VIRTUE ETHICS IN ACTION

Introduction

My plan is to begin by explaining virtue ethics in rather general terms, showing how it’s different from the two other main traditions in ethics. Then I want to briefly outline the theory of one very prominent contemporary virtue ethicist: Rosalind Hursthouse. After that I’m going to use these ideas to look in general terms at the question of whether virtue ethics is really the kind of theory that can lead to practical moral recommendations about what to do. I’m then going to take a pretty detailed look at what Rosalind Hursthouse has had to say about the specific issue of abortion. It’s rather controversial and some of you may find yourself disagreeing with a lot of it, but it does demonstrate, I think, that virtue ethics is not silent about problems in the real world. I’ll give an evaluation of what she has to say, leading to some suggestions of my own which are a bit different but still within the basic virtue ethics framework. If there’s time, we’ll also look at Michael Slote’s use of a certain kind of virtue ethics to try and decide what our moral obligations are to far-away people who are victims of hunger and other misfortunes.

As you probably know, the three main approaches to ethical theory are: utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. All of them go back a long way. Virtue ethics originates with Aristotle and can also be seen in Hume’s theories of morality. In Anglo-American philosophy of the last century, the debate was almost entirely between utilitarians and deontologists and it was only about fifty or sixty years ago that virtue ethics started to become prominent again. We can illustrate the differences between the three main approaches to ethics by means of a concrete example: say, a situation in which you have to decide whether to grant a terminally ill person’s wish to be killed. I don’t want to discuss this issue in detail; I’m only using it to clarify the difference between the approaches.

UTILITARIANISM will consider the consequences of granting the person’s wish—for them and anyone else affected. Consequences are assessed in terms of people’s well-being. If the action produces the best overall consequences for people’s well-being, then the utilitarian considers it morally right.

DEONTOLOGY will consider whether in granting the person’s wish you would be conforming to moral rules that seem intuitively correct, e.g. ‘Do not kill’. Deontologists think that these rules need to be adhered to, irrespective of their consequences, for the most part.

VIRTUE ETHICS will consider whether the act would be the kind of thing that a virtuous person would do, e.g., would granting the person’s wish be the sort of thing that a kind person would do or the sort of thing that a callous person would do?
Hursthouse’s Theory

Let’s now take a brief look at Rosalind Hursthouse’s virtue ethics, as it’s fairly typical.

For Hursthouse, a virtue is a rather complex thing. For example, the virtue of honesty is not just a disposition to do honest things—to tell the truth, to avoid cheating etc.—because a person might behave in these ways purely for their own personal gain. To have the virtue of honesty you have to value truth and fair play for their own sake; you have to do the honest thing because it is honest. Also, she calls virtues multi-track dispositions, which means that they affect a range of emotional reactions, choices, values, desires and perceptions. For example, an honest person:

…chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on.

This all sounds very high-minded and some of us might wonder whether we actually make the grade. But fortunately, Hursthouse allows that possessing a virtue is a matter of degree. If some of those things are true of us some of the time, we count as people who are honest to an extent, but only those for whom all these things are true all of the time get full marks and can call themselves ‘fully virtuous’. Unlike most of us, the fully virtuous never feel ‘conflicted’. They’re not even tempted to do a vicious thing. This is the ideal, but those of us who do get tempted and mange to overcome our temptations at least get credit for defeating our baser urges.

Another way in which people can fall short of full virtue, Hursthouse says, is through lacking phronesis, a Greek word meaning something like ‘practical wisdom’. Practical wisdom enables us to see how we can overcome conflicts between what different virtues seem to ask of us, for example, whether to be honest in telling someone a painful truth, or be dishonest but kind in hiding the truth. Practical wisdom requires wide experience of life, particularly of the likely consequences of different actions. I’m sorry to report that Hursthouse thinks that because of their relatively limited experience of life, adolescents don’t have much practical wisdom in general, but I’m sure she would acknowledge that there are exceptions: both young people who are forced to grow up by having big responsibilities thrust on them early on and, conversely, adults who never acquire much practical wisdom.

