishing—they do not absolutely guarantee that the virtuous person will flourish.

> The claim is not that being virtuous *guarantees* that one will flourish. It is, rather probabilistic—'true for the most part' as Aristotle says. Virtue is the only *reliable bet*.[20]

And she draws a parallel between virtue and health. You ask the doctor how to become healthy and she tells you to give up smoking, lose weight and take exercise. This is good advice, even if having followed her advice, you subsequently become ill. We recognise that giving up smoking is (one of part of) a 'reliable bet' for becoming healthy.

On the constitutive reading of VE, this is a very curious parallel to draw, although surprisingly it is one which she reiterates in *On Virtue Ethics* as if it were unproblematic. Giving up smoking, losing weight, and taking exercise are not even partly constitutive of enjoying good health—they are means to good health, and indeed fairly reliable means. That is why good health can be fully present in their absence, and they can be fully present in the absence of good health. But on the constitutive reading of VE, being virtuous constitutes flourishing (see quotations above from Statman and from Hursthouse). Being virtuous is precisely not a means to flourishing. Since being virtuous is supposed to constitute

[20] *Beginning Lives*, 230, italics added.

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flourishing, the two attributes cannot exist in complete isolation. The non-virtuous person cannot flourish at all, and the virtuous person must achieve flourishing. These claims are entailed by a combination of the constitutive reading of VE, and the fact that a phenomenon cannot exist in the absence of its constitutents, and that the presence of the constituents is sufficient for the existence of what they are the constituents of.

Just as there are easy-to-imagine cases in which possession of the virtues appears to prevent my flourishing, so there are others in which possession of vices actively promotes my flourishing. Hursthouse imagines such a case,[21] in which someone who has been ruthless and dishonest throughout her life has ended up perfectly happy. She does not feel guilty or lonely, or that her life has been in any way a failure. Prima facie, she represents a counter-example to the claim that what constitutes flourishing is living a life of virtue.

Of such a person, Hurthouse says two things. First, she makes the psycho-sociological point that in considering such a person, 'we' would not find their life 'enviable or desirable'. Secondly, she makes a moral claim that in such a life there is something 'amiss', and says that 'We can view a life containing every apparent benefit and advantage as one that we do not want because it contains having acted wrongly in various ways'. [22]

But neither of these responses is adequate. First, we need to be clear whether the claim is (a) that the monster does flourish, but that some forms of flourishing are bad, or (b) that contrary to appearances, the monster is not flourishing at all. There is no hint in Hursthouse or in other writers in the VE tradition that some forms of flourishing are bad, and *a fortiori* no hint of what criteria might distinguish good and bad ways of flourishing. So presumably the thought is that the monster is not really flourishing. But now we need to press the question 'Why not?'. To observe that 'we' would not find their life 'enviable or desirable' simply invites the further question 'Aren't we merely confused if we don't envy and desire such a life?'. The fact that we would not envy and desire such a life cannot show that such a life is not a flourishing one, without at least some demonstration that the lack of envy and desire on 'our' part is justified or appropriate or legitimate.

Perhaps it is this query which is being addressed in Hursthouse's second claim that the life of the monster is in some way 'amiss'. The problem here is that given the starting point of the theory, VE

[21] Op.cit., 231.
[22] Ibid. for all words and phrases quoted in this paragraph.

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has no resources to explain what could be 'amiss' with the monster's life, or in what way the monster could have acted 'wrongly'. The only sense which the theory can give to acting wrongly is acting in a way that will not promote the agent's own flourishing, and given that we have been given no reason to think that contrary to appearances the monster has not flourished, the theory can give us no reason to say that the monster has acted wrongly.

