

## Right Actions and Good Motives (20190503)

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This paper concerns the proposition:

*The right act is the act that a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would perform in those circumstances.*

I have become interested in this thesis, in part, because I see a similarity between the way W.D. Ross described conflicting prima facie duties and what is true of an agent with conflicting motives. I wish to consider the possibility that what Ross was describing – what he took to be a conflict of prima facie duties – is actually better understood as a conflict between motives, where the right act is the act that a person with good motives would have done in the circumstances.

There is some independent justification for such a thesis. Rosalind Hursthouse defended a similar thesis:

*An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances (Hursthouse 1999, Loc. 355).*

Hursthouse was concerned with an objection that virtue theories – that they are not sufficiently action-guiding. Deontological and consequentialist theories tell a person what to do (e.g., to maximize utility or to keep a promise). In contrast, virtue theories tell you what to be –

courageous, temperate, and generous, for example. The instruction to “do what a virtuous person would do” gives a person (who, for whatever reason, wants to do the right thing) guidance as to what to do.

Hursthouse’ thesis invites us to ask the question, “What is a virtuous agent?” At least one rough approximation is that a virtuous agent has good motives and lacks bad motives. Then, from here, I wish to take Ross’ prima facie obligations and plug them into the formula in the form of good motives and the absence of bad motives. The duty to keep promises is to be understood as a desire to keep promises, and a duty to help those in need is to be taken to be a desire to help those in need. In doing so, I wish to bring Ross’ deontology and Hursthouse’s virtue-theory concept of right action closer together.

### I. Conflicting Duties and Conflicting Motives

Ross’ most famous contribution to moral philosophy has to do with the way that he handled moral conflict – cases where two or more duties command incompatible actions. His illustrative case involved a person who has made a promise to meet somebody, but who comes upon an accident where there are people in need of assistance (Ross, 2002, p. 18). To provide assistance, she must break her promise. To keep her promise, she must abandon the victims of the accident to their fate.

I want to draw attention to the similarities between the way Ross described the case of a person confronting conflicting prima facie duties and that of a person confronting conflicting motives.

For Ross' hypothetical agent who is faced with either keeping a promise or helping the accident victims, neither principle is absolutely superior to the other. That is to say, it is not the case that the obligation to keep promises always trumps the obligation to help those in need, nor does the obligation to help those in need always trump the obligation to keep promises. Instead, the agent is expected to weigh the two concerns. In some cases, the obligation to keep promises wins. In others, the obligation to help those in need wins.

As Ross stated:

*[N]ormally promise-keeping, for example, should come before benevolence, but that when and only when the good to be produced by the benevolent act is very great and the promise comparatively trivial, the act of benevolence becomes our duty (Ross, 2002, p. 78).*

In the case where the promise was a trivial promise (e.g., a promise born of habit to meet somebody for lunch every Monday), and the accident victims needed significant help, then the duty to aid the accident victims outweighs the duty to keep the promise. On the other hand, if the promise was significant (e.g., a promise to one's child to attend a performance that was important to him), and the accident victims needed little help, the promise outweighs the duty to help.

Compare this to an agent making a choice in the face of conflicting motives. Our agent is in bed because of back pain. He is also hungry. If the pain is significant and the hunger is slight, he may decide to stay in bed. On the other hand, if his back pain was slight and he has grown very

hungry, the motive of hunger outweighs the agent's aversion to his pain and he gets something to eat.

The similarities go further. Once the agent decides what to do (e.g., to help the accident victims) the other duty does not vanish. It persists, continuing to pull the agent in the direction of keeping the promise even as the agent decides not to do so (Ross, 2002, p. 20).

Analogously, desires do not disappear when they are outweighed. Upon deciding to stay in bed, our agent does not cease to become hungry. Instead, the hunger remains, pulling the agent to get out of bed and go to the kitchen.