Hursthouse, like a lot of virtue ethicists, makes much use of the Greek term eudaimonia, which we can roughly translate as ‘flourishing’. The flourishing life for a human being is a good life, the way her life ought to go. And the link between eudaimonia and virtue is simply that in order to achieve eudaimonia, you have to be virtuous and to achieve it fully, you have to be fully virtuous in the sense I explained earlier. This implies that a life devoted to having as much fun as possible or to getting as wealthy as you possibly can would not be a life of eudaimonia, even if it was a happy life. So eudaimonia is different from happiness. It’s a less neutral idea, more value-laden.
Now when it comes to right and wrong action, there’s an important distinction to be made between two kinds of virtue ethical theories. Michael Slote calls them *virtue-focused* and *virtue-based* theories. The distinction is about the right answer to this question: to do the right thing is it enough to do what a virtuous person would do or must you do it because you yourself are virtuous? To explain this, Slote draws on an example from the Victorian utilitarian philosopher, Henry Sidgwick. Sidgwick imagined a lawyer wondering whether to prosecute a suspect. Suppose the facts of the case and the law are such that this suspect should in fact be prosecuted. But suppose also the lawyer happens to really dislike this particular suspect. If he prosecutes he will be doing it out of malice, not out of respect for the law. On the view that all that is needed for right action is to do what a virtuous person would do (the *agent-focused* view), the lawyer has acted rightly, even though he didn’t do it for a morally acceptable reason. But on the view that to act rightly you must manifest virtue in your actions and so you must have the right sort of motive (the *agent-based* view), the lawyer acted wrongly. Now that might seem like a strange position because it may sound as if the agent-based theorist wants to say that the lawyer shouldn’t have prosecuted, whereas we agreed that, given the facts of the case and the legal realities, that was his obligation. But the agent-neutral theorist wouldn’t say that the lawyer shouldn’t prosecute. He would say that to act rightly, he *would* have to prosecute, but that that wouldn’t be enough. He would have to be doing it for the right motive—for example, because he wants to do his duty as a lawyer—and not because he wants to harm someone.

Hursthouse’s theory is only agent-focused. If you do what a virtuous person would do, you acted rightly. But, as we saw, Hursthouse believes and most virtue ethicists would probably agree with her on this, that there is more to being virtuous than just doing the right things and avoiding the wrong ones. If you avoid doing wrong things for purely selfish reasons, for example, you can’t be regarded as fully virtuous because your motives are of the wrong sort. But if you do the right things for the right motives, you meet a higher standard within Hursthouse’s system. In contrast to this, agent-based theories recognise only the higher standard. Acts of promise-keeping and kindness have no moral worth if they don’t spring from the right motives. I have to say that agent-based theories seem more in accord with the spirit of virtue ethics. We may think it a good thing if people keep their promises and tell the truth even when they do so for purely selfish reasons, but this is likely to be because we think that such promise-keeping and truth-telling makes for a more cohesive society in general, not because it has moral value in the sort of terms that would be recognised by virtue ethics.

**Can virtue ethicists tell us what we should do?**

Before looking at the abortion issue, I want to consider the general impression that many people have that virtue ethics cannot make practical recommendations about what to do in concrete situations. The point is often put by saying that virtue ethics tells us not what to do but how to be. It may also be felt that telling people how to be makes little sense, for none of us chooses what sort of character to have. The problem is more acute for agent-based theories than it is for agent-focused theories. The agent-focused ones at least incorporate the lower standard, which we can satisfy just by doing what a virtuous person would do, even if we aren’t actually virtuous ourselves.
For the agent-based theorist, on the other hand, there is only the higher standard, which requires not only doing the right thing, but also doing it with the right sort of motive and it seems we don’t choose our motives when we act.