There is one final line of thought which Hursthouse invokes to meet this major objection to VE (that the virtuous can suffer because they are virtuous). It overlaps with the 'reliable bet' move, but it is worth noting separately. The reply is that the objection confuses what Hursthouse calls the 'particular' and the 'general' question.[23] The particular question is whether on each particular occasion, exercising the virtues benefits the agent; the general question is whether 'overall' a life of virtue benefits the agent. The thought seems to be that VE can concede a 'no' answer on the particular question, as long as it holds firm to a 'yes' answer to the general question. It is part of this strategy that Hursthouse claims that VE does not say that practising the virtues is either necessary or sufficient for flourishing. This does look to be a strange claim to combine with a constitutive reading of VE. If a life of virtue constitutes flourishing, how is it possible for there to be a virtuous but non-flourishing life? Or a flourishing but non-virtuous life? Surely a phenomenon cannot exist in the absence of what constitutes it. If this is possible, then we need to be told a good deal more about what the constitutes relation is.

Perhaps for these reasons, in the later *On Virtue Ethics*, although the non-sufficiency thesis is repeated, the non-necessity thesis is not mentioned. This goes along with the fact that the constitution claim is sometimes amended to say that being virtuous is *partly* constitutive of flourishing. Although VE theorists are silent on what the other part is, we might guess that it is something like luck or context. The constitution claim is that the virtues are partially constitutive of flourishing, and that it is impossible to flourish without them.

However, we need to distinguish two ways in which As might partially constitute Bs. It might be that the presence of A as a partial constituent of B does not yield any B at all in the absence of the other necessary constituents. Thus, oxygen is a constituent of water; but in the absence of hydrogen, it does not yield defective or

[23] *On Virtue Ethics*, 171.

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non-standard water: it yields no water at all. Alternatively, it might be that the presence of As guarantees the presence of Bs to some degree, but not fully (there are fewer Bs than there would be if all the constituents were present, or the Bs are not as fully B-ish as they would otherwise be, etc.) Thus we might say that a bicycle is partially constituted by its handlebars. If there are no handlebars, there can still be a bicycle, but it will be a defective non-standard bicycle. On which of these two models of partial constitution is the claim that the virtues are partially constitutive of flourishing to be understood?

If we take the first model, the claim that the virtues partially constitute flourishing will not give us any reason to adopt the virtues unless we have some reason to think that the other unspecified constituents will also be present. If we take the second model, the virtue theorist faces the counter-examples canvassed above (the virtues leading not just to diminished flourishing but to suffering, ruin and death).

There is a further problem for the constitutive version. If it provides the correct way of conceptualising the situation, we need to rethink the original position in which the path of moral virtue was recommended to the enquirer who asks 'How can I flourish?'. We implicitly construed this as a question asked by a games-theoretical rational agent who was not herself to be transformed by the adoption of the recommended answer. That is to say, we conceived of the enquirer as remaining a games theorist in her conception of 'reason for acting' throughout the period in which she is pursuing the path of virtue. But in effect, on the constitutive interpretation, what VE recommends to the enquirer is an irreversible transformation of that starting point. It is as if the virtue theorist says to the enquirer:

> The best-bet means of flourishing is to cease to be a rational games theorist. You must cease to be the sort of person who is always prepared to ask the question 'Are the moral virtues still the best-bet means to my flourishing?—because if they are not, then I no longer have any reason for following them'. A person who is always prepared to ask herself that question is not genuinely following the path of virtue, and hence is not genuinely following the best-bet route to her own flourishing.

In effect, the virtue theorist is saying that it is empirically improbable that comprehensive games theory rationality and flourishing can be successfully combined in one life. Put more

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paradoxically, she is saying that the rational thing to do is to cease to be (comprehensively and games-theoretically) rational.

But if this is what adoption of the moral virtues involves, the recommendation to the original enquirer has to be viewed in a certain light. She is being invited to transform herself, and in such a way that even when the transformation will prove disastrous for her, she will find it psychologically impossible to abandon it. She is being instructed 'Become the sort of person who values honesty so highly that you will lay down your life for it'. This is a very different recommendation from 'being honest will be a best-bet means of flourishing'.

