

**ROSS'S VERSION OF ETHICAL INTUITIONISM:
A STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF MOORE AND KANT**

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The prime focus of moral philosophy in the last four centuries had been the relation of facts to values, specifically the ethical values. The issue evolved and centered round the Humean view that 'Ought cannot be derived from Is'. The naturalist philosophers attempted to define moral words like 'good' or 'right' in terms of natural properties. G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica* criticized the naturalists' intention of defining ethical terms with reference to factual properties. He elaborated the issue and preferred to consider moral terms as in-definable and which refer to some non-natural property knowable through intuition.

The argument which Moore puts forward to refute naturalism may be stated thus. He solely concentrated on examining the object or the idea which the word 'good' stands for or refers to, i. e. the definiens of 'good'. Thereby he showed that 'good' is not definable. In every case that we use 'good' and any natural property to define it, we can look into our minds to clearly realize that 'good' refers to something unique and does not match exactly with any of the natural properties used to define it. This unique property, namely, goodness is, therefore, something which is dealt with in Ethics. Thus, it is through intuition that we come to know that 'good' denotes a unique feature which is not denoted by terms used in defining 'good' viz. 'producing happiness', 'conducive to evolution', 'fulfilling the will of God' etc.

It may be asked, do all men have before their minds the same unique object when they think about good? Even if it be admitted that there is the same unique object in all men's minds when they think of good, this does not prove that if any person fails to have such an object in his mind when he thinks of good, he is guilty of a fallacy. This may be simply a fact that he cannot conceive it, it is not a logical compulsion that it has to be the case. If we try to answer the first question, we are to first set criteria for determining the unique feature of goodness and then need to check whether all people satisfy to have the same criteria of uniqueness when they think of good. It is practically not feasible to determine the criteria for the uniqueness of goodness and therefore application of such criteria also does not come into question. This also answers the second objection raised here that if a person fails to

have such a feeling of unique object with regard to goodness, he actually does no wrong since it is not clear exactly what is meant by this uniqueness .

From the fact that Moore employs intuition to know that goodness is a unique property, we may consider him an intuitionist. But Moore himself declared in the preface of *Principia Ethica* that “I am not an ‘Intuitionist’ in the ordinary sense of the term.” One of the reasons for this self-declaration was probably that Moore did not support the view of the deontological intuitionists who held that judgements concerning right or duty cannot be proved with respect to the results of the actions which are judged, they are to be judged with respect to their intrinsic worth or obligations. Moore, on the contrary, judged actions as right or wrong, as our duty or not on the basis of how much good result, the actions had or failed to have. It is at this juncture that we come across the views of the 20th century philosopher W.D. Ross.

Ross’s intuitionism relates right with duty and goodness and finds a way of relating the explanation of each with the intuitive capacity of a person. Ross defined ‘right’ thus: ‘Right’ means ‘suitable, in a unique and undefinable way which we may express by the phrase “morally suitable” to the situation in which an agent finds himself.’ Such a definition clearly has two aspects of being right – the objective aspect and the subjective aspect. The objective right consists of the morally relevant facts about the persons or things involved, whereas the subjective right refers to the morally relevant thoughts of the agent about the persons or things involved. How do the two different aspects become morally relevant? Ross clarified the matter by bringing in the context of duties or obligations. He said that there are certain general principles of conduct which all men who have developed moral consciousness intuit. They are promise-keeping, fidelity, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, non-malificence etc. These moral obligations are self-evident like the mathematical axioms. Ross, however, refused to finalize the list of these general obligations, because he believed that he might have missed out some of them which other people can intuit. This point seems not at all consistent with his view that those obligations are self-evident. Had they been so, it would have been equally obvious to everyone and therefore there would be no scope of keeping the list of those general obligations incomplete.

The definition of right as stated by Ross gives rise to the question as to how does he relate the ethical property of being right with the natural property of say being the fulfillment of a promise. In discussing on the relation between ethical property and natural property, he referred to the former as consequential characteristic and the latter as (constitutive) characteristic. Ross comments that the connection between keeping a promise and being right is grasped only by intuition. We directly see that if X is the keeping of a promise, then X is right. It is as if like seeing that if a triangle is equilateral, it is also equiangular. This comparison of moral intuition with mathematical intuition was introduced by Prichard and followed by Ross. But Ross while drawing the above analogy pointed at a limitation/restriction in doing so. He said that in case of mathematical intuition, we directly see that if a triangle is equilateral, it is equiangular, and this applies also vice versa. But in moral intuition, if X is the keeping of a promise, we see that if it is right, but we do not see the opposite, i. e. If X is right, it is not necessarily the keeping of a promise.