But I think this problem is a red herring. There is a sense in which I can choose my motive when I act. Of course, I can’t choose the motive independently of the act. That is to say, it could never happen that I know I’m going to help someone, for example, and then make it the case that I do so out of kindness instead of self-interest. This is because if I really know I’m going to help them, I won’t be able to choose to help them. (Just imagine trying to decide to make something happen when you already know it’s going to happen—it’s impossible.) But what I can sometimes do is choose the motive that is going to prevail with me in the process of choosing the act. For example, if I’m already leaning towards helping someone, but hesitating because of the effort required, I could let my thoughts dwell on how needy they are, which might well lead to my desire to help triumphing over my desire to avoid the effort, with the result that I go ahead and help. And this amplification of the effect of certain motives could also be brought about by someone else’s recommendation that I dwell on the relevant thoughts or maybe investigate the situation further with a view to trying to get a certain motive to win out in my mind. This point also helps us to deal with the objection that we don’t choose the way we are. This may be true, but we don’t need to do this in order to be able to respond to moral recommendations. Admittedly, I don’t choose to be the sort of person who would respond in a certain way to a certain recommendation. But the important point is that I can respond. That’s enough for moral advice to be a potentially useful thing within the context of virtue ethics.

Rosalind Hursthouse on the morality of abortion

Well, it’s time now to turn to the main subject of this talk, which is the question of what virtue ethics has to say about the morality of abortion, and to get us thinking about this, I want to look at what Rosalind Hursthouse had to say about this subject in an article she published in the journal Philosophy and Public Affairs in 1991. We’ve already looked briefly at Hursthouse’s conception of virtue ethics in general. What are her thoughts on the application of virtue ethics to this particular problem?

First of all, she tells us that she doesn’t want to ‘solve’ the problem of abortion, nor does she want to tell people what they ought to do. Rather, she wants to reveal how virtue ethics would direct us to think about the issue. I think we can accept these statements of hers, but I also believe we should be careful how we take them. It’ll become clear, I think, that what she means is that she doesn’t want to tell women in general who may be contemplating having an abortion either that they should or should not go ahead. Her discussion, as we’ll see, makes the decision highly dependent on the circumstances of the case. But that doesn’t mean that if you were to take her general views about abortion seriously and you knew all the relevant facts about a particular case, you wouldn’t sometimes know—or think you knew—what ought to be done in that case. Hence the relevance of my earlier point about virtue ethicists’ being able to make practical recommendations about how to act.

Hursthouse emphasises that she’s not concerned with assessing laws about abortion. She isn’t going to tell us that abortion should be legal or illegal. She is going to talk
strictly about the *morality* of this practice. Obviously the two concerns are not the same. It’s possible to think that abortion is immoral but should, despite this, be legal—perhaps because the evils of unsafe, illegal abortions outweigh anything to be gained by prohibition. So we should have no difficulty in allowing Hursthouse to make this distinction.

The first really controversial feature of Hursthouse’s account is that she dismisses women’s rights as irrelevant. This sets her against much contemporary discussion of the subject, because, as you probably know, many people think that the right of a woman to control her own body is central to the case for allowing abortion. But those sympathetic to the idea of such a right shouldn’t rush to condemn Hursthouse here. Remember again that she’s concerned about whether it’s right or wrong to have abortions, not whether it’s right or wrong to prohibit others from having them. If women do have a right to abortion under certain circumstances, then it must be wrong for others to *stop* them from having them under those circumstances—or else it’s hard to see what the right would amount to. But it doesn’t follow that it’s morally O.K. for women to *exercise* that right. In support of this, Hursthouse points out that acting within your rights is no guarantee that you act kindly, wisely etc. Indeed, in exercising a moral right, I may act callously, selfishly, dishonestly and so on. The link with virtue ethics is clear—acting within your rights doesn’t guarantee that you act *virtuously*.