In explaining how prima facie duties work, Ross drew an analogy to natural forces (Ross, 2002, pp. 28-9; see also Hurka, 2014, p. 73). We recognize a distinction between the individual forces acting on the object and the overall effect on an object of all of the forces acting on it. By analogy, we can recognize a set of prima facie obligations each pushing an agent in the direction of a particular right action and the overall result of all of those prima facie obligations combined. An object can have a force pushing it to the right while an even stronger force pushes it to the left, and an agent can have a duty to keep a promise while an even stronger duty pushes her to help the victims of an accident.

*[The] tendency to be one's duty may be called a parti-resultant attribute, i.e.*

*one which belongs to an act in virtue of some one component in its nature.*

*Being one's duty is a toti-resultant attribute, one which belongs to an act in virtue of its whole nature and of nothing less than this (Ross, 2002, p. 28).*

The same can be said of the motivational forces acting on an agent with good motives. The desire to keep a promise pushes her in the direction of leaving the accident to meet her friend, while the desire to help the accident victims pushes her to stay and help the victims. The stronger motivational force wins the contest.

These similarities suggest that, when we are looking at the agent who made a promise and came upon the accident, we are asking “What would a person who wanted to keep her promise, but also wanted to help the accident victims, do in those circumstances?” She would weigh keeping the promise against helping the victims and go with the strongest motive. Yet, the outweighed motive would not die – it would persist.

Of course, simply knowing that our hypothetical agent had a desire to keep promises and a desire to help those in need will not answer our question. Our hypothetical agent “with good motives and lacking bad motives” would need to have those motives properly calibrated to yield a right answer. There is a proper level of concern for each. As noted above, when Ross compared the obligation to keep promises to the obligation to aid those in need, he wrote that the former should “come before” the latter, but that a great need can outweigh a trivial promise (Ross, 2002, p. 19)

Ross obviously did not claim that the clash of prima facie duties as a clash of motives, but perhaps he should have.

## II. Unfulfillable Duties

There is a break in the analogy given above that suggests that the motive-based interpretation has an advantage.

In our case of the agent who decides to help the accident victims, at some point it becomes clear that she will not be able to keep the appointment. Our agent checks her watch at 11:55 and recognizes that she cannot make it to her appointment at 12:00. Yet, the obligation still exists, even though she cannot fulfill that obligation. If God were to appear at that moment and offer to teleport her to the appointment and take care of the accident victims, our agent's obligations would require that she accept the offer. In this sense, the agent still has an obligation, even though, as a matter of fact, she cannot make the appointment.

Ross' theory does not support these observations. Ross put weight on the principle that "ought" implies "can". For example, he used this to argue that an agent has no obligation to act on a particular motive because an agent cannot summon – instantly and out of the blue – a particular motive and use that motive as a reason for action. Ross would have to say that, at 11:55, our agent no longer has an obligation to keep the promise. Phillip Stratton-Lake argues along similar lines that Ross would have to say that an agent has no obligation to repay a loan if he does not have the money to pay it (Lake, 2002, p. xxxi).

The motive-based thesis can handle this since the motive to keep a promise does not die if the desire behind it cannot be fulfilled. Hunger does not disappear simply because there is nothing to eat, and a parent's wish for the health of their child will not vanish when the doctor informs them that their child has a serious illness. If God were to appear before our agent with a motive to keep promises, offering to teleport her to her destination and care for the accident victims, the person with a desire to keep her promises and a desire to see that the accident victims are cared for would accept the offer. In this case, the thesis that the right act is the act that a

person with good motives would have performed, with Ross' prima facie duties taking the role of good motives, provides the better result.

### III. Acting from a Motive

Ross had a couple of objections to the idea of deriving right action from good motives. The first of these is his objection from "'ought' implies 'can'".

*It is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive (whether this be an ordinary desire or the sense of obligation) in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act. . . . My present duty, therefore, cannot be to act here and now from it*  
*(Ross, 2002, p. 5).*

We can easily set this problem aside. It is not relevant to the thesis I am considering here. The thesis under consideration says to act as a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would act in those circumstance. It does not say to act from a particular motive.

Let us assume you owe somebody \$100. When you hand over the \$100, you have discharged your obligation regardless of whether you acted out of a sense of duty, to avoid being punished, or because doing so indirectly harms the interests of that person's rival – somebody who you dislike. When you have paid back the loan, you have done what a person with good motives would have done in those circumstances.

