

# Philosophy 1100: Ethics

## Topic 7: Ross' Theory of *Prima Facie* Duties

1. Something all our theories have had in common
2. W.D. Ross
3. The Concept of a *Prima Facie* Duty
4. Ross' List of *Prima Facie* Duties
5. Ross' Theory
6. Ross' Argument from Promises against Utilitarianism
7. Is Deontology Irrational?

something all our theories  
have had in common

So far, all of the main theories we have looked  
at ...

Divine Command Theory (DCT)

Cultural Relativism (CR)

Act Utilitarianism (AU)

(there also GR, the Golden Rule)

have been forms of monism in the Normative  
Ethics of Behavior.

something all our theories  
have had in common

A theory is a form of monism if, according to it,  
there is just one basic thing that all right acts  
have in common. Such as ...

being commanded by God,

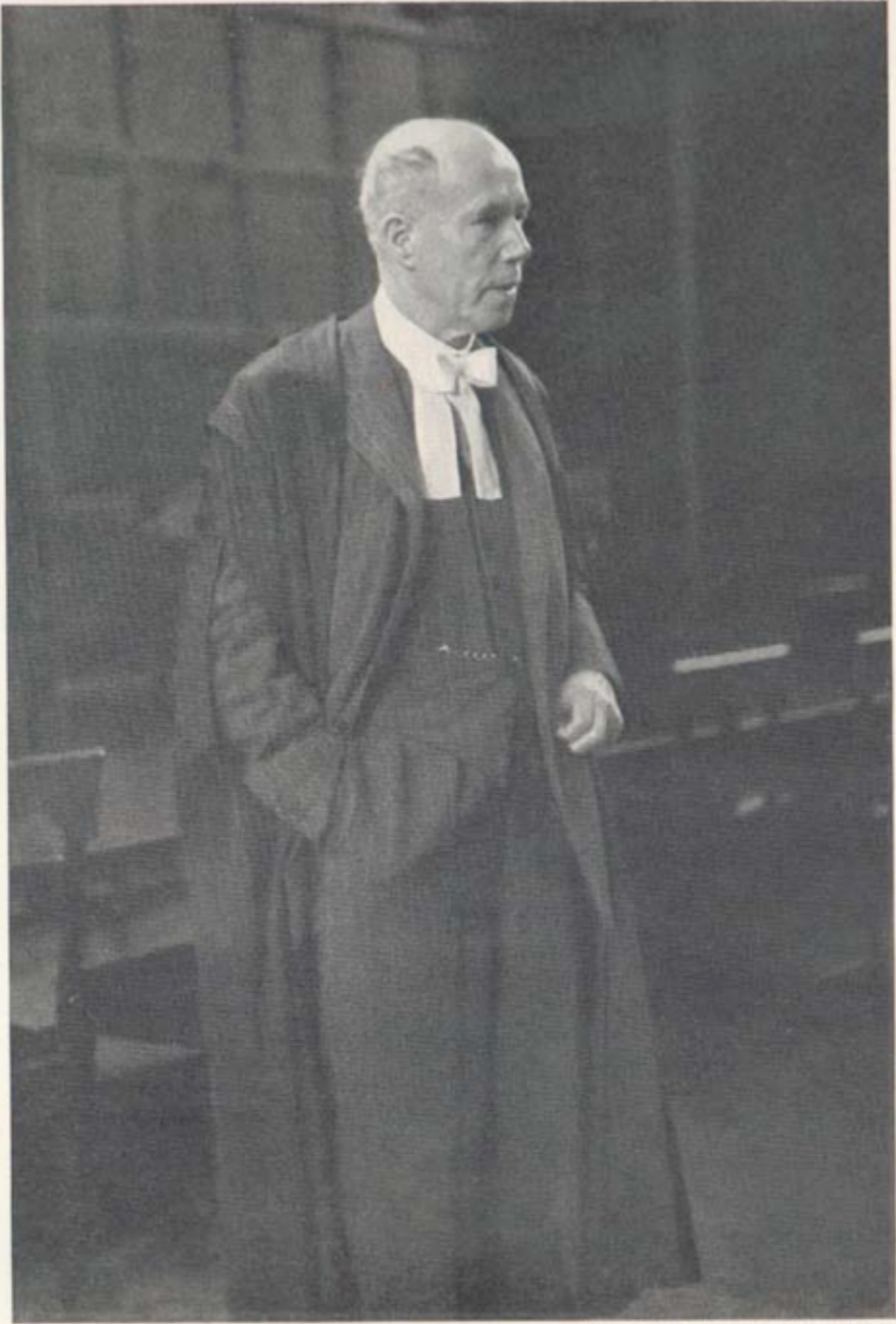
being permitted by the moral code of society,

maximizing hedonic utility,

treating others as the agent of the act would  
like to be treated.