Another aspect of the contemporary debate that Hursthouse dismisses as irrelevant is metaphysical discussion of whether the foetus is a person. It’s easy to understand why the metaphysical status of the foetus *has* been thought important. Persons are morally privileged beings in nearly all systems of ethics. In particular, it’s considered wrong to kill a person, but not necessarily wrong to kill a non-person such as a non-human animal. So it would seem important to know whether a foetus is a person. But Hursthouse, with her distinctive virtue-ethical take on the issue, argues that it must be possible to show the virtue of wisdom without having obscure knowledge that can only be reached by complicated philosophical deliberation. I think the idea is that wisdom must be within everyone’s reach, so to speak, even if not everyone actually attains it, so it must be possible to come to a wise decision about abortion without being clever enough to understand a philosophical debate. And at this point I’d like to start being a bit critical of Hursthouse. It may be true that you can be wise without being of high intellectual ability. But surely if you *are* wise, you will to some extent seek out knowledge commensurate with your intellectual ability and, as far as those who can’t intellectually cope with the debate is concerned, well, maybe it’s a part of virtue to defer to those who are more knowledgeable than yourself, a point that many virtue ethicists, including Hursthouse herself, seem willing to accept. I’m not suggesting, by the way, that it *is* a good idea to get too hung up in the abortion issue on the question of whether the foetus is a person. I agree that this isn’t a good thing, but the reason is different from the one given by Hursthouse about wisdom. It’s what she calls the ‘well-worn point’—but which I think is a very important point here—that the transition from non-person to person in the development of the foetus is a very gradual one, and there’s no definite moment at which it ceases to be just a creature and actually becomes a person: if this is right, then the reason why it’s so hard to answer the question of whether the foetus is a person during the early stages of development, particularly during the first trimester—*i.e.* the first twelve weeks—is
that there is no right answer to it and time devoted to trying to answer the question is therefore not time well spent.

But if Hursthouse doesn’t think women’s rights or the metaphysical status of the foetus is relevant, what does she think is? Well, what she thinks are supremely important are the familiar facts about pregnancy and its implications in people’s lives. These, she reckons, are enough to show at least that treating an abortion as if it were no different from a haircut is not to take a virtuous attitude to it. For it is to ignore the fact that in carrying out an abortion, you are ending a human life, and so showing a kind of unacceptable lightness—even callousness—of attitude. She reminds us that those who do think that an abortion is no cause for grief aren’t usually prepared to make the same claim about a spontaneous miscarriage, so there seems to be a kind of inconsistency there. Of course, Hursthouse concedes that the developmental stage of the foetus is relevant. Much more unacceptable lightness is shown if a person takes such a casual view in relation to a late abortion than when he does so in relation to an early one. Naturally, we’ll want to make some exceptions to this: women in poor health, or worn out from having had many children or forced to do very physically demanding jobs. Such women could certainly seek an abortion without being callous. For them to go through pregnancy could be heroic and virtue ethics quite reasonably insists that heroism isn’t required of anyone—it involves going ‘beyond the call of duty’, so to speak.

You’ll remember that one of the major concerns of virtue theorists is the idea of eudaimonia or ‘flourishing’: virtue theorists think a lot about what constitutes a good human life. Defenders of women’s rights remind us that in the abortion debate we’re not just talking about a foetus’s life, but also—and for them at least—more importantly, the life of the woman carrying it. But Hursthouse argues that we need to go further and ask “Is this life of hers a good one? Is she living well?” Hursthouse suggests that since we know that having children is something that is intrinsically worthwhile, someone who opts for abortion may be showing a defective grasp of how their lives could be. Again exceptions are allowed for, e.g., women who have already had a number of children or who are too old or who devote their lives to something worthwhile that is not easy to combine with motherhood. According to Hursthouse, there has to be some weighty reason of this sort for the proposed abortion to be acceptable as part of a good, virtuous life—just not wanting to go ahead with the pregnancy because it’s found to be inconvenient isn’t good enough as a reason. And even when having an abortion is the right thing to do, it’s nevertheless in some sense an evil, as a human life has been cut short and it would be appropriate, she thinks, for a woman to feel guilty if she got herself into a situation in which an abortion was the only reasonable course of action as a result of behaviour that manifested a character flaw in her.

In summary, there seem to be two main reasons why, in Hursthouse’s view, the attitude of a woman who chooses to have an abortion may be defective. They are, firstly, that parenthood is intrinsically worthwhile and, secondly, that an abortion cuts short a human life, which is an evil. How convincing are these reasons?