But given this gloss on the Hursthousean injunction 'Follow the path of virtue', the original enquirer needs to review her options. They seem to include at least the following:

(1) Accept the VE prescription. Become the sort of person who will continue to be virtuous even when doing so does not lead to your flourishing but perhaps results in your destruction.
(2) Accept a modified VE prescription. Become the sort of person who will be virtuous, except when you can flourish better by abandoning the path of virtue.
(3) Ignore Hursthousean prescriptions and VE altogether.

Which of these the rational enquirer will accept must depend in part on what she thinks the future contingencies of her life will be. If she foresees a future life of a placid and undemanding kind, in which her virtue will never lead to her destruction (or perhaps even to any serious preference unsatisfaction), she could rationally accept (1). She could safely turn herself into someone who would act on some destructive counterfactual conditionals, secure in the knowledge that those conditionals would remain counterfactual.

By contrast, if she foresees a future life for herself in which virtue is likely to lead to destruction, she surely ought rationally to reject (1). This is true, even if she also foresees that by the time she is required to lay down her life, she will think (what she does not think now) that it is better to die virtuous then to live non-virtuously.

What about option (2)? This is in effect the option which my imagined reply on behalf of VE is designed to block. For it is this option that allows the rational enquirer to say 'Yes, I will become generally morally virtuous, because I can see that generally it will help me to flourish. But on those occasions when I flourish better by not being virtuous, I will abandon virtue'. I imagined the virtue theorist as objecting to this 'But if you retain that way of thinking,

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you are not really being virtuous'. But now the enquirer can reply 'Let's not dispute about words. If you don't want to call what option (2) alllows me 'virtues', let us call them 'quasi-virtues'. Now the issue is: would 'I flourish better by becoming virtuous or by becoming quasi-virtuous?'. The constitutive version provides no reason for preferring virtue to quasi-virtue.

The upshot, then, is that on the constitutive reading, VE is badly exposed. If we accept that the connection between wanting and flourishing is one of meaning, and hence that argument is needed to link flourishing with the virtues, it appears that no good argument is forthcoming to show that being virtuous cannot lead to your own impoverishment and destruction. This in turn means that no argument is forthcoming to show that being virtuous constitutes flourishing. In response to the weaker claim that the virtues are partially constitutive of flourishing, on one interpretation, we are still left with no reason to adopt the virtues, and on the other, the virtue theorist still faces the problem of the virtues leading to our destruction.

4. The instrumental interpretation

Is there some alternative way of interpreting the claims of virtue theory, one perhaps not explicitly embraced by VE theorists, but which might nevertheless provide a tenable fall-back position for them? The instrumental interpretation suggests itself.

On the instrumental interpretation, flourishing would be the acknowledged end of human endeavour, and the life of virtue would be recommended as the only reliable means to the achievement. Here are two ways in which the instrumental view might be expressed.

(a) VE retains the ordinary idea of the virtues which we have been operating with so far, so that the VE theorist can take for granted that honesty, compassion, etc. are indeed virtues, but she then needs argue for each virtue that it is indeed the best-bet means to flourishing.
(b) VE defines a virtue in functional terms, as whatever character traits are a best-bet means to flourishing; and then the VE theorist can take for granted that the virtues are a best-bet means to flourishing, but she needs to argue that honesty, compassion, etc. are indeed virtues as defined.

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There is a hint that Hursthouse wants to adopt the second strategy when she says:

> [VE] specifies [the virtuous agent] in terms of the virtues, and then specifies these ... as the character traits ... required for *eudaimonia*'.[24]

It is not quite clear what 'specifying' amounts to here, but one way of understanding it would be as 'defining', and hence as saying that VE defines the character traits functionally. Notice that this would be to say not *just* that the virtues cause flourishing, or that they generally do—it would be to say that this is true by definition. Something could not be a virtue if it did not have this tendency; and correspondingly, any character trait which does have this tendency must be counted as a virtue.