Henry Sidgwick provided an example of a case we can use to illustrate these points (Sidgwick, III.1.2). That case, which he borrowed from Bentham, involved a prosecutor who prosecutes an individual out of malice. We may imagine a prosecutor holding a grudge from some offense

that the accused committed in grade school. Convinced of the accused's guilt, the prosecutor commands her staff to do everything by the book. "Do nothing that the SOB can use on appeal to escape a conviction. No short cuts." We may assume that this prosecutor is generally lax about following the rules. She demands perfection in this case only to see the accused suffer. Yet, she can form a clear idea of what a properly motivated prosecutor would do and insist on following that model. In doing so, she commits no wrong act.

Because the motive thesis says to act as a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would act in the circumstances, rather than commanding the agent to act from a particular motive, Ross' first objection potential objection against the motive thesis does not apply.

#### IV. The Motive of Duty

Ross' second objection will force me to apply a qualification to the motive thesis. That second objection applied strictly to acting from the motive of duty. A version of that argument will require that the motive thesis exclude the motive of duty from the list of "good motives" when determining right action.

Ross raised this objection against the thesis that the right act is one carried out from a motive of duty. He argued that this thesis produced an absurdity (Ross, 2002, p. 5). In order for my keeping a promise to be the right thing to do, I must do it from a sense of duty. However, my sense of duty is a sense that keeping a promise is the right thing to do. So, now, I must keep my promise from a sense that keeping my promise is the right thing to do. What is my motive for "keeping my promise from the sense that keeping my promise is the right thing to do"? That, in



turn, is something I must do because I have a sense that “keeping my promise from the sense that keeping my promise is the right thing to do” is the right thing to do. This goes on forever.

If we count on our list of good motives the motive of doing one’s duty, then we face a similar objection. We would say that keeping the promise is the right thing to do if it is what a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would do in those circumstances. If we count the motive of duty among the good motives, then we get the conclusion that one should keep a promise if a person motivated by duty would keep his promise. Would a person motivated by duty keep his promise? To answer this question, the person motivated by duty would have to ask if the person motivated by duty would keep his promise. The chain continues, without ever coming to an answer to the question of whether a person motivated by duty would keep his promise.

To avoid this problem, we remove the motive of duty from the list of good motives when determining right action. We use other motives to determine right action and then, after arriving to the answer to what a person with those good motives (and lacking bad motives) would do, the person motivated by duty would know what to do in those circumstances.

Consider, for example, two sets of parents. One set loves their children and is motivated by love to care for and protect them. The other does not love their children but are still motivated by duty to do the right thing. The parents motivated by duty cannot determine what to do by asking, “What would parents motivated by duty do in these circumstances?” There is no direct answer to that question. However, they can ask, “What would parents motivated by love do in

these circumstances?” This will give them an answer – a set of actions that they, motivated by duty, can then perform.

If we cut the motive of duty from the list of good motives, this eliminates the problem of circularity. However, this raises additional concerns.

**Concern 1:** Ross identifies the motive of duty as the “highest motive” (Ross, 2002, p. 65). Yet, I have provided an argument that this motive is irrelevant to determining right action. Can these be reconciled?

**Answer 1:** The usefulness of a motive in determining right action is not the sole determination of its value.

This brings up a question that I have conspicuously avoided so far: What makes a motive a good motive? The answer to this question is relevant to the answer to the question of whether duty is a good motive. There is no space here to answer that question in detail. Instead, I hope that it is sufficient to present some options that would allow duty to be a “highest” (or, at least, higher) motive though it is not useful in determining right action.

*Intrinsic Worth:* One may hold that good motive has intrinsic value. Sidgwick’s sparring partner James Martineau had such a theory (Martineau, 1985). On Martineau’s account, motives could be ranked from lowest to highest. Whenever an agent faced a question about what to do, the agent was to look at the motive behind each option and choose the option backed by the highest motive. Most virtue theories fall into this category.