Regarding first the idea that parenthood is intrinsically worthwhile, I’m inclined to say this. Parenthood can involves great joys, but it can also involve great anxiety. Do the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones? I don’t know in any objective sense
that they do. I myself chose parenthood along with my partner for the positive aspects, deciding to just put up with the negative ones. But that doesn’t mean I thought that in some objective sense the positive things outweighed the negative things. And without such an objective basis for supposing parenthood to be intrinsically worthwhile, I don’t feel inclined to criticise someone else’s decision not to be a parent.

Now let’s turn to the argument that an abortion cuts short a human life, which is an evil. To assess this, let’s focus first on early abortions, where the foetus is furthest from the state of a being a human infant. Suppose we ask from whose perspective the ending of the foetus’s life is supposed to be an evil? The answer cannot be the foetus’s, since at this early stage, it’s not clear that the foetus has anything like a perspective on anything. So is it, then, an evil from some more neutral perspective, such that we can say that the world is not as good a place as it might have been because it lacks an extra person, with that person’s lifetime of joys and achievements? But then the judgement would seem questionable for two reasons, first, because human lives typically contain a lot of negative as well as positive things and secondly, because it isn’t clear that such a lack of an extra person would be any more of an evil than it is for some part of the world to have a slightly lower population than it might have had. The key thing here is that if Hursthouse can’t substantiate her claim that this is an evil, as opposed to something that is just a bit regrettable, there seems to be no reason why it shouldn’t be tolerated for the sake of some minor gain, making early abortions for the sake of convenience morally acceptable.

Now consider later abortions, say from around week 18. At this point, the foetus is surely able to feel pain. It’s a being which, if not yet clearly a person, should arguably be accorded at least the same status as a higher non-human animal, which most people agree should be protected from arbitrary killing. Here, there would be more justification for regarding the killing of the foetus as an evil. While this wouldn’t impugn abortions in which there is some goal that outweighs that evil, e.g., saving the mother’s life, it would cast in a very negative light any late abortion undertaken for the sake of convenience, e.g., to avoid postponing a planned trip abroad. But this sounds like a utilitarian argument, in which the likely consequences of actions are compared to decide which is the best course of action, not a virtue-ethical argument turning on the moral qualities of the agent. Is there any way in which a moral concern for the fate of the foetus could be framed in a way that fits in with virtue ethics? This is what I now want to explore.

The significance of empathy

To do this, I’m going to return to Michael Slote, who, following in the footsteps of some feminist authors, has developed an agent-based ethic of caring. According to Slote, an act is right—that is, morally OK—when it doesn’t exhibit a lack of caring and wrong when it does. Just to be clear: an act doesn’t have to be caring to be morally OK. Slote uses the example of brushing your teeth, which is morally OK because it doesn’t exhibit any lack of caring, unlike, say, hitting someone, which generally does. And Slote thinks he can ground the moral importance of caring in the idea of empathy, the ability that most people have at least to some degree to put themselves in another’s shoes and imagine their pleasure or pain. Basically, Slote
thinks that an uncaring act is one whose agent shows less empathy than is normal for human beings.

How could these ideas be related to the problem of abortion? Well, people’s ability to empathise is affected by a range of factors. One that is particularly important is the ability to see, hear or otherwise perceive the other person or being with whom they might or might not empathise. Common observation, as well as a number of psychological studies, confirms that if you actually see another person suffering, as opposed to just being told about it, you are more likely to empathise and want the suffering to stop. Slote himself relates this to the abortion issue by noting how an invisible foetus may not inspire as much empathy as a baby that you can see suffering in front of your very eyes. But here the importance of the developmental stage of the foetus becomes clear once again, and there was a particular purpose in the earlier discussion in my focusing on abortions carried out from week 18 onwards. At about this time, ‘quickening’ occurs, that is, the woman starts to be physically aware of the foetus inside her, feeling it moving and kicking. So I think we’re entitled to say this: a woman who decided to have an abortion at this point for the sake of convenience would have to be showing through her decision a capacity to feel empathy that was much lower than the norm and so would be acting in an uncaring way. Of course it doesn’t follow from this that all late abortions are morally suspect. A late abortion is morally OK if the reason for it does not show lower than normal empathy. Even a woman who obtains a late abortion because she fears labour pains (perhaps as a result of her previous experience of giving birth) would not be showing undue empathy if she genuinely felt pity for the foetus and that pity was simply outweighed by her fear of giving birth. As for early abortions, where empathy is much harder for most people and may even be out of place given the primitive nature of the foetus at that point in its developmental stage, the approach I’m suggesting gives little support for a morally negative attitude towards such abortions.