# W.D. Ross (1877-1971)

- British philosopher
- Translator of Aristotle
- Defends a pluralist theory of morality in his now-classic book *The Right and the Good* (1930)
- Big idea: *prima facie* duties



*Photo: Radio Times Hulton Picture Library*

# *Prima Facie* Duties

Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 19-20:

“I suggest ‘*prima facie* duty’ or ‘conditional 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.

Whether an act is a duty proper or actual duty depends on all the morally significant kinds it is an instance of.”

# *Prima Facie* Duties

An act is a *prima facie duty* when there is a moral reason in favor of doing the act, but one that can be outweighed by other moral reasons.

Another definition:

An act is a *prima facie duty* when it has at least one right-making feature.

Another term that means the same thing is '*prima facie* right'.

# *Prima Facie* Duties

An act is a *prima facie wrong* when there is a moral reason against doing the act, but one that can be outweighed by other moral reasons.

Another definition:

An act is a *prima facie wrong* when it has at least one wrong-making feature.

\* *Don't confuse prima facie rightness and wrongness with actual rightness and wrongness, or what I will sometimes call all-things-considered rightness and wrongness.*

# *Prima Facie* Duties

## Example:

“If I have promised to meet a friend at a particular time for some trivial purpose, I should certainly think myself justified in breaking my engagement if by doing so I could prevent a serious accident or bring relief to the victims of one.”

- Ross (p. 18)

*Let's make this more explicit ...*



# *Prima Facie* Duties

## The Promise/Accident Example:

- I promise to meet a friend for lunch.
- On the way there, I witness an accident.
- If I keep my promise to meet my friend, someone will die.
- If I break my promise, I can help at the accident, and save a life.
- I thus have a *prima facie* duty to meet my friend (since I promised that I would meet him, and that I promised to do something is a moral reason in favor of doing it).
- But I also have a *prima facie* duty to help at the accident (since this would prevent serious harm to someone, and that an act would prevent harm is a moral reason in favor of doing it).
- I thus have a conflict of *prima facie* duties.

# *Prima Facie* Duties

Another Example:  
the splinter



this one has a  
"right answer"

# clicker question

If an act is a *prima facie* duty in virtue of having a certain feature, then

- A. that feature has the *appearance* of being morally relevant, but might not be morally relevant upon closer examination.
- B. the act is morally required.
- C. we know that at least the act can't be wrong.
- D.** the act has a point in its favor, but could still be wrong.

# Ross' List of *Prima Facie* Duties

(p. 21)

## (a) Fidelity:

“If you make a promise, you have a *prima facie* obligation to keep it.”

## (b) Reparations:

“If you have wronged someone, you have a *prima facie* obligation to repair it, or to make it right.”

## (c) Gratitude:

“If someone has benefitted you, you have a *prima facie* obligation to express your gratitude.”

# Ross' List of *Prima Facie* Duties

(continued)

(d) Justice:

“See to it that goods are distributed fairly.”

(e) Beneficence:

“Help a brother out.” (or a sister!)

(f) Self-Improvement

“Make yourself a better person.”

(g) Non-Maleficence

“Don't f--- a brother up.” (or a sister!)

# Ross' List of *Prima Facie* Duties

(continued)

(d) Justice:

“See to it that goods are distributed fairly.”

(e) Beneficence:

“Help a brother out.” (or a sister!)

(f) Self-Improvement

“Make yourself a better person.”

(g) Non-Maleficence

“There is a *prima facie* moral obligation not to harm others.”

# Ross' Theory: Rossian Pluralism

“It is worth while to try to state more definitely the nature of the acts that are right. ...

