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W.D. Ross and Aristotle

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Numerous moral theories endeavor to explain our moral obligations and duties; aiming to develop a fundamental understanding of moral permissibility as well as the actions we perform. Some theories appeal to how our world ought to be, or even from political and religious dogmata. Moral theories such as Divine Command Theory, Utilitarianism, and Kantianism, (to name a few), fall under a crucial idea, ideology, or imperative rule in which the rest of the theory is built upon. Notwithstanding this, we must introduce a new type of moral theory that appeals to the system of *moral pluralism*, in which there is a plurality of basic moral principles. Indeed, the concept seems contradictory, yet it would be permissible to say that one *can* be a pluralist about intrinsic value, moral worth, what is good, or even the concepts of right and wrong. We should then turn to the moral theory of *prima facie duty*, introduced by W. D. Ross, an influential Scottish philosopher and scholar. The ethical theory of *prima facie duty* insinuates the importance of our judgement in stringent situations, as well as certain adjudications we encounter in our everyday life. Let us therefore formulate what *prima facie* duties entails, as well as its weight in moral dilemmas such as *Jim*.

W. D. Ross heavily combatted the ideas of Utilitarianism and Kantianism. Ross believed that these theories were superfluous as they did not provide ample ethical guidelines for our decision-making. Instead, he remonstrated against these ideologies and developed the system of *prima facie duty*. Ross reasoned that someone's "prima facie duty" is the action that retains a morally relevant feature: something that counts morally in favor or against performing the action

at hand. It should be noted that prima facie duties do *not* embody our actual duties in a given situation, or our “duty proper”, (this will be clarified later on). Rather, each duty respectively rests on the notion that, intrinsically, it is the *tendency* to do something. One may ask, “What is a characteristic of my action that counts in favor of performing this action? May it be because I have a responsibility toward this person/thing?” Ross would argue that prima facie duty inadvertently rests upon the fact that we have a predisposed accountability, obligation, or responsibility to a person or thing. Let’s explicate upon this concept further, as doing so will advance our comprehension of prima facie duties and their disparity between *actual* all-things-considered duties.

Indeed, A prima facie duty can be better cognized if we consider the principle of *important promise*. Imagine I make a promise to a friend that I would positively not miss their dance recital. The time comes for me to attend the recital, and me attending the recital and meeting with my friend is dependent on the fact that I made *that* promise. Subsequently, my prima facie duty arises because I am able to act on my promise in this situation. Since we have established a firm comprehension of prima facie duty, it is valuable to explore the implications of *duty proper*, or the actual all-things-considered duty.

It should be noted that a prima facie duty can be overwritten by another. This is particularly relevant if a stringent situation presents itself, where our proclivity to make a just and equitable choice arises. If one prima facie duty can be overwritten by another, then the first would not be the all-things-considered duty. Naturally, an event will arise where we have to make a choice. We must rely on our judgement in these cases, nothing more. To differentiate which prima facie duty is more stringent, we must judiciously and thoughtfully use an acquired knowledge and richly-developed skillset. Ross would say that in order to judge fairly which

prima facie duty becomes the all-things-considered duty, we must rely on our *own* judgement – therefore coming to a conclusion thanks to an attained and seasoned expertise that takes time to develop. Moreover, the more we choose and judge our actions as to which *becomes* the duty proper all-things-considered duty, the better we get at it.

That being said, Ross provides us with a list of rudimentary prima facie duties. Ross believed stalwartly that morality should be concerned with more than “duty” and “happiness”. Sensibly, there are a myriad of things more important to people than that. We are given seven main prima facie duties: fidelity, reparations, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence. Why does this matter, then, and why are there only seven? Interestingly, Ross believed that all ethical issues can be boiled down into one or more of these principles –or could be a combination of values from the list. These seven values should be considered intently, as they further elucidate how prima facie duties act as guidelines for ethical decision-making. Let us expand upon this idea –doing so will allow an in-depth explanation of the *Jim* morality case and allow us to gauge Jim’s predicament accurately and legitimately through the lens of prima facie duties.