It seems, however, more natural to adopt the first formulation of an instrumental reading, and this is certainly what other remarks by Hursthouse suggest. For example, after saying that 'We can only flourish/be happy/successful by developing those character traits that are called the virtues', she at once adds:

> ... This has to be argued for each character trait that is said to be a virtue.[25]

It needs to be argued because given the instrumental conception of virtue, it is very far from obvious that the conventional list of moral virtues consists of any character traits which are best bets for my flourishing.

There is more to the same effect in *On Virtue Ethics*. She there sees a need to argue that our standard list of the virtues 'is the correct one', where presumably the criterion of correctness is that possession of the traits on the standard list does constitute (partially) a flourishing life.[26]

The theory could then claim to be an account of morality in that it offers a proof (in Mill's large sense of that term perhaps) that it is always rational to possess and display those character traits normally called moral. It is rational, in the sense that we all want to flourish, we all therefore have a reason to aim at our own flourishing, and we all therefore have a reason to adopt the most efficient means to that end, and we all therefore have a reason to adopt the virtues.

[24] 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', 229.
[25] *Beginnng Lives*, 226.
[26] *On Virtue Ethics*, 180.

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On the instrumental reading, virtue theory thus emerges (perhaps rather surprisingly) as tactily consequentialist (though VE theorists would doubtless reject the label). It is consequentialist in the sense that ultimately it is the beneficial consequences which give me a reason to be morally virtuous. This will be true even though the theory says that when one acts, one should perform the act because it the honest/benevolent, etc. thing to do, not because (one has calculated that) the consequences will actually benefit oneself. The theory is thus a kind of rule consequentialism: it is not that if I am virtuous, the consequences of each of my individual acts will benefit me, but rather that my having this-or-that character trait (being that sort of person) will overall be to my benefit.

The problem, at least for a VE theorist, with this account of the matter is that it leaves VE open to some powerful objections. I will mention four.

(a) It is unclear what flourishing is.

Hursthouse says that it is true by definition that everyone wants *eudaimonia*, i.e. wants to flourish. 'Someone who said that she did not want to be *eudaimon* would be incomprehensible' she boldly says.[27] But does everyone want the same thing? On the face of it, different people want very different things. Some people want to be famous; other people want to be obscure; some people want to pursue active lives, others prefer a contemplative life; some people want to be footballers but not philosophers, and others want to be philosophers but not footballers. And so on. Why shouldn't we take this obvious diversity seriously? Why should we assume that there is an underlying unity? And if we do take the diversity seriously, it seems very clear that people will need different character traits according to the goal they have set for themselves. The qualities needed to be a good stand-up comedian, or quiz show host are unlikely to be the same as those needed to be a successful accountant, or monk, or farmer.

What then could explain the mistaken claim that we all want the same thing? A possible explanation would be as follows. It is true that I can introduce a new term (or perhaps it already exists in some foreign language) which I will arbitrarily use to describe all the very different things which people fear, or all the very different things

[27] Op.cit., 224.

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which people admire, or all the different things which people want. In such a spirit, I might say that there is after all some one thing which everyone fears: they all fear the Fearsome. Similarly, there is some one thing which everyone admires: they all admire the Admiresome. (Note that this new concept is not the familiar one of the admirable. The admirable is what is worthy *of* admiration; the Admiresome, by contrast, is the doubtless disjunctive totality of what is actually admired by everyone.) In a parallel way, we could agree that everyone wants the same thing, namely the Wantsome. Hursthouse tells us[28] that among the truths which determine the concept of flourishing is the fact that everyone wants to flourish. And in a parallel and equally empty way, we could now say that among the truths which determine the concepts of the Fearsome, the Admiresome and the Wantsome are the facts that the Fearsome is something everyone fears, the Admiresome is something everyone admires, and the Wantsome is something everyone wants. To paraphrase her claim which I quoted earlier 'Someone who said that she did not want the Wantsome would be incomprehensible'. But clearly this linguistic manoeuvring would not have circumvented the fact that the Fearsome is a term that describes a multiplicity of kinds of thing feared, the Admiresome describes a multiplicity of kinds of thing admired, and the Wantsome describes a multiplicity of kinds of thing wanted. The Wantsome is a single name for a collection of very heterogeneous goals. But at least in Hursthouse's presentation and use of the concept of eudaimonia, it seems indistinguishable in its bogus universality from the concept of the Wantsome.