It is obvious that any of the acts that we do has countless effects, directly or indirectly, on countless people, and the probability is that any act, however right it be, will have adverse effects ... on some innocent people. Similarly, any wrong act will probably have beneficial effects on some deserving people. Every act therefore, viewed in some aspects, will be *prima facie* right, and viewed in others, *prima facie* wrong, and ...

# Ross' Theory: Rossian Pluralism

... right acts can be distinguished from wrong acts only as being those which, of all those possible for the agent in the circumstances, have the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness ... over their *prima facie* wrongness ... .”

- Ross (p. 41)



# Rossian Pluralism

RP: an act is morally right if and only if it has the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness over *prima facie* wrongness, as compared with the alternatives – (where *prima facie* rightness and wrongness is determined by the list (a)-(g) above).

# Ross' Theory: Rossian Pluralism

For the estimation of the comparative stringency of these prima facie obligations no general rules can, so far as I can see, be laid down. We can only say that a great deal of stringency belongs to the duties of 'perfect obligation' — the duties of keeping our promises, of repairing wrongs we have done, and of returning the equivalent of services we have received. For the rest, *εν τη αισθησει η κρισις*. This sense of our particular duty in particular circumstances, preceded and informed by the fullest reflection we can bestow on the act in all its bearings, is highly fallible, but it is the only guide we have to our duty.

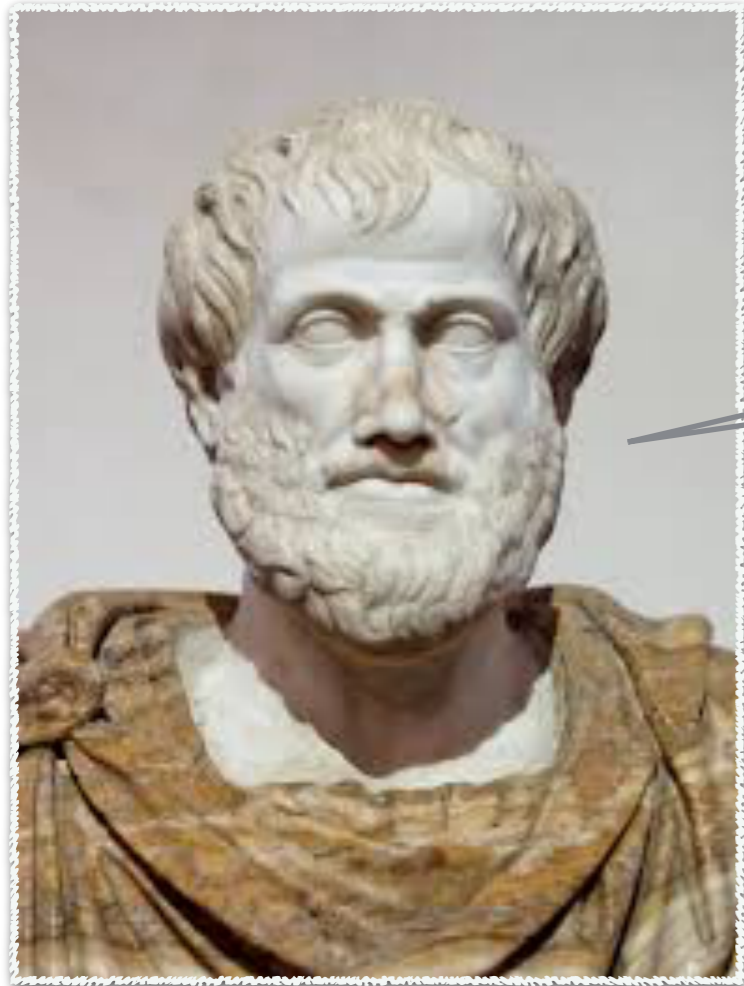
- Ross (pp. 41-42)

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- Ross (pp. 41-42)

# Ross' Theory: Rossian Pluralism



Aristotle

εν τη αισθησει η κρισις.

That's right, Aristotle.  
*The decision rests with perception.*



Ross

# Ross' Theory: Rossian Pluralism

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RP: an act is morally right if and only if it has the greatest balance of *prima facie* rightness over *prima facie* wrongness, as compared with the alternatives – where *prima facie* rightness and wrongness is determined by the list (a)-(g).