Slote on our obligations to the needy in far-off places

I thought it might be interesting in the time remaining to look at another moral issue from the viewpoint of virtue ethics, which is the question of the extent of our obligations to needy and suffering people who live in far-off places and have no direct connection to us. In fact I want to look at how Michael Slote tackles this issue from the standpoint of his theory of caring and empathy, which I’ve already invoked in connection with abortion. But before we can understand what Slote has to say about this we need to look at the views of Peter Singer because Slote is trying to tackle a problem exposed by Singer’s work.

Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher, is a utilitarian. He has become famous as a defender of the view that if we are fully moral, we need to take into account the interests of non-human animals as much as those of human beings. But Singer has also had some controversial things to say about the question of how much we should be helping suffering people in the world who live far from us and whom we know little about. In fact, he believes that we have as strong an obligation to help such people as we have to help a child drowning before our very eyes. Distance and lack of connection make no difference. All that matters is the need. And as everyone would agree that we have a very strong obligation to help a child drowning before our very
eyes (assuming we are able to), it would follow that we have very strong obligations to help the hungry and destitute in far-off countries. In fact, Singer believes that we ought to give to the needy, irrespective of where they are and how much we’re personally connected to them, up to the point where we are left with only the necessities that we require to live—which is a very demanding position, I’m sure you’ll agree.

Of course these are the views that you would expect of a pure utilitarian who believes that the only thing that could justify greater moral concern would be greater need. But as you might also expect, they’ve met with a lot of dissent and many ethicists have spent a lot of time trying to show why there is something wrong with Singer’s position. The work of Slote that I’m about to discuss is a contribution to this.

So how does Slote think that an appeal to empathy can help to avoid Singer’s counter-intuitive idea that we have as strong an obligation to help unfortunate people in far off places as we have to help a child drowning before our very eyes? Well, I’ve pretty much said it there: it’s happening before our eyes. We can see and hear the child in trouble, but we can’t see and hear the person in a far-off country. (Of course we may be able to see and hear them on T.V. or whatever, a point whose implications we’ll explore in a moment.) And seeing and hearing as well as other forms of perception are crucial here, since, as we noted earlier, when people can actually perceive another’s suffering they are more likely to empathise with them. So according to Slote, it’s worse not to help the drowning child than it is not to help the distant unperceived sufferer because a person who perceives a drowning child and doesn’t help must be unduly lacking in empathy (i.e., have less than the normal amount) whereas this wouldn’t necessarily be true of someone who doesn’t give any help to an unperceived sufferer. Still less would it have to be true of someone who refuses to make big sacrifices to help unperceived sufferers, so Singer’s extreme conclusion that we are all obliged to do this is avoided. Of course someone might do it because she had a capacity for empathy that was stronger than the norm, but such a person would be doing more than her moral duty. Her action would have a great deal of moral value, but it wouldn’t be the kind of action that could reasonably be required of anyone. She would have done what ethicists call a supererogatory act: something ‘morally heroic’.

But what about the obvious point noted above about our ability with modern technology to perceive people in very distant places? One thinks of the footage of famines brought to our T.V. screens, often inspiring charitable giving on a mass scale. Now I think Slote would regard the means of perception as irrelevant. It doesn’t matter whether we see through the unassisted operation of our eyes or via modern technology. The point is that the vision or perception can be just as good in either case and so can give rise to a high degree of empathy in the viewer. So I think he would say that if you see the T.V. images of the famines and don’t give some help, then there is something wrong with you, morally speaking, just as there would be if you failed to help the drowning child you directly see. But given the extent of the need, one might ask why we aren’t morally required to give the sort of extraordinary levels of help recommended by Singer when we can see the T.V. images? Presumably because our readiness to act is affected not only by our empathy, but by other factors as well. In particular, our very awareness that if we gave that much help, we would be sacrificing so much inhibits us doing this. That explains why not helping to the extent demanded
by Singer is compatible with having a normal level of empathy and so is not morally wrong even when we see or otherwise perceive the people we would be helping.