Clearly this 'arbitrary semantics' move does not give good support to the claim that we all want the same thing. But in the absence of anything better, VE has failed to provide an interesting sense in which it is true that we all want the same thing; and without any good reason for thinking that we do, we should take seriously the enormous diversity of people's goals. People have radically different goals, and so it would be natural to expect that radically different means would be appropriate to attaining those goals. It would be very surprising if, as VE maintains, the same means were appropriate for everyone. So, very probably, it will be rational for people to adopt quite different character traits.

[28] Ibid.

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(b) There is a mismatch between the lists of causal virtues and of moral virtues, and this undermines the theory's claims to be a moral theory.

Let us suppose that this first objection is mistaken. Let us assume for the sake of argument that we do all want the same thing (or, if you like, let us concentrate attention on some subgroup of us who do all want the same thing). Given that we have fixed what the goal is, we can then consider the next move that VE makes, namely, consider what is the most reliable means to that goal. What character traits are a reliable means of achieving the goal, and which ones are likely to be hindrances?

The second objection is that if this is how we proceed, we will almost certainly end up with a list of character traits that has little overlap with the conventional list of the virtues. For example, it seems quite plausible empirically to suppose that having a lively sense of humour is one fairly important component in being popular with one's acquaintances, and hence one important component in many people's conception of flourishing. People advertising in Lonely Hearts columns often proclaim that they have a GSOH, or stipulate that they require a GSOH in any potential partner. If this is empirically right, then it seems that having a lively sense of humour is a serious candidate for being part of a best bet means of achieving flourishing, and humourlessness for being part of a best bet means of failing to achieve flourishing. Yet it would be strange to call a sense of humour a *moral* strength in a person, or humourlessness a *moral* deficiency. Similarly, it is empirically plausible to think that, given many people's goals, extreme shyness or lack of self-confidence would make it harder for them to flourish. But again, it would be very strange to list shyness as a moral shortcoming. And there are many other similar traits which could plausibly thought to help or hinder what many people would regard as a flourishing life. I think here, for example, of having a good (or bad) memory for names and faces, or being reasonably fit or unfit. It seems likely, then, that there may be little overlap between the traditional moral virtues, and best-bet means to flourishing.

A similar lack of match emerges if we start from the moral end, and ask what contribution the traditional virtues make to a flourishing life. Leave aside for the moment the fact that individual acts of vice (i.e. acts that go against one of the moral virtues) clearly help particular agents on particular occasions to flourish, and focus on the question of whether in general a virtue like honesty benefits

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those display it. It seems clear that for some people honesty does contribute to their flourishing, for others it does not.

Suppose I am right in what I have been saying so far with this second objection—that there is a mismatch between character traits which contribute to my flourishing, and the list of moral virtues as we ordinarily think of them. The consequence is that VE faces a dilemma: either it continues to recommend to everyone the path of virtue, and abandons the claim that such a path will be a best bet means of achieving what everyone wants (flourishing); or it abandons the virtues, and starts to recommend whatever character traits are in fact best-bet means to achieving whatever any individual wants. If it embraces the first horn, it needs to finds some reason for recommending courses of action even when it agrees that they will be disastrous for those who embrace them. It if accepts the second horn, it abandons any claims to be an account of morality. VE appears indeed to be like a 'Keep Fit' theory, giving us some advice on how to achieve a goal which we might or might not have, with no pretensions to be a theory of morality.