- (a) Fidelity      (b) Reparations      (c) Gratitude      (d) Justice  
(e) Beneficence      (f) Self-Improvement      (g) Non-Maleficence

# Rossian Pluralism

## Example: Promise/Accident

	<u>Fidelity</u>	<u>Beneficence</u>	... <u>wrongness</u>
keep promise; guy dies	+5	-100	-95
break promise; save guy	-5	+100	+95

balance of *prima facie* rightness over *prima facie* wrongness

this column is all a utilitarian would look at

this column is what Ross will look at

# an abstract illustration of Ross' Theory

<i>Prima facie</i> duties	Alternatives	<u>a1</u>	<u>a2</u>	<u>a3</u>
(a) Fidelity .....		0	-1	0
(b) Reparations .....		+10	0	0
(c) Gratitude .....		0	0	0
(d) Justice .....		0	0	+5
(e) Beneficence .....		+4	+1	0
(f) Self-Improvement .....		0	+3	0
(g) Non-Maleficence .....		-4	+2	-10
<hr/>				
balance of <i>prima facie</i> rightness over <i>prima facie</i> wrongness .....		+10	+5	-5

the right act, according to Ross' Theory 



# Deontology

Ross' Theory is a form of "deontology."

**Deontology** is the view that an act can be right or wrong (or *prima facie* right or wrong) in virtue of the *kind* of act that it is (e.g., a *promise-breaking*, a *lying*, a *killing* as opposed to a letting die), and not just in virtue of the consequences of the act.

Deontology thus implies that it can be permissible, and perhaps even obligatory, not to do what would have the best outcome.

Deontology is thus the denial of "consequentialism," the view that whether an act is right or wrong is determined solely by consequences, and not at all by what kind of act the act is.

# Deontology

Deontological theories often believe in:

- *constraints*: rules that forbid (either absolutely or *prima facie*) certain *kinds* of action (e.g., promise-breaking, lying, violating a person's autonomy)
- *options*: the idea that agents are often permitted to favor their own projects and interests to the detriment of overall happiness.
- *duties of special relationship*: the idea that we are sometimes required to favor the interests of those we stand in special relationships to (e.g., parent-child, teacher-student, friend-friend), to the detriment of overall happiness.

Kant's theory is also considered a form of deontology.

this one has a  
"right answer"

# clicker question

**Which of these statements is true of Ross?**

- A.** Unlike a utilitarian, he thinks that how our acts affect happiness doesn't matter at all.
- B.** Like Kant, he thinks it is always wrong to break a promise.
- C.** He thinks it can sometimes be wrong to bring about the best outcome.
- D.** Like the Ten Commandments theory, his theory puts forth a list of absolute duties.

Ⓒ. He thinks it can sometimes be wrong to bring about the best outcome.

“Professor Moore's view is, I think, that the coextensiveness of ‘right’ and ‘optimific’ is apprehended immediately. ... Now at first sight it might seem as if the constant connexion of the two attributes could be immediately apprehended. It might seem absurd to suggest that it could be right for any one to do an act which would produce consequences less good than those which would be produced by some other act in his power. Yet a little thought will convince us that this is not absurd.”

- Ross (p. 34)

# Ross' Argument from Promises against Utilitarianism

Ross (p.p 34-35):

“Suppose, to simplify the case by abstraction, that the fulfilment of a promise to A would produce 1,000 units of good for him, but that by doing some other act I could produce 1,001 units of good for B, to whom I have made no promise, the other consequences of the two acts being of equal value; should we really think ... that it was our duty to do the second act and not the first? I think not.

We should, I fancy, hold that only a much greater disparity of value between the total consequences would justify us in failing to discharge our prima facie duty to A.

After all, a promise is a promise, and is not to be treated so lightly as the theory we are examining [utilitarianism] would imply.”

# Is Deontology Irrational?

P1. If we all successfully follow Rossian Pluralism, we'll be less happy as a whole than if we all successfully follow utilitarianism.

P2. It would be irrational for us to follow a theory under which we would be less happy as a whole.

C1. Therefore, it would be irrational for us to follow Rossian Pluralism.

P3. If it would be irrational for us to follow some moral theory, then that theory cannot be the correct moral theory.

C2. Therefore, Rossian Pluralism cannot be the correct moral theory.