

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007  
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Lecture Notes, November 29: Ross

We have looked at two distinct moral theories, now.  
Both have advantages, and problems.  
What do you do when you are confused about which theory is right?

Here are some questions which may help you decide:  
What would the political views of utilitarians and Kantians be like?  
Which would be a better society, one filled with utilitarians or one filled with Kantians?  
Is either theory plausible as a guide to behavior? (I.e. Could one adhere to it?)

You might think that the right theory is somehow a blend of the two theories.  
But then how do you know when to adhere to one theory and when to the other?  
If you merely rely on intuitions to decide when to choose one theory and when the other, then the theories are not doing the work they are supposed to do.  
You need another theory to help you decide.

Ross provides a moral theory which blends both considerations.  
In providing such a theory, he is like Chisholm's particularist, in contrast to the methodism of Mill and Kant.  
That is, Mill and Kant start with a moral theory, and derive our duties.  
Ross starts with our duties, and constructs a theory out of them.  
So, just as Chisholm said that we can start our epistemology with a working list of what we know and what we do not know, Ross says that we can start our moral philosophy with a working list of what we know to be our duties.  
The (methodist) criticism of this approach is that we should not assume such a list.  
Just as Descartes started by dumping out the apple cart, we should start in moral philosophy without assuming that we know what our duties are.  
Ross replies that any moral theory will have to tell us that we have certain prima facie duties.  
In science, we can not start as particularists, since people without scientific training do not have access to scientific truths.  
But, in moral philosophy, every one has access to moral truths, just by virtue of experience and thought.

Consider if we had a moral theory that said that we did not have to fulfill our promises, or provide good reasons when we did not.  
Or, if a moral theory said that we never had to be beneficent.  
We would reject such moral theories right away.  
There are certain prima facie, defeasible duties that must appear in any plausible moral theory.  
"I would maintain, in fact, that what we are apt to describe as 'what we think' about moral questions contains a considerable amount that we do not think but know, and that this forms the standard by reference to which the truth of any moral theory has to be tested..." (593).

Ross describes six classes of duties:

1. Duties I incur
  - a. promises
  - b. reparations
2. Duties of gratitude
3. Duties of (distributive) justice
4. Duties of beneficence
5. Duties of self-improvement
6. Duties to refrain from harming others

Note that while Ross's framework is essentially deontological, his considerations, unlike Kant's, are at times consequentialist.

Ross says that we apprehend our prima facie duties as self-evident.

That is, we do not need a theory to figure out our basic duties, to fulfill promises, effect just distributions of social goods, return services rendered, or promote the good.

Once we have reached a certain level of maturity, we just see that these are our duties.

"It is self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident" (592).

In science, we can not rely on any kind of self-evidence.

For example, it used to be thought that geocentrism was self-evident, and that the sky was a roof over our heads was self-evident.

In science, we must appeal to experts.

But, in ethics, Ross claims, there are no experts aside from the reflective person, 593.

We merely need to think about the right and the good to discover it.

The self-evidence to which Ross refers only extends to prima facie duties.

Ross distinguishes between these duties, of which we can be confident that they are duties, and actual duties in concrete situations.

In actual cases, we can not be so sure about our duties.

Prima facie duties may conflict.

Even if, in a particular act, we do not see conflicts among prima facie duties, they still may exist.

And, it is often difficult to see how a general principle becomes instantiated in real-life situations.

(Compare to the D-N model of explanation; Ross says that moral instances do not follow deductively from general moral principles.)

The problem with the hybrid approach is that it leaves us without principles to which we may appeal to adjudicate a conflict among the prima facie duties.

"It may... be objected that our theory... leaves us with no principle upon which to discern what is our actual duty in particular circumstances" (591).

Ross discusses our thought processes in trying to determine how to act in the case of conflict of prima facie duties, p 592.

But, all he says is that we come, in the long run, after consideration, to think that one duty is more pressing than another.

Ross focuses on the uncertainty which arises from the conflict among prima facie duties.

Particular duties are not self-evident, like prima facie ones.

And, they are not logically derivable directly from prima facie duties.

Ross's conclusion is that we can not know with certainty what the right act is.

He thinks that we thus have to be fortunate to do the right act.

But, there is a further problem about what makes the act right.

In other words, Ross is focused on the epistemic problem, but he hasn't answered the metaphysical one. It seems that we need some account of what makes an act right or wrong.

Then, we might have some problems discerning the right or wrong actions, but at least we would know what we are looking for.

How in fact do we do that?

Mill says that we consider the consequences.

Kant urges that we look must toward the categorical imperative, at the risk of losing our autonomy.

But, Ross leaves us with no tool whatsoever.