There is one further point linked to this second objection. If the question that VE wants to take as its starting point is 'How can I flourish?', it needs to be consider a much wider range of facts than it standardly does. VE offers us a list of character traits as the means to a flourishing life. But it is empirically plausible to think that for many people, given their goals, something other than a set of character traits will contribute to their flourishing. For example, being good-looking, or being taller than average, or being born into a family with high status, might well be highly correlated with having a flourishing life. So any serious study of the good life and its preconditions ought to give proper weight to factors like these. It is true that your looks and your birth are beyond your control (your looks perhaps to a less extent), and the virtue theorist might insist that she wants to focus on the factors that are under a person's control, the steps which she could deliberately take, and that is why she focuses on character traits. But again, there is a range of facts which *are* under our control, and which *do* arguably contribute significantly to our flourishing, and yet which are nothing to do with any character traits. The most obvious one is a certain level of affluence. 'Become at least reasonably well off by the standards of your society' sounds very good advice to give to someone who is in pursuit of her own flourishing. As advice, it seems at least as good as that which Hursthouse would press upon the would-be flourisher: 'Be honest/generous/courageous, etc'. So, it has a good claim to figure on the list of best-bet means to

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flourishing. But we are being led in strange directions if we are invited to think that becoming at least reasonably well off is a moral prescription.

(c) A correct list of the causal virtues would be person-specific.

VE claims that we can all flourish in the same way as each other[29] (which is why the list of character traits which count as virtues and vices for me is the same is those which count for you, and the next person, and so.) This is VE's nod towards the idea that in some way, morality is meant to be universal (cf. Kantianism and utilitarianism). The theory is committed to the strong thesis that the same set of character traits is needed for any flourishing life; it will not allow, for instance, that soldiers need courage but wives and mothers do not, or that judges need justice but can live well without kindness.[30]

The third objection is that whether or not there is any truth in the idea that in some sense morality is universal, it is simply false to think that we do all need the same character traits to flourish.

Let us take for granted the framework which VE supplies. Let us grant that we are concerned with someone whose aim in life is to flourish, and who is asking herself what character traits would be effective means in helping her to achieve that aim. Now, my empirical claim is that the character traits which will enable a person to flourish will depend in large measure on facts about that person which are not facts about people in general. If I am a medieval peasant or the wife/daughter of an Islamic fundamentalist, servility and obedience might help me to flourish—not so if I am a feudal lord, or a samurai warrior. The qualities needed to flourish as a 1950s stay-at-home wife were not those needed to flourish as a captain of industry. If I am by birth a member of Cosa Nostra, pity and benevolence are unlikely to contribute to my flourishing. A nice example comes from the Thugs or Thugees of India.

> The thuggee (sic) religion was allegedly a *cult* with members ... who practiced [sic] large-scale robbery ... Assassination for gain was a religious duty for them, and was considered a holy and honorable profession, in which moral feelings did not come into

[29] Op. cit., 234.
[30] 'Virtue Theory and Abortion' note 4, 243.

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> play ... When a favorable opportunity arose, the Thug strangled his victim by throwing a yellow scarf ... around the neck, and then plundered and buried him. All this was done according to certain ancient and rigidly prescribed forms, and after the performance of special religious rites, in which the consecration of the *pickaxe* and the sacrifice of sugar formed a prominent part.[31]

If I am a man born into a Thugee community, it is empirically very implausible to suppose that I will need the same character traits to flourish as if I am a woman born into a serene and gentle and pacific well-to-do modern Western family. Nor is there any reason to think that flourishing (in at least one clear sense of that term) was not possible within Thugee communities. The Thugees flourished (as we naturally say) for some 500 years (so longer than, e.g., the civilisation of Classical Greece, or the British Empire) from the early 14th century through to the 19th.

The Thugees simply illustrate in a striking fashion what is a general truth, namely, that there is unlikely to be a species-wide list of reliable-bet means to flourishing. The list has to be relativised to a culture, to a class, to an occupation, perhaps to a gender, perhaps to a person. Furthermore, the list may even need to be relativised to a period in a person's life. The qualities that may be engaging in a 20 year old blue stocking may be merely tiresome in 70 year old granny; and of course vice versa. Whatever charms an old fogey has, we should not assume that a young fogey will differ only by displaying those very same charms earlier in life.