Slote discusses another kind of case. Suppose some miners are trapped in a mine because of an accident. (You could think of the recent case of the trapped Chilean miners.) What are our obligations in such a case? According to Charles Fried in his book *An Anatomy of Values*, if resources are scarce it would be better to use them to install safety devices to prevent such disasters in the future than to use them to help get these miners out, as more lives would be saved in the long run. He even thinks that we should be prepared to tell the trapped miners this in person. But Slote says that can’t be right. If we’re forced to choose, we must choose in favour of helping those miners who are already trapped right now. I guess most people would agree with him. But how could this position be justified?

Again, Slote thinks he can appeal to the idea of empathy. But in this case, it’s not necessarily going to be empathy inspired by perception of the individuals concerned. True, we might be able to see T.V. pictures of the trapped miners, but suppose that isn’t the case. Surely it would still be right to help them rather than the potential victims of future possible accidents. Why? Because of what Slote calls the *immediacy* factor. These actual miners are facing clear and present danger, while the potential victims of future accidents are not. And immediacy, even without perception, tends to increase empathy. In other words, we’re more likely to empathise with those we think of as being in clear and present danger than with those we don’t, all other things being equal.

Now, I can imagine both Singer and Fried feeling quite unconvinced by Slote’s attempted justification of his position on these matters. Singer might say: why isn’t it just a matter of one person’s need as compared with another’s? If the other person’s need for assistance is greater than my need for whatever I would have to give up, then surely I should provide it. And Fried might say that if we are concerned, not with people in greater need, but with *more people in the future* with similar levels of need, then our obligation is to the larger number. But I think Slote’s response would be that while it might be *desirable* in some sense for the person with the greater need to get what he needs or for the greater number to get what they need, this desirability doesn’t in itself amount to genuine moral obligation. For that, it needs to be shown that it would be uncaring not to give it to him or them, as determined by the standard of normal empathy. Because of this distinction between, on the one hand, what it would be desirable to happen and, on the other, what it would be right or wrong for someone to do, I don’t think Slote’s approach can be dismissed so easily.

A critic of Slote might try another line of attack, though. She might point out that people can’t usually control their general capacity to feel empathy and if someone happens to be less given to empathy than most others and as a result does things that are uncaring by that standard, it’s not his fault and it would be unfair to criticise him morally for it. This reflects what might be thought to be a general objection to agent-based virtue theories: that in judging people’s actions by reference to what sort of people these actions demonstrate them to be, they judge unfairly, as we can’t help being the sort of people we are. But Slote could answer this by arguing that fairness or unfairness is related to the way in which we *treat* people and that the question of whether a person has acted rightly or wrongly is different from the question of how
we should treat that person, although they’re clearly not unconnected. In an agent-based virtue theory such as Slote’s, the question of whether we should treat others in certain ways is a matter of what sort of people our treating them in those ways would reveal us to be. In Slote’s particular theory, it is a matter of whether, or to what extent, we would be revealed as caring people. For example, if we’re considering criticising someone for an uncaring act, we’d have to consider whether it would be caring or uncaring to criticise him. And we might well decide that it was uncaring to criticise someone for lacking empathy when no conceivable good would be likely to result from doing so because he had no way to make himself more susceptible to empathy than he was.

**Conclusion**

Well, I want to draw this to a conclusion now. Even if you haven’t agreed with everything I’ve said, I hope I’ve managed to convince you that virtue ethics can be sensibly applied to at least some practical moral problems. I myself, in the course of working on this, despite having always felt a strong pull towards utilitarianism, have become increasingly ready to take virtue ethics seriously as a valid approach to morality, especially when it’s based on the idea of empathising with others. I hope I’ve succeeded in making the strengths of such a view apparent to you.