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*Prima Facie* Duty Conflict Analysis

To preface this paper, the prima facie guidelines as given by W.D. Ross serve as fundamental guidelines that help categorize our moral duties and obligations. However, these eight guidelines are just that; guidelines that, though helpful, are not absolute and are conditional based on one’s situation. Thus, we will look at three different situations in which these obligations come into conflict and how a rational decision is made. These situations include my own that happened recently, Nephi’s that happened near the beginning of the book of Mormon, and Rick Blaine’s near the end of the classic film Casablanca.

The first of these examples was my own. It started last week when the conflict of going to my regularly assigned work hours on Saturday or of going to see my grandmother for her 90th birthday. The case seems trivial, but for me it was quite a dilemma in the moment of decision.

On the one hand, the duty of fidelity to work when I said I would, since I couldn’t get it off or trade hours with someone else. There was also the duty of non-injury, since my absence to T.A. hours could be detrimental to students who needed assistance then. On the other hand, however, I had the duties of beneficence and fidelity to go as well. It would be the world to my grandmother for me to be there for her and I told her I would see her when the circumstances permitted.

So, both sides of the argument had directly conflicting obligations, but in the end I decided that I simply couldn’t say no to my grandmother’s requests. There just didn’t seem like a better circumstance than her birthday to see her. So I cancelled my Saturday T.A. hours and went to my grandmother’s birthday party. Looking at the argument in retrospect, I believe that I made the right decision to go instead of fulfill T.A. duties. True, it could have been handled better with more time spent finding an alternative or giving more warning of my choice, but the priority to be true to my word to her was more compelling than the prospect of harming some student’s learning. Plus, hardly anyone comes in on a Saturday.

The second case we’ll look at is a scenario from religious history. It’s the difficult decision that Nephi was given in the Book of Mormon. He had been charged to retrieve the Brass Plates from Laban before leaving for Central America. In his family’s two previous attempts they had been robbed of their property and almost killed. On the third attempt Nephi goes alone under cover of night ‘not knowing the things he should do beforehand’. As he makes his way towards Laban’s house he finds a man lying in the streets in drunken sleep, who, upon closer examination, happens to be Laban. Nephi goes over to Laban, notices Laban’s sword, draws it from the sheaf, and then is commanded by the Spirit of the Lord to kill Laban in order to obtain the Brass Plates.

For a little context to this story, Nephi was raised as a good little Jewish boy in Jerusalem. He had always strived to live the Judaic law and to keep the Ten Commandments. Being well versed in these and having a knowledge of the situation, the story tells that he evaluates every variable in the equation as he deliberates what he should do. On the one hand, he probably never imagined that he’d be commanded to kill someone. If we look at the prima facie obligations in conflict, the duty of non-injury would clearly be violated if he killed Laban, since killing someone is just about the most harm you could do to someone. There was also the duty of fidelity that would be broken should he kill Laban since the sixth of the Ten Commandments plainly says that ‘Thou shalt not kill’ and he had surely sworn to keep the Ten Commandments.

On the other hand, prima facies would also be violated should he not kill Laban. He is reminded that ‘the Lord hat delivered him into thy hands’ and it would violate the duty of gratitude if he didn’t take advantage of the situation in which he found himself to be able to kill his enemy in the middle of the night without resistance. There was also the duty of reparation that he had, since Laban had taken their property and Nephi had a responsibility to try to get it back. There was also a facet of fidelity to motivate Nephi to kill Laban since he was actually being told by the Spirit of the Lord to kill Laban and we all know that even before Nephi went on this quest that he would ‘go and do the things the Lord commands’.

At this point, it seems that the conflict of prima facie obligations on either side of the argument had produced a balanced scale. Either side of the argument was valid, but neither was particularly appealing at the expense of denying the other, thus rendering Nephi at a state of indecision. For a while Nephi makes no action until he is reminded of another commandment, stating that ‘Inasmuch as though shalt keep my commandments, though shalt prosper in the land’. Nephi is reminded that they need the Brass Plates because they wouldn’t be able to keep God’s commandments if they don’t have them all written down and the Brass Plates do. Obtaining the Brass plates will fulfill the duty of self-improvement within himself as he strives to live a virtuous life, as well as provide a means of improvement in his future generations. This compels him take up Laban’s sword and cut off Laban’s head.

This is how I feel it should have been resolved. The demands of self-improvement required the action and the prospect of an entire people able to keep the commandments of God outweighed the issues of not killing Laban.

The third example is of Rick Blaine, the American running a night club in Vichy-controlled Casablanca. After being confronted by Ilsa for the letters of transit, he is left with the decision on what to do about it. Should he help her and her husband out or surrender them to the police? As we look at the prima facies in conflict, we have to understand that Rick had a right to turn them in. Ilsa had run out on him without a word for her allegedly killed husband, so Rick could have been justified in turning them in on some form of reparation for himself against their wrong doings against him. Helping them out would also harm Rick’s duty of self-improvement, since he would probably lose everything should he help out criminals. On the other hand, the duty of non-injury to the two was to be considered, as well as that of beneficence, because everyone hopes for forgiveness and mercy.

In the end, it is an aspect of beneficence that compels Rick to help them. Should he turn them in, the forces resisting the Nazi’s would lose a great leader and who knows what injustices could be committed by the Nazi’s should that happen. Thus, Rick creates and executes a plan to get Ilsa and her husband on a plane to Lisbon with the papers. Though at the end of the story Rick has lost the love of his life and his business, Rick definitely made the right decision. His compliance to show beneficence was above and beyond the call of duty. Plus his desire to help others in an act of serving others instead of himself was truly admirable.

In conclusion, the three cases show us that though we may have certain moral duties, they may be overruled by another more important duty depending on our circumstance to bring about a far greater good.