

As the title suggests, Ross is interested in how to account for what is right, and what is good. On the one hand, Ross denies that our ability to know rightness and wrongness is *not* just an evaluation of what will result in optimific consequences. On the other hand, Ross also denies that moral knowledge is a set of moral absolutes which can never be overridden.

For Ross, after we consider enough cases, we will begin to 'see' moral principles. These principles present us with what are called our *prima facie duties*. In his words:

"I suggest 'prima facie duty'... as a brief way of referring to the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g. the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant." (pg 2)

You can think of Ross' theory as being a three-step process. The first step is to study circumstances. Second, we reflect upon what *prima facie* duties appear to be at play in that circumstance. The final step is to assess which duty is more incumbent in the circumstance. What duty is most incumbent is our *proper duty*. Let's put this into practice with the following thought experiment.

Suppose that you promised a loved one that after class today, you would take them to the DMV to renew their license. The license isn't going to expire for a few more months, but this loved one wants to take care of it ASAP. After you class, you begin driving over to your loved one's house, but - all of a sudden - hear the cars in front of you colliding. You hop out of your car and see that a great many people are injured and need assistance. Do you offer what assistance you can, or do you get back into your car and maneuver around the accident to fulfill your promise to your loved one?

In this case there are two (or three) *prima facie* duties at play: fidelity (keeping your promise), beneficence (help those in need), and (maybe) non-maleficence (not injuring others). Ross' analysis of such a circumstance is that some of the duties in this case are clearly more important to uphold than the others. Specifically, you should offer aid to those in need even though you will be breaking your promise. Do you agree?

This assessment would, of course, be unacceptable for Kant. All moral rules, for Kant, are inviolable. A duty is a duty no matter the consequence. This assessment would also be unsatisfying to the utilitarian. For them helping those in the accident may be optimific thing, but Ross does not care about optimific. On page four, Ross directly takes exception to the utilitarian notion of *impartiality*. Recall that for the act utilitarian, there was no basis for preferring the happiness of your mother to that of a stranger. Promise making, for Ross, justifies our being

partial. This is what Ross calls the 'essential defect' in utilitarianism. (He comes back to this with more force later in the paper starting at the bottom of page 7).

The seven *prima facie* duties that Ross provides are: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence. While these duties are quite appealing, you may be wondering how Ross came up with his list. Each moral theory thus far has given some kind of process by which it was claimed we could determine what we should do in most circumstances. Ross' basis for this list of duties rests on one important feature; Ross claims that they are *self-evident*. If we reflect upon his list, we will 'see' that these duties are morally important.¹

Moral intuition is much like mathematical intuition for Ross. Much like mathematics, we begin learning matches by taking two blocks, and plopping them down by two more blocks. We now have four blocks, and are beginning to establish our mathematical training. Similarly, when "we see the *prima facie* rightness of an act which would be the fulfilment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the fulfilment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend *prima facie* rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfilment of promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident *prima facie* rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of *prima facie* duty." (pg 6)

A difference between mathematical knowledge and moral knowledge is that in mathematics, the connection between axioms and theorems is one of necessity. With morality, however, almost every action we will ever take will be partly good and partly bad (uphold some duties, and will violate others). Hence, while we must weigh our duties in each case, our conclusions as to what we should do is just 'considered opinion'. (pg 2) Though that may be unsatisfying, Ross claims it better captures our moral intuitions.

The existing body of moral convictions of the best people is the cumulative product of the moral reflection of many generations, which has developed an extremely delicate power of appreciation of moral distinctions; and this the theorist cannot afford to treat with anything other than the greatest respect. The verdicts of the moral consciousness of the best people are the foundation on which he must build; though he must first compare them with one another and eliminate any contradictions they may contain. (pg 9)

¹ It is possible to be a Rossian even if you largely disagree about which duties are the correct ones. See, for example Robert Audi's 2003 book *The Good in the Right*.