Rosalind Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics can focus on particular actions and evaluate them as right & wrong, can formulate moral rules to guide action, & help us to resolve practical or applied moral issues such as whether abortion is morally permissible. In this article she discusses 9 criticisms that demonstrate an inadequate grasp either of the structure of virtue theory or what would be involved in thinking about a moral issue in its terms. She argues for a robust theory of morality that grounds rightness in good character traits & draws upon a sort of built-in indexicality involving practical reasoning, right attitude/truths, actions/passions, thoughts/reactions of the virtuous/non-virtuous, network of relationships, etc all within the context of what constitutes a good human life (eudaimonia). Moreover, one must ask, “What is the mark of having of having the right attitude to these facts & what manifests having the wrong attitude to them?” For her, abortion is conditional upon a certain state of affairs (e.g., situational setting, reasons, goals, purposes, & consequences), grounded in good character traits & related in virtue-vice terms [Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory & Abortion” in Virtue Ethics, eds. R. Crispe & M. Slope (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 217-38)].

Outline of Virtue Ethics:

1. An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances;
   1a. A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, i.e., one who has & exercises the virtues.
2. A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well.

 responses to 8 misconceptions (I’ve collapsed 9th criticism into 8):

1. VE does not have a peculiar weakness or problem in virtue of the fact that it involves the concept of eudaimonia. While eudaimonia is hard to grasp, it is no more obscure than the concepts of “rationality” and “happiness.”
2. VE is not trivially circular; it does not specify action in terms of virtuous agent & then immediately specify the virtuous agent in terms of right action. Rather, it specifies her in terms of a moral rule, & then specifies the rule, not merely as dispositions to right action, but as the character traits (which are dispositions to feel & react as well as act in certain ways) required for eudaimonia.
3. VE does not answer the question “What should I do?” as well as “What sort of a person should I be?”
4. VE generates rules/principles--for every virtue generates a positive instruction (e.g., act justly, kindly, courageously, honestly, etc) & every vice a prohibition (do not act unjustly, cruelly, like a coward, dishonestly). So, one does not need to imagine what some ideal exemplar would do in order to know what one should do in a given situation.
5. VE is not committed to any sort of reductionism which involves defining all our moral concepts in terms of the virtue agent. Rather, VE relies on a lot of very significant moral concepts (e.g., charity/benevolence is the virtue whose concern is the good of others; good is related to the concept of evil or harm, & they are both related to the concept of the worthwhile, the advantageous, & the pleasant).
6. VE is said to be subject to the threat of moral skepticism, ‘pluralism’, or cultural relativism. This is too a problem for both utilitarianism & deontologists, esp. in view of their second premises.
7. VE is said to have unsolvable conflict built into it. While she agrees this is a problem, it is not a problem peculiar to VE.
8. VE (most major criticism) is that it can’t get us anywhere in real moral issues because it is bound to be all assertion & no argument; but the best VE can come up with in the way of action-guiding rules are the ones that rely on virtue/vice concepts (e.g., act charitably). This criticism manifests a failure to understand what an adequate normative theory is. Does an adequate normative theory truly have (1) easy rules one (esp. adolescent) one can follow & (2) clear guidance on what ought to be done? This is implausible. (b) Critics drastically underestimate the variety of ways in which virtue/vice concepts and others, such as that of the worthwhile, figure in the discussion.

Two very difficult charges which VE will need to address:

(1) VE has to argue against moral skepticism, ‘pluralism’, & cultural relativism; &
(2) VE has to find something to say about conflicting requirements of different virtues.

Drs. Hursthouse shows how it is possible for VE to claim that right actions are actions a virtuous person would perform in the relevant circumstances, without falling without falling into circularity. It is possible, because the concept of a virtuous person can be unpacked in terms of the notion of particular virtues, & these latter, in turn, can be understood as traits human beings need in order to live well, to achieve eudaimonia. She also equates right actions with actions that display no vice, & that equivalence doesn’t in fact follow, from indeed, seems to run contrary, to the restaff her view. Could not an action that exhibited cowardice or ignorance somehow turn out to be exactly what the wise, courageous person would also have chosen? But even if such a thing is possible, Hursthouse offers a defense of rules in the context of virtue ethics that seems to survive pretty well (Ibid, 21).