

# W.D. Ross's Moral Theory

The next theory we will consider comes from William David Ross (1877-1971)

While *mostly* deontological, Ross's theory is somewhat *in between* stricter deontological theories, like Kant's, and teleological theories, like utilitarianism.

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## A. Ross's Criticisms of Rival Views

1. Utilitarianism only considers limited aspects of the relationships between people:
  - the relationship of harmer to harmee
  - the relationship of beneficent to beneficiary
2. Ross: this leaves out other significant relationships:
  - the relationship of spouse to spouse
  - the relationship of parent to child
  - the relationship of promiser to promisee
  - the relationship of creditor to debtor, etc.
3. Recall the case of *Angelika's promiscuity*: utilitarianism ignores bonds created by wedding vows and the obligations that come from it

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## A. Ross's Criticisms of Rival Views

5. Ross is also critical of deontological views that make certain types of act *always* right or wrong.
6. Consequences must also be taken into account.
7. If the consequences of breaking a promise are bad enough, then we must break the promise.

**The case of the borrowed gun:** David borrows a hunting rifle from his friend Mitch, promising to give it back as soon as Mitch asks. Mitch shows up at David's house in a state of rage complaining about how much he hates his philosophy professor for failing him on the midterm, and asks David for the rifle. David could lie and say he lost it. Should he fulfill his promise or not?

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### B. Ross's Pluralism

1. Not just one source of morality but several
2. Promoting happiness and avoiding unhappiness is one source but not the only source.
3. Other sources of morality:
  - our past actions (like making promises)
  - justice, fairness and the rights of others
  - self-improvement
  - Etc.
4. Acting rightly involves balancing different obligations coming from different sources of morality

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### B. Ross's Pluralism

5. Ross makes a distinction between:

*Prima facie* duties:

- duties we seem to have "at first blush"
- obligate us to act certain ways, *assuming everything else is equal*
- can be overridden by other considerations

*All things considered* duties:

- what we must do after balancing all the conflicting *prima facie* duties we may have

6. Ross lists seven sources of *prima facie* duties.

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### C. The Seven Kinds of *Prima Facie* Duties

1. **Duties of fidelity:** first there are duties stemming from our explicit and implicit promises.

**The cases of the two moving friends.** If I've promised one friend I'd help him move, I should help him, and not another friend, even if the other friend has more stuff.

Implicit promises have many sources. Consider, e.g.:

**The case of the dining friends.** Kim and Shelley eat together in their dorm every day. Kim has come to expect this. On one busy day, however, a "cute boy" comes and wants to sit next to Shelley. Should Shelley let him sit there?

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### C. The Seven Kinds of *Prima Facie* Duties

2. **Duties of reparation:** these are duties stemming from our past wrong-doings towards others.

**The brothers and the bike:** Sam gets mad at Gus for no reason and breaks his bike. It would seem that at least until Gus can get a new bike, Sam ought to loan his bike to Gus.

3. **Duties of gratitude:** these are duties to repay or redo favors or simply thank others for their kindness towards us.

**Frasier and Daphne:** Frasier offers to pay for Daphne's wedding. Daphne is obligated to invite Frasier to the wedding and give him a thank you card.

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### C. The Seven Kinds of *Prima Facie* Duties

4. **Duties of justice and fairness:** these are duties involving distributing goods and services in a fair and equal manner whenever possible.

**The tax break:** Due to a good year financially, the government can give many taxpayers a partial tax rebate. It would be morally wrong simply to give these rebates to some people and not others.

5. **Duties of beneficence:** these are duties to try to bring about the happiness of other people if possible.

**The new car:** I am trying to decide between buying a red or blue car. My wife strongly prefers red. If I don't care between them, I ought to get the red car.

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### C. The Seven Kinds of *Prima Facie* Duties

6. **Duties of self-improvement:** these are duties involving making the best ourselves and making our lives the best they could be.

**The video game question:** Roger wants to play his new video game but needs to study for his ethics exam the next day. What should he do?

7. **Duties of non-maleficence:** these are duties not to hurt, harm or sadden other people.

**Grandma Edna:** Grandma Edna sure is taking her time getting across a crosswalk. No one is around. Late for work, Francine could just run her down and continue on her way.

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#### D. Ross's Theory of Right Action

1. When deciding what to do, we need to consider all the *prima facie* duties that are relevant
2. These duties often conflict; need to be weighed and balanced
  - borrowed gun case: fidelity and non-malefeasance come into conflict.
  - if I have to decide whether to go to Gym, or stay home to cheer up my wife, duties of self-improvement and beneficence are in conflict

**(Ross)** An act token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if it is the act that best balances the seven possible kinds of *prima facie* duties that may apply to person P at time T.

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#### D. Ross's Theory of Right Action

3. How do we know which duties are stronger and which action "best balances" them all?

Ross doesn't give a worked out answer.

4. Perhaps we can think of it like this:

- a) Consider each of the seven sources of duty.
- b) For each action, considers how well it does with regard to that duty.
- c) Assign a number between -10 (does really poorly) and +10 (does really well).
- d) Add them up. An act is right iff there is no action with a higher total sum.

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#### D. Ross's Theory of Right Action

Example: the Gym/Cheer up wife case:

	Going to Gym	Staying Home
Fidelity	2	2
Reparation	0	0
Gratitude	0	4
Justice	0	0
Beneficence	0	8
Self-Improvement	7	0
Non-malefeasance	0	0
TOTAL	9	14

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### E. Criticisms of Ross's Theory

1. An epistemological criticism:

How are we supposed to *know* which duties apply in which cases, and which are stronger?

2. Ross responds: we can know what duties we have simply by "intuition".

- does not mean ESP or anything similar

- just *obvious* to us when we reflect honestly

- it's only those "corrupted" by philosophy who don't think it is obvious what our duties are

3. But are Ross's intuitions just a byproduct of his upbringing or culture?

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### E. Criticisms of Ross's Theory

4. Other objections: Is Ross's list exhaustive, and is every category really necessary?

- Is self-improvement really a *moral* duty?

(Perhaps I should develop my talents for pragmatic reasons, but is it really *immoral* for me not to?)

- Does *gratitude* really deserve a separate category from beneficence?

(Is it really immoral not to thank someone if it doesn't make them happy at all?)

5. Hard to develop counterexamples without firmer grasp of how to assign the numbers. (Organ Harvest)

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