What makes right acts right?

W.D. Ross on
Duty and Moral Knowledge

What makes right acts right?

* Some background assumptions:

  * Some acts are right and others wrong.

    * They are not made wrong by subjective preferences or beliefs.

      * Someone's believing that murder is right does not make it right; by the same token, someone's believing murder is wrong does not make it wrong.

  * Something *makes* right acts right: this is not a brute fact.

  * There is some 'general character' in virtue of which all right acts are right.

The Schema

* An action *a* is right (wrong) if, and only if, *a* . . .

    * What completes this schema?

    * Compare:

        * A figure *F* is a triangle if, and only if, *F* is a closed-plane, three-sided figure.

    * Is it plausible to think that *anything* will complete the schema?

Against Egoism

- An action *a* is right if, and only if, *a* . . .

    - . . .is believed to be right by the agent.

    - . . . feels right to the agent.

    - . . .conduces to the pleasure of the agent.

        - Against egoism: 'This theory comes to grief over the fact, which stares us in the face, that a great part of duty consists in an observance of the rights and a furtherance of the interests of others whatever the cost to ourselves may be.' (Ross, *RAG*)

        - This holds true even if *in fact* doing what morality requires proves good for us.

            - Perhaps, e.g. my job as a postal carrier is *in fact* good for my health; it does not follow that I do my job *because* it is good for my health.

Against Hedonic Utilitarianism

- An action *a* is right if, and only if, *a* . . .

    - . . .conduces to the greatest pleasure overall.

    - Here hedonic utilitarianism fares better than egoism:

        - It is, recall, agent-neutral.

- Still, it is an unsustainable form of value monism.

- As we saw, there are many other things we value, and which we should value: good character, knowledge, love, freedom, authenticity. . .

A Better Form of Consequentialism

- An action *a* is right if, and only if, *a* . . .

    - . . .conduces to the greatest good.

        - Assuming, that is, that pleasure, though *a* good, is not *the* good.

        - Here one may pause to reflect on the 'open-question argument':

            1. It is always possible to ask of any given pleasure *p*: 'but is *p* good?'

            2. It is never possible to ask of any good action or experience *x*, 'but is *x* good?'

            3. If (1) and (2), pleasure is not *the* good.

            4. So, pleasure is not *the* good.

- Let us call this amended form of consequentialism *Ideal Utilitarianism* (**IU**)

Directions of Justification

- This form of justification is forward-looking in time: it grounds the rightness of an act in its future outcomes.

  - Ross's question: does this make sense of our *prima facie* duty to keep a promise?

- The keeping of promises, like lots of other *prima facie* duties, seems essentially backward-looking: what makes keeping a promise right is not that it will issue in this or that outcome, but rather that we should honour *past* commitments.

  - 'When a plain man fulfils a promise because he thinks he ought to do so, it seems clear that he does so with no thought of its total consequences, still less with any opinion that these are likely to be the best possible. He thinks in fact much more of the past than the future.' (Ross, *RAG*)

Breaking Promises

- Sometimes (evidently) we are justified in breaking our promises; sometimes (arguably) we *must* break our promises.

    - One analysis, that of the proponent of IU: this is so, and it is so because in some cases breaking our promise is conducive of the greater good.

    - Another analysis: this is so, and it is so because in some cases one *prima facie* duty gives way to a greater *prima facie* duty—in which case the only real duty is to do as we are directed by the real duty in that situation.

        - On behalf of the second: suppose I could bring the same amount of good into the world by keeping my promise or by breaking it, then, plainly, I should keep my promise rather than break it.

            - This shows, or indicates, that keeping a promise has a consequence-independent value.

An Unsatisfying Simplicity

- In cases of conflicting duties, IU directs us to do that act which produces the most good.

  - The agent-neutrality of this theory, however, seems a weakness as well as a strength.

    - Strength: it rejects as unmotivated and untenable ethical egoism.

    - Weakness: it ignores the complexity and variegation of actual human relations.

      - We are related as promisee to promisor, creditor to debtor, parent to child, friend to friend, neighbour to neighbour, and so forth.

        - '[E]ach of this relations is the foundation of a *prima facie* duty, each is more or less incumbent on me according to the circumstances of the case.' (Ross, 612)

        - 'The essential defect of the "ideal utilitarian" theory is that it ignores, or at least does not do full justice to, the highly personal character of duty.' (Ross, 613)

Types of Duty

- Duties derived from my own acts:

    - those resting on a promise: *duties of fidelity*

    - those resting on a wrongful act: *duties of restitution*

- Duties deriving from the acts of others, e.g. services done to me by others: *duties of gratitude*

- Duties pursuant to the meritocratic distribution of good: *duties of justice*

- Duties deriving from the mere fact that we can help others: *duties of beneficence*

- Duties not to injure others: *duties of restraint*

Completing Our Schema

- An action *a* is right (wrong) if, and only if *a* is required (or proscribed) by my duty.