*Consequentialist:* Some might hold that a good motive produces the best consequences. Robert M. Adams' proposed this in an article on motive utilitarianism (Adams, 1976). Good motives might not be the motives that produce the consequentialist best action in this particular case – so it is not equivalent to “do the act with the best consequences”. Instead, it is the motives that tend to produce good consequences as they are spread among the whole population over a period of time.

*Coherentist:* One might hold that a good motive is a motive that fits harmoniously with other motives. We can interpret Hume's morality as expressed in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* as saying that the best character traits to be those that are pleasing and useful to self and others (Hume, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

On each of these options would allow the motive of duty to have a great deal of value. In no case does its value require that the motive of duty be useful in determining right action.

Instead, they are all compatible with using other motives to determine right actions (e.g., the love of parents for their children) and using those to determine what an agent motivated by duty should do.

**Concern 2:** Some actions, such as repaying debts and keeping promises, seem intimately related to the motive of duty. Would a person with good motives and lacking bad motives – and also lacking a motive of duty – repay debts or keep promises?

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<sup>1</sup> For the record, I would argue that this is the correct way to determine good motives. Good motives are those that people generally have reasons to promote universally. The reasons that they have for promoting those motives are other motives. Those motives, in turn, are evaluated in terms of their relation to still other motives. The means by which agents promote good motives is through the use of praise and condemnation. By way of example, people generally have many and strong reasons (motives) to promote, universally, a desire to keep promises, which they can do by praising those who keep promises and condemning those who do not.

**Answer 2:** To answer the challenge, I wish to distinguish two types of motives: (1) keeping a promise because one has a desire to do one's duty and a belief that one has a duty to keep one's promises and (2) keeping a promise because one has a desire to keep one's promises. If we borrow the idea that a desires and beliefs are propositional attitude, we have a distinction between (1) a "desire that I do my duty" accompanied by a "belief that it is my duty to keep my promise" and (2) a "desire that I keep my promise".

This distinction may be hard to see in terms of keeping promises. It is much easier to see in the case of beneficence, which is another of Ross' prima facie duties. Michael Stocker provides a relevant example. On this example, imagine that you are in the hospital recovering from a long illness (Stocker, 1976). As you recover, Smith visits you regularly, making the long hospital stay much more tolerable. However, it comes out in conversation that the reason he comes to visit you is because he thinks it is his duty to do so and not out of any concern for you. Here, we can more clearly see a difference between visiting you because one desires to do one's duty and believes that one has a duty to visit you and a simple desire to visit you.

It might also be useful to recognize that a person can have a reason to avoid spiders or to avoid burning one's hand on a hot stove without being motivated by a duty to avoid spiders or to avoid burning one's hand on a hot stove. We can like and dislike a great number of things. Among the things we can dislike, in the same way one might dislike spiders, is breaking promises or telling lies.

The problem of circularity will keep the motive of duty out of the list of good desires that we can use in determining right action. However, it still allows us to consider agents who have a

simple aversion to breaking promises or telling lies. If we have reason to count these as good desires – which, I would argue, we do – then, when we put a person with good desires in a situation where (for example) he has something to gain by breaking a promise, she will keep her promise, simply because she hates to break a promise.

#### V. Personal Pleasure and Supererogatory Actions

According to Ross, there is no moral duty to pursue one's own pleasure.

*It seems to me that if we are honest with ourselves, which in a matter affecting us so closely it is hard to be, we shall find that we never really think ourselves morally bound to do an act which will increase our own pleasure, except for some ulterior reason. (Ross, 1939, p. 72)*

This raises a question of how we are to view our hypothetical agent with good motives and lacking bad motives (counting Ross' prima facie duties as good motives) when placed in a situation in which her own pleasure is at stake.

According to Hurka, Ross has a problem handling such cases. In a case where an agent is in circumstances where she could provide 1 unit of pleasure to somebody else or acquire 1000 units of pleasure for herself, Hurka argues that Ross' account would yield the conclusion that one is obligated to provide 1 unit of pleasure for another, foregoing one's own pleasure, even if it is significant (Hurka, 2014, p. 181). We can expand this by asking whether our hypothetical agent would be obligated to endure 1000 units of pain, since Ross' prima facie duties do not include a duty to avoid one's own pain either (unless the pain interferes with realizing some other good).

