Lecture 21: Abortion

Rosalind Hursthouse – “Virtue Theory and Abortion”

A doula assisting a woman give birth.
Agenda

1. Rosalind Hursthouse
2. Practical Wisdom
3. Abortion
4. Status of the Fetus
5. Women’s Rights
6. Law
Rosalind Hursthouse

• 1943–
• New Zealand moral philosopher
• Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist
• Professor at the University of Auckland
• Her aunt Mary studied philosophy and when her father asked her what that was all about, he could not understand her answer. Hursthouse, 17 at the time, knew immediately that she wanted to study philosophy, too, and enrolled the next year.
Practical Wisdom

Phronesis or Practical Wisdom is knowledge that enables you to make the right moral decision. Practical wisdom cannot be captured in simple straightforward rules. Instead, it is knowledge that is subtle, nuanced, and sensitive to particular circumstances (a kind of know-how, or skill).
“It is true that when she discusses real moral issues, the virtue theorist has to assert that certain actions are honest, dishonest, or neither; charitable, uncharitable, or neither. And it is true that this is often a very difficult matter to decide; her rules are not always easy to apply. But this counts as a criticism of the theory only if we assume, as a condition of adequacy, that any adequate action-guiding theory must make the difficult business of knowing what to do if one is to act well easy, that it must provide clear guidance about what ought and ought not to be done which any reasonably clever adolescent could follow if she chose. But such a condition of adequacy is implausible. Acting rightly is difficult, and does call for much moral wisdom, and the relevant condition of adequacy, which virtue theory meets, is that it should have built into it an explanation of a truth expressed by Aristotle, namely, that moral knowledge—unlike mathematical knowledge—cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have had much experience of life” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion”).
“Someone hesitating over whether to reveal a hurtful truth, for example, thinking it would be kind but dishonest or unjust to lie, may need to realize, with respect to these particular circumstances, not that kindness is more (or less) important than honesty or justice, and not that honesty or justice sometimes requires one to act unkindly or cruelly, but that one does people no kindness by concealing this sort of truth from them, hurtful as it may be. This is the type of thing (I use it only as an example) that people with moral wisdom know about, involving the correct application of kind, and that people without such wisdom find difficult” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion”).
Abortion

• The discourse on abortion generally is focused on two considerations: the status of the fetus, and women’s rights. Consider “pro-life” versus “pro-choice” positions.

• Hursthouse thinks that this framing of the issues can be limited and myopic. She wants to explore how virtue ethics might direct one to think about abortion in ways that more aptly engage with the moral complexities of the issues.

• “It might indeed be said that thinking about the problem in this way ‘solves’ it by dissolving it, insofar as it leads one to the conclusion that there is no single right answer, but a variety of particular answers” (3).
Status of the Fetus

• What might a virtue theorist say about the status of the fetus?

• Hursthouse suggests we do not need to wait on abstruse metaphysical discoveries about whether the fetus is alive.

• Instead, the status of the fetus is relevant “only in the sense that the familiar biological facts are relevant. By ‘the familiar biological facts’ I mean the facts that most human societies are and have been familiar with—that, standardly (but not invariably), pregnancy occurs as the result of sexual intercourse, that it lasts about nine months, during which time the fetus grows and develops, that standardly it terminates in the birth of a living baby, and that this is how we all come to be” (5)
Status of the Fetus

• “How do these [familiar biological] facts figure in the practical reasoning, actions and passions, thoughts and reactions, of the virtuous and the nonvirtuous?” (6).

• Having an abortion isn’t comparable to a haircut or an appendectomy.

• The gradual development of the fetus is morally relevant.
Women’s Rights

“Supposing only that women have such a moral right [to abortion], *nothing* follows from this supposition about the morality of abortion, according to virtue theory, once it is noted (quite generally, not with particular reference to abortion) that in exercising a moral right I can do something cruel, or callous, or selfish, light-minded, self-righteous, stupid, inconsiderate, disloyal, dishonest—that is, act viciously” (4).
Women’s Rights

• “Speaking in terms of women’s rights, people sometimes say things like, ‘Well, it’s her life you’re talking about too, you know; she’s got a right to her own life, her own happiness.’ And the discussion stops there. But in the context of virtue theory, given that we are particularly concerned with what constitutes a good human life, with what true happiness or eudaimonia is, this is no place to stop. We go on to ask, ‘And is this life of hers a good one? Is she living well?’” (8).

• When might opting for an abortion be callous, short-sighted, or shallow? When might it be appropriate?

• Guilt and remorse may be appropriate even if the decision to abort was the right one (10).
Laws

• Hursthouse says that she is just concerned in this paper with “the morality of abortion, not the rights and wrongs of laws prohibiting or permitting it” (4).

• However, we can ask what the laws should be concerning abortion. To what extent is virtue ethics helpful when formulating laws?