- Still, it does not follow that acting on duty is always acting on the same ground:

  - A duty not to break a promise (a duty of fidelity) is not the same as a duty to make right a wrong (a duty of restitution).

  - So, although we have a simple schema, our actual moral motivations can be, and in fact will be, various.

Any further justification?

- No. Ross contends that all these duties—as general principles—are *self-evident.*

    - It does not follow that their application will be obvious or mechanical.

- Still, *general* principles of duty are self-evident.

    - 'That an act, *qua* fulfilling a promise, or *qua* effecting a just distribution of goods, or *qua* returning services rendered, or *qua* promoting the good of others, or *qua* promoting the virtue or insight of the agent is *prima facie* right, is self-evident. . .' (Ross, 662)

Self-Evident? Really?

- Yes, really:

- 'It is self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident. The moral order expressed in these propositions is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe (and, we may add, of any possible universe in which there are moral agents at all) as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic. In our confidence that these propositions are true there is involved the same trust in reason that is involved in our confidence in mathematics; and we should have no justification for trusting it in the latter sphere and distrusting it in the former. In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.' (Ross, 663)

Morality and Mathematics

1. We are justified in claiming to know the axioms of morality if, and only if, we are justified in claiming to know the axioms of mathematics (and logic).

2. We are justified in claiming to know the axioms of mathematics (and logic).

3. Ergo, we are justified in claiming to know the axioms of morality.

Assessing this Argument I

- (2) seems plainly correct: we are justified in claiming to know the axioms of mathematics.

    - N.b. however that all such know is (evidently) *a priori*.

        - This is plausibly because mathematical truths are necessary rather than contingent.

            - They in this sense outstrip all available perceptual basis.

        - On this basis, it seems reasonable to conclude:

            - In fact we have at least access to certain sorts of necessary truths.

            - We accordingly have mental faculties capable of putting us into contact with such truths.

Assessing this Argument II.1

- What about (1)?

  - We are justified in claiming to know the axioms of morality if, and only if, we are justified in claiming to know the axioms of mathematics (and logic).

- It is natural to think that we have *a priori* knowledge in the domain of mathematics (and logic), but that we could not possibly have anything similar in the domain of morality?

- Why? Well. . .

  - We have been told that morality is *relative*.

    - We have seen that this is at best a dubiously coherent contention.

  - We have been told that morality is *subjective*.

    - We have seen upon reflection that this is a surprisingly ill-supported contention.

      - Barring moral facts on the grounds that they are just too queer proves, like other failures of rational argumentation, puerile rather than persuasive.

  - Note, importantly, that these sorts of objections pertain to the *metaphysics of morality*, maintaining in their separate ways that there are not, or could not be, suitable objects in the domain of morality.

Assessing this Argument II.2

❖ A different sort of objection to (1):

  ❖ We are justified in claiming *to know* the axioms of morality if, and only if, we are justified in claiming *to know* the axioms of mathematics (and logic).

❖ The problem here pertains not to the metaphysics of morality so much as *moral epistemology*.

  ❖ That is, even assuming provisionally that there are moral facts of some variety, we could never come to know them.

  ❖ Why not?

    ❖ Well, if they were available to be known *a priori*, they would be, just as Ross contends, *self-evident*.

      ❖ But if anything is self-evident, it is that moral truths are *not* self-evident.

        ❖ That is why we are perpetually arguing about them.

    ❖ Further, were we to have such knowledge, we would need a special faculty for acquiring moral knowledge.

      ❖ But we possess no such faculty.

Synderisis?

- Thomas Aquinas thought that we in fact were endowed with such a faculty, which he called *synderisis*.

  - Now it is clear that, as the speculative reason argues about speculative things, so that practical reason argues about practical things. Therefore we must have, bestowed on us by nature, not only speculative principles, but also practical principles. Now the first speculative principles bestowed on us by nature do not belong to a special power, but to a special habit, which is called "the understanding of principles," as [Aristotle] explains (*EN* vi 6). Wherefore the first practical principles, bestowed on us by nature, do not belong to a special power, but to a special natural disposition, which we call *synderesis*. (*ST* 1a 79, q. 12, resp.)

  - As we have a natural disposition to believe the first principles of theoretical knowledge *a priori*, so we have a natural disposition to believe the first principles of practical knowledge *a priori*.

- The first principle of practical knowledge: the good is to be sought.

Moving Forward to Ross

❖ Self-evident?

  ❖ '. . .not in the sense that it is evident from the beginning of our lives, or as soon as we attend to the proposition for the first time, but in the sense that when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself. (Ross, 663)

❖ Self-evident does not mean 'immediately obvious to just anyone, anytime, anywhere.'

❖ Rather, it means 'needs no proof or evidence beyond itself.'

  ❖ This is simply the way of all first principles.

    ❖ This is to say, then, that first principles, being necessary, neither need nor admit of justification beyond themselves.

      ❖ They are known by the natural light of reason, *a priori*.