The virtue ethics approach to professional morality is most fully developed by Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking in *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles*. Using the Aristotelian account of virtue ethics – an account that places central importance on the exercise of reflective moral agency\(^1\) – this approach provides a useful way of delineating professional responsibilities and professional morality. Aristotelian virtue ethics is particularly well suited to professional ethics because it ties virtuous behaviour to the concept of good functioning in particular roles. Oakley and Cocking claim that ‘virtue ethics’ teleological approach to right action in terms of good functioning relative to appropriate ends makes it especially well placed to capture the special roles and sensitivities of particular professions’.\(^2\)

The Aristotelian approach to professional role morality is a two-tier approach: professions are defined by their connection to excellence in human flourishing – *eudaimonia* – and professional virtues are then derived from the profession’s regulative ideal; the conception of excellence in professional functioning. First, a profession must provide a service that addresses an important human need, a need essential or at least very important for a flourishing human life. Second, the particular professional roles, actions and character traits that professionals should adopt are then determined or regulated by that goal. The good professional in a good professional role would develop traits and virtues appropriate to the promotion of the ends of the profession.\(^3\) So the regulative ideal is used to delineate both good professional roles and good professional character. As I will demonstrate, the regulative ideal also sets the limits of appropriate professional behaviour, indicating not only when professionals should provide their services but also when they should refuse. Professionals sometimes have a positive moral duty to refuse their professional services when providing them would violate important professional ideals.
Virtue ethics and dispositional rule-consequentialism

Before describing the virtue ethics approach to professional roles, I will consider a plausible character-based alternative: dispositional rule-consequentialism. Brad Hooker defines dispositional rule-consequentialism as the view that: ‘accepting rules is a matter of having certain desires and dispositions ... an act is morally right if and only if it is called for by the set of desires and dispositions the having of which by everybody would result in at least as good consequences judged impartially as any other’.4

Under this view, an act is morally right if it conforms to the set of general rules or dispositions that lead to the best consequences if they are accepted by all or most people, and it is morally wrong if it fails to conform to those rules or dispositions.5

Applying this theory to professional ethics would have the following result. Rather than appealing to good consequences in a general sense, we would consider what counts as good consequences in the professional context. An ideal (or optimific, as Hooker puts it) set of professional dispositions would be those dispositions the having of which by all or most professionals would best promote the ends of the profession, where the profession serves an important moral good by consequentialist standards.

At first glance it is clear that a dispositional rule-consequentialist approach and a virtue ethics approach to professional ethics would be likely to reach many of the same conclusions regarding what counts as good professional behaviour and good professional character. For example, both approaches would recommend trustworthiness as a virtue appropriate to doctors, in light of the ends of the medical profession. However, important differences between the two approaches indicate that virtue ethics is the more appropriate approach to apply to professional ethics. First, rule-consequentialism, as an ethical theory, must overcome what is known as the partial-compliance objection. Hooker describes the objection as follows: ‘Following a moral code that would be optimal in a world in which everyone accepted it can be (in Brandt’s words) “counterproductive or useless” in the real world where there is actually only partial social acceptance of that code.’6

While, as Hooker points out, there may be different interpretations of this objection, the most plausible (and most serious) interpretation claims that the rule-consequentialist might be committed to following a rule in a situation where doing so causes great harm because of others’ non-compliance.7 Given that we live in a world where any set of ideal rules or dispositions will only ever be partly complied with, this is a serious