(d) The theory is committed to some large and unsupported empirical assumptions.

The final objection is that on the instrumental reading, VE is committed to some large empirical assumptions, for which it provides no supporting evidence, and which are highly contestable. For example, Hursthouse says that VE assumes that human beings are the sorts of creatures that can flourish

> ... in the same way as each other, and ... flourish side by side, all together, not at each other's expense.[32]

[31] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thuggee#Beliefs_and_practices
[32] *Beginning Lives*, 234.

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This 'no losers' picture of humanity is an appealing vision, and it is one which has attracted utopian thinkers from the Ancient Greeks through Marx to soggy liberals in the 21st century. But an alternative vision, running also from the Ancient Greeks through Hobbes and Nietzsche to some contemporary empirical studies presents a darker picture. Perhaps human beings are by nature aggressive, competitive, territorial, hostile to outsiders and strangers. Perhaps what matters from the point of view of flourishing is not how you played the game but whether you won. Perhaps my flourishing has to be at your expense. One is reminded of Gore Vidal's aphorisms 'It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail' and 'Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies'. Perhaps life as a whole is a zero sum game. Perhaps contra Hursthouse's suggestion[33], there are deep natural differences between the sexes which mean that men and women cannot flourish in similar ways or by adopting similar means, or even 'side by side'. Of course these questions about human nature are not to be settled by philosophers or political theorists, but by theoretically informed empirical studies. But given some of the early suggestions from evolutionary psychology, the supporter of VE is giving hostages to fortune in opting for the 'no losers' picture.

This consequence (that the enquirer has no reason to follow VE) in turn has further destructive implications for the grander aspirations of VE. In Chapter 8 of *On Virtue Ethics*, Hursthouse says that she is going to venture into

> ... the extremely difficult and tendentious territory of 'the objectivity (or rationality) of morality'.[34]

She at once denies that she is going to 'prove that "morality is objective/rationally justifiable" ' [35]. But it is also clear that she thinks that VE does have something substantial to say that is relevant to that debate; and it is easy to see why. If we accept that all human beings desire to live well, and VE can defend the claim that living well requires living virtuously, then VE can produce a species-wide set of reasons for acting. Recall now that VE also tells us that the initial desire to flourish is not a wholly optional one (like, say, the desire to climb Everest). It is a desire the absence of which would render a person incomprehensible ('Someone who

[33] Op.cit., 235.
[34] *On Virtue Ethics*, 163.
[35] Ibid.

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said that she did not want to be *eudaimon* would be incomprehensible'[36]). So the reasons for acting which VE derives from this desire have a kind of bindingness which approaches a Kantian categorical imperative: you cannot evade them simply by saying 'But I do not happen to want that particular end'. So even if VE does not prove that morality is objective, it clearly does have serious aspirations to show that every rational agent always has overriding reasons to be virtuous, regardless of the contingent aims, desires, projects, etc which she may have.

However, this large aspiration will be frustrated if the desire for *eudaimonia* is optional for comprehensively rational agents. And yet if VE opts for the constitutive thesis and interprets the virtues in the moral sense, that desire precisely becomes optional (in the sense that you can be a comprehensible rational agent without it), and the hopes of VE to have something substantial to say about the objectivity of morality collapse.

Is there any hope for the VE theorist in appealing to an opaque reading of the desire for flourishing. There are certainly contexts in which we might allow a distinction between the wants which a person avows, and what she 'really' wants. For example, being vegetarian but ill-informed about the constituents of much commercial ice cream, I might declare both that I want to eat some ice cream and that I don't want to eat any animal product. Unbeknown to me, much commercial ice cream is made using pigs' fat. Does this thought help the virtue theorist?