Hurka sought to correct this problem by introducing a set of prima facie permissions to accompany Ross' prima facie obligations. He claimed that these permissions worked like Ross' prima facie obligations.

*You have a prima facie duty to do acts of type F if an act's being F tends to make it your duty all things considered, and you have a prima facie permission to do acts of type F if its being F tends to make an act all things considered permitted. Just as the prima facie duty to do F is stronger than the prima facie duty to do G in a situation if, taking the two together, what you ought to do is F, so the prima facie permission to do F is stronger than a prima facie duty not to do F if, combining the two, you are permitted to do F. Thus your permission to pursue your own good is stronger than your duty to promote the good impartially whenever you are permitted pursue your lesser good. (Hurka, 2014, p. 180-1)*

I am unclear as to how Hurka's prima facie permissions are to fit in with Ross' prima facie obligations. When we weigh a permission against an obligation, what are we weighing? When we weigh obligations against obligations there is a sense that we are weighing like against like. However, when we consider the case of our hypothetical agent weighing a permission to obtain pleasure for herself against an obligation to provide pleasure for others, we face the question of how to convert units of permissibility into units of obligatoriness so that we can make a proper comparison.

I can express this concern with respect to Ross' force analogy. We can imagine having a force pushing an object to the right can be outweighed by an even stronger force pushing it to the left. Our understanding includes understanding the effect of both forces working on the object and the effects of both of those forces combined. However, Hurka is asking us to fit something else into this picture – something that may counter a force of obligation and push the agent towards a “permissible” end. The fact that this breaks the analogy is not a fatal objection – all analogies break at some point. However, it gives Hurka's thesis a disadvantage compared to an alternative account that I will present after discussing another problem Hurka identified in Ross' theory.

This second problem concerns supererogatory actions. Supererogatory actions go above and beyond the call of duty. The paradigm example of a supererogatory action is that of a healthy person who donates a kidney to a stranger. Ross' theory would seem to make such sacrifices mandatory. There is an obligation to provide benefits for other – and giving a person a kidney clearly provides that person with a benefit. Yet, there is no counter-balancing obligation to oneself, except when the action would harm one's own knowledge or virtue or interfere in the execution of some other duty. Ross' theory seems to make what are normally considered supererogatory actions obligatory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapting another often-discussed example, a large person who can stop a runaway trolley and prevent it from killing five workers down the track by jumping in front of it would have an obligation to do so on Ross' account – particularly if one could avoid dying and suffer “merely” traumatic injuries. Typically, such an action would widely be considered supererogatory rather than obligatory.

If we see Ross' prima facie obligations serving the role of good motives in the motive thesis we can resolve these issues. The pursuit of personal pleasure and avoidance of personal pain are permissible, but not a duty. Certain self-sacrificing actions are supererogatory.

However, these considerations require that I add a few more qualifications and background conditions relevant to understanding the motive thesis. Specifically, there are three empirical facts regarding motives that are relevant to addressing these concerns.

(1) Human motives are malleable. Our likes and dislikes are shaped, in part, by our interactions with our environment.

(2) A part of the environment that alters our likes and dislikes includes the praise and condemnation of others. Or, in other words, we have the power to use praise and condemnation to alter that which motivates other people. This includes not only providing incentives and deterrence but changing people's ends or goals.

(3) This malleability has its limits. There is a range beyond which we cannot expect experience to have much of an influence over basic motives such as aversion to pain, hunger, thirst, sex, comfort, and concern for those who are a part of our family or tribe.

So, with these facts in mind, what can we say about the duty to pursue one's own personal pleasure or avoid one's own personal pain?

I suggest that, unlike the motives on Ross' list, the motive to pursue personal pleasure or avoid personal pain is not a motive we have any reason to encourage. It is not something we have reason to praise people for doing or for condemning them for a failure to do – as a general rule.



It is quite strong enough in its natural state. There is similarly no general duty to eat, drink, to avoid pain, or to have sex.