Imagine I still have a prima facie duty of *fidelity* to keep my promise to my friend. But on the way to their recital I come across a horrible car accident, therefore giving me the duty of *beneficence* to render aid to that person. Now we must ask: what is my actual duty (duty proper) in this situation, and is it obligatory, wrong or optional when formulated in terms of a theory of right conduct? We must keep this concept in mind when assessing Jim’s case, as we are now ready to critically weigh his judgement and choices. Jim, a man on an ill-fated botanical expedition in South America, finds himself in a village. He sees a group of Indians who appear to be protestors held against their will by a military general and his militia. Jim learns that the

defiant Indians protested against the government recently, and their punishment is death by firing squad. The captain offers Jim a choice: the guest's honor to kill one Indian and the rest be set free. If Jim refuses, though, then all of the Indians will be shot according to plan. The captain offers a very calamitous ultimatum. The prominent question now is what are Jim's basic *prima facie* duties in this case, what is his duty proper, and are his actions obligatory, wrong, or optional when considering the lives of the Indians?

It would seem that Jim has a *prima facie* duty of beneficence in this case. Doing good, being altruistic, as well as magnanimous. However, he also has a *prima facie* duty of non-maleficence. It would be advisable that he brings harm to no Indians *at all*. Nevertheless, Jim must rely on his judgement and make a decision to see then which of these is the duty proper, overrides the other, and subsequently guides the directions of his actions. He must then ask himself which is more stringent: preserving his *prima facie* duty of beneficence and not killing the one Indian, (even though the rest die), or preserving his *prima facie* duty of non-maleficence and all of the Indians perish...

Respectively, it appears that his conflicting *prima facie* duties have equal stringency. There is a profound dichotomy between Jim's duties, as both favor an alternative action. While this may provide ample evidence for formulating a theory of right conduct that is *optional*, we must consider which is more stringent in his case. It would seem that Jim's duty of non-maleficence is more stringent than his duty of beneficence. Suppose that Jim comes to the imperative decision to refrain from killing the Indian, due to his *prima facie* duty of non-maleficence. *Since* he has done this, his duty proper would be non-maleficence, an all-things-considered duty. We can then articulate a theory of right conduct to reach a verdict: Jim's action of killing an Indian is wrong iff (and because) Jim has a *prima facie* duty of non-maleficence to

refrain from killing the Indian that is more stringent than any conflicting prima facie duty that would favor killing the Indian in his circumstance.

Interestingly, the seven principles that Ross lists share an almost uncanny resemblance to Aristotelian virtues. This should come to no surprise, as Ross most likely modeled his moral theory from the thoughts and dogma of Aristotle as he extensively wrote upon Aristotle's life, philosophical thought, and systems of virtue. That being said, Ross' system of prima facie duties communicate the importance of judgement in strenuous situations, while also offering a fascinating approach to ethical decisions and what influences them. Consequentially it would be reasonable to move onto Virtue Ethics and Aristotle's system of virtue and vice, as it closely resembles the focus of character traits of W.D. Ross.

Aristotle believed intently on the thought of how to be and what to do. Having an expeditious and influential effect on western thought, his works on logic, morality, and ethics all have proven to be highly intellectual and dominant in today's world. His philosophy is concerned with ideas and issues of right and wrong action, what sort of person we should be, as well as why certain character traits are good, and others are bad. As opposed to other moral theories which focus on the "act" of performing an action, Aristotle was concerned with how to be a truly virtuous, honorable, benevolent person while avoiding certain vices that destruct the human mind. That is to say, he believed it was possible for a human to acquire and nurture character traits that can help aid in ethical dilemmas. These we call virtues. It is salient to cognize the concept of virtue, and how it relates to moral situations.

The concept of a virtue is eloquent in nature, as it is composed of intellectual, sentimental, and behavior-based elements that serve as a basis for judging the overall character of a person. It is a reasonably fixed character trait that also concerns inclinations to think or feel.