The analogy would have to be that I avow a desire to flourish, but also claim not to want to be (e.g.) generous, in a situation in which, unbeknown to me, my generosity is a prerequisite for my flourishing. 'He who wills the end, wills the means', and if we assume that that is true even when 'he' does not realise what the means are, then we are indeed entitled to say that he wants (or wills?) to be generous, even if he is unaware of the fact. However, the maxim above can just as easily be given a reverse application: Once I see what the means to my end would have to be, I change my mind about willing the end. Once a McDowellite convinces me that a life of virtue requires of me limitless sacrifice, I no longer desire to flourish.

[36] *Beginning Lives*, 224.

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5. The defensible kernel

In spite of the above strictures on VE, considered both constitutively and instrumentally, if we trim its pretensions, it can indeed be a source of good advice. We can start to pin down this unpretentious version by focusing on the following remarks by Hursthouse:

> ... I shall be using 'we' to mean 'me and you, my readers', and I am making certain assumptions about my readership. It is not possible to write a book in moral philosophy without taking a fair amount of common ground for granted, and I am assuming that anyone who is interested enough in the area to read such books shares my ethical outlook to a fair extent... . we all think that ethics matters and that ... we are against murder, dishonesty, cruelty, and so on, and in favour of benevolence, honesty, justice and so on..[and that] we would fill out those 'and so ons' in the same way.[37]

The defensible kernel in virtue ethics is that for someone who antecedently does have those values, and who lives amongst other people who have those values, those values are indeed a good way of flourishing. Those who live by those values in that sort of social context are likely to think that their life is going well, they will look back on it in old age with a sense of satisfaction, of a life well-lived, of a life that has not gone 'amiss' (to use Hursthouse's words); they will have this judgement reinforced by the views of their peers, who will display to them friendship, admiration and good will, and so on. The virtues are for such people indeed a best bet for flourishing.

What about the possibility of flourishing even more by deviating from the virtues—by being a hypocrite, a free rider? There are two good pragmatic reasons, based in facts about human psychology, which make that a bad bet for flourishing. First, it will probably be psychologically impossible for me to switch character traits on and off. If I have become a genuinely honest person, I will find it psychologically difficult or even impossible to tell lies when doing so would benefit me. Secondly, it might be the case that the benefits I receive by adopting certain character traits accrue to me only if I act on those character traits spontaneously i.e. without reflecting in each individual case whether it would pay me better to act against the trait. There is also the third fact which is built into this defence

[37] *On Virtue Ethics*, 8.

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of the virtues as a best bet to flourishing that we are considering them only in a restricted context. We are assuming that I can know antecedently that in the context in which I making my choice to adopt the life of virtue, I am very unlikely to come across those situations in which if I am virtuous I will be Pryor's 'food'[38]. If my situation does change in those radical and unpredictable ways (e.g. a civil war leads to a complete collapse of law enforcement, the cessation of water and power supplies, etc.), then all bets are off. My situation might then be a zero-sum game, and the rational route to flourishing (or to minimising my non-flourishing) might entail abandoning the path of virtue. Once I see that this is so, virtue ethics cannot be for me a serious contender, let alone a most reliable bet, for flourishing.

6. Conclusion

Construed as a substantive thesis, providing species-wide reasons for acting to everyone whose goals and behaviour are to be even intelligible, VE is thus a failure. On both the constitutive and the instrumental readings, VE fails to tie together the concepts of what everyone wants, of flourishing, and of the virtues. It needs to be able to show that the class of those who do not want to flourish, of those who are non-virtuous and thereby flourish, and of those who are virtuous and thereby come to a sticky end, can all be empty together. But while it may be able to show that any of these classes is empty (depending on what we count as wanting, flourishing, etc), it cannot show that in a univocal sense all three classes are empty. The residual element of truth in VE, the 'defensible kernel' referred to in the opening paragraph is found by restricting the claims of VE to small sub-groups of humanity, most of whose members will have dealings only with other like-minded people.

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[38] See footnote 16 above.

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