These motives differ from those drawn from Ross' list of prima facie duties. Those are motives that we have reason to encourage – which we can do by praising people who act as people who have those motives and condemning those who act as people who lacked those motives. Once again, we are not praising or condemning people for having or lacking those motives, but for acting like people who have or lack those motives. A person may begin by being honest out of a desire for praise and condemnation, but then come to be a person who is honest for its own sake – something the person wants to do even when no praise or condemnation is to be had.

With respect to supererogatory action, the motive of generosity is one that we have reason to encourage, but it has its limits. Those limits are not the same for everybody. Some people are going to become more generous than we have reason to expect most people to be. Such is the case of those who donate a kidney to strangers. We have reason to praise these people so as to promote generosity – and to use great praise for the fact that they went above and beyond the call of duty. However, there is little reason to condemn others for failure to reach a level of generosity that we cannot reasonably expect most people to be able to acquire.

Ross wrote:

*The desire for pleasure is so strong in every one that any one who tries to ignore or suppress it entirely will find himself defeated by the laws of human nature; (Ross, 2002. p. 152)*

Ross, here, is recognizing that while we can be expected to give up some pleasure for the sake of duty, it is unreasonable to expect people generally to give up the amounts of pleasure that would be required in Hurka's counter-example, particularly when weighed against the weak benefits that are required. It is consistent with this that there is a level of generosity which, though it is beyond what we can expect of most people, is still possible for some.

## VI. Right Actions/Bad Motives

Before closing, I would like to circle back and consider the issue of why duty requires that an agent act as a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would act, rather than require that an agent act from a good motive and not act from a bad motive.

Item (2) in the previous section says that we use praise and condemnation to change people's motives. This gives us reason to ask: What are the effects of condemning a person who performs a right action from a bad motive?

Under the caveat that this needs empirical investigation, I will suggest that the effect of condemning a person who performs a right act from a bad motive will be to strengthen an aversion to performing acts of that type. Condemn a person who repays a debt out of fear of punishment and the effect will be to promote within him (and within the population as a whole) a greater aversion to repaying debts. This would not be a particularly wise strategy.

The better strategy would be to condemn those who perform a bad action when a person with good motives would have done otherwise. This will help to motivate agents to keep their actions within the track of what a person with good motives would do.

## VII. Conclusion

My intention has been to show that the following proposition at least deserved a closer examination:

*The right act is the act that a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would perform in those circumstances.*

Using Ross' theory of prima facie duties as a foil, I have attempted to show how it explains much of the phenomena that Ross attributed to prima facie duties. Taking Ross' duties and plugging them into the role of "good motives and lacking bad motives", this account explains the weighing of duties and the survival of the outweighed duty – the residue or trace that says that the duty exists even when a stronger duty calls. When combined with certain facts about motives – that they are malleable to some extent and we can shape them using praise and condemnation – it explains Ross' obligation that there is no obligation to pursue one's own pleasure. This simply is not a motive we have reason to encourage or make stronger than nature alone tends to make it.

Furthermore, it patches some of the holes in Ross' account. For example, the fact that a duty survives even under conditions where an agent cannot fulfill it – such as when an agent simply does not have the money to pay back a loan. In a person with good motives, the motive would survive, and the agent is expected to act as a person with that motive would act. Another problem it handles is that of supererogatory action. Ross' theory does not leave room for the possibility of actions above and beyond the call of duty. The motive theory, combined with the fact that motives are not infinitely malleable, suggests that there is a level of generosity we can

expect in some, but not most, individuals. WE have reason to praise (so as to promote) those motives. However, condemning those who lack them would condemn most of the human population for something that our condemnation cannot effectively change.

In other areas, Ross' concerns gave us reason to refine the original thesis. We cannot include the motive of duty in the set of good motives to be used in determining right action since those motives require a prior determination of right action. And, consistent with the claims above concerning supererogatory action, the "good motives" must be those within the realm of what we can effectively expect to be able most people to acquire.

The theory also suggests an explanation as to why we respond to right actions with praise and wrong actions with condemnation. These tools act on the brain to change the motives of agents – not only the motives of the person being praised or condemned, but others as well, attempting to create the good motives that would then become the basis of future right actions.

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