We can better understand the concept of a virtue by taking a look at the different categories that Aristotle siphons them into –*moral virtues and intellectual virtues*. Moral virtues are concerned with benevolence, justice, gratitude, and honesty. Intellectual virtues are concerned with intellectual courage, perseverance, and open-mindedness. Notwithstanding this, there are many more virtues like these which act as an intermediate state between the vices of defects and excess. Aristotle in return uses The Doctrine of the Mean to assess decorously that virtue we should aim to develop, while also being mindful of the vices to avoid on each side of the spectrum.

Aristotle believed that we ought to have feelings about the correct things at the appropriate times –and to achieve this, we must be heedful of the vices of excess and defect. Consider this example. To be virtuous in a sense of courage or bravery, I must not be too rash (excess), but I also cannot be a coward (defect). The “mean” between the two is the virtue of courage or bravery. It is a perfect balance between being wary and craven in a situation, while also reacting with a proper amount of fear. How can we then use the doctrine of virtues to assess moral situations?

When considering a *theory of right conduct*, we must appeal to an ideally virtuous agent. This is hypothetical in nature, as they would idyllically be qualified for the theory of right conduct in of itself. Also, we are referring to said agent to explain right conduct, therefore making the theory agent-based. Therefore, we can formulate a theory of right conduct as such: An action A in circumstance C is *obligatory/wrong/optional* iff (and because) *any/no/some* ideally virtuous agent *would not fail to do/would do/might or might not do* A in C. To formulate a pluralist version of this, we simply appeal to certain virtuous traits and insert them into the theory, making it more specific. Consider this: An action A in circumstance C is *obligatory* iff

(and because) *no* ideally virtuous agent *with the virtues of* benevolence, truthfulness, temperance, etc. would not fail to do A in C. How does this theory of right conduct and virtues address moral conflict, though? Interestingly, if moral conflict arises among the certain virtues, it would be in one's best interest to rely on their judgement –much like Ross' interpretation. Reasonably so: the aim of virtue ethics is to continuously develop good and noble virtues in order to achieve the highest good and also act accordingly in moral situations. Furthermore, we can rely on re-formulating the theory of right conduct as to what an ideally virtuous agent would do or wouldn't do; guiding accordingly and justly. However, that isn't to say virtue ethics is not susceptible to objections. Let us consider these and entertain them to see if there are any weaknesses that lie within the virtue ethical theory of right conduct.

Robert Johnson, professor at the University of Missouri, specializes in ethical theory and early modern philosophy. His objection for virtue ethics emphasizes and stresses the axiom that it fails to comply with the standard of internal support. He remonstrates that we can be morally obligated to engage in self-improvement. We *can* reform ourselves to cultivate new traits and virtues. However, an ideally virtuous agent would not be able to do this, because they would never find themselves to be in a situation where they would need to improve. They are already...ideally virtuous. Therefore, virtue ethics would neglect to yield the conclusion that these actions are requisite, and hence failing the standard of internal support. He supports his claim with a few examples, one being someone who has a moral blind spot and is in need of guidance from others about what is appropriate in different settings. This example as well as the others exposes the notion that certain agents can perform and engage in self-development, but not the virtuous agent.

Along with Johnson's objection, we are also given the redundancy objection to virtue ethics. Consider the Euthyphro dilemma: is an action morally right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is morally right? Taking this dilemma into consideration, we can say the same about virtue ethics. We formulate the problem as such: Is an action A obligatory *because* an ideally virtuous agent would do A? Or would all ideally virtuous agents do A because intrinsically A has features that makes it obligatory and required? These issues are intriguingly similar in nature, yet equally as important when considering the explanatory power of a theory. In some cases, the need to refer to an ideally virtuous agent is redundant. Virtues such as benevolence consider being perceptive and understanding to the needs of others, as their needs are explanation enough for helping them –therefore making the action obligatory. Therefore, what an ideally virtuous agent would so is simply superfluous. It doesn't apply and is disused. Taking these objections into consideration, virtue ethics still appears to be a fundamentally sound ethical theory, much like Ross' Theory of Prima Facie Duties.