Ross brings in the concept of duty while elucidating the concept of right. As he defines right, we have seen that he distinguishes between objective right and subjective right. It is, therefore, quite relevant to understand whether it is our duty to perform subjectively right action or objectively right action. In order to make any judgement on the above, it is proper to analyze all possible ways of performing a right action - an action may be in fact right in the situation as it in fact is, an action which the agent thinks right in the situation as it in fact is, an action may be in fact right in the situation as the agent thinks it to be or it may be an action which the agent thinks right in the situation as he thinks it to be. Of all these ways possible for an action to be right, which should be considered as our duty? Ross's answer is the fourth. He argues that in case of the other possible ways of right action, it is implied that in order to know what an agent should do, one should have complete knowledge of all the actions which is open for the agent to do and also what consequences all such actions would bring to him or others concerned. Moreover, one should also have clear idea of the situations in which all such acts would be performed. But such complete knowledge is practically not possible, though logically necessary for choosing what our obligation should be. Therefore, in order to know which action an agent should practically choose to perform, Ross commented that it is the right action

in the fourth sense as stated above whereby an action is right which the agent thinks right in the situation as he thinks it to be. He argues that it is important to draw a distinction between what an agent should do and what he thinks he should do. It is not acceptable that an agent should do an action simply because he thinks that he should do it. If this happens, it is undoubtedly a mistake. Therefore, in order to talk about obligations prudently and also reasonably, Ross considered the fourth kind of right action where the two components are distinctly stated viz. what a person should do and what he thinks he should do.

Ross compares the prima facie concept of rightness with absolute concept of rightness. According to Ross, an action is right in the former sense, i.e. it is prima-facie right, and not absolutely. This is the peculiarity of Ross's deontology as he is not an absolutist in the Kantian sense, rather an objectivist who relates the rightness with the "prima-facie principles" which are valid rules of action that one should generally adhere to but, in cases of moral conflict, may be overridable by another moral principle, hence the moderation. When the two moral principles come into conflict, the relevant features of rightness and wrongness should be compared against each other in order to understand which of them has the greater weightage. For example - an action may be right in respect of its being the keeping of a promise, whereas the same action may be wrong in respect of its being a case of causing harm or evil to someone. However, whichever principle will have more weightage will amount to its being the guiding principle of the action. This leads us to understand the standards which will speak for or decide on the weightage factor. In answer to this, Ross says that it is merely by intuition we can weigh one moral principle against another, i. e. a morally developed man can simply see 'whether rightness outweighs wrongness in an action or not. Ross later described prima facie duties as "responsibilities to ourselves and to others" and he went on to say that "what we should do (our duty proper or our actual duty) is determined by the balance of these responsibilities

Let us point out the discussion in the context of analysing duty, rightness or obligation. What is a tendency to be right? Or, what is a tendency to be one's duty? Ross might be misinterpreted in this regard to mean that 'tendency to be right or tendency to be one's duty is a positive property of an action. This is because, when

we come across an action exemplifying the duty of keeping a promise, we understand that the tendency of being a duty is a property of the action. But Ross pointed out that duty is not a property of actions, it is a fact about agents. He was motivated by Prichard who said, "But, as we recognize when we reflect, there are no such characteristics of an action as ought-to-be doneness and ought not to-be-doneness. This is obvious; for, since the existence of an obligation to do some action cannot possibly depend on actual performance of the action, the obligation cannot itself be a property which the action would have, if it were done. What does exist is the fact that you, or that I, ought or ought not, to do a certain action. And when we make an assertion containing the term 'ought' or 'ought not', that to which we are attributing a certain character is not a certain activity, but a certain man. "From the above passage, it is clear that, we may ascribe rightness to a particular action which is done or is possibly done, but duty is never ascribed of an action, it is always said of a person or the agent who does the action that it is his duty. Hence, duty is always of a person. But an action is the duty of a person not only when it is done but also when it is not done. It means it is expected of a person to do an action which is his duty, but it is not always that one performs his duty .though he should.

Ross next tries to relate goodness with duty or what is right. According to him, what is morally good may be any of the following - moral good may be an action which is voluntarily performed as being part of one's duty, or to relieve from pain , or just for the sake of extending knowledge; or , moral good may be the desire to do such an action as mentioned above, even if the desire does not produce the action in reality ; moral good may also be the satisfaction to see that the action has attained the ends it aimed at, or the dissatisfaction to see that the ends are not achieved ; moral good can be the dispositions in the character of a person which lead him to do such an action . From the above, it is worth noting that any action done from the sense of duty is not morally good. Because, it may so happen that a man performs an action from a sense of duty but his motive is not good. Hence, his intention may be right though his motive is wrong. Such an action is not said to be morally good. On the contrary, it may so happen that a man has a good motive to do an action, but it goes against his duty, therefore, his intentions are not right. An action which is in accordance with duty is a right action, i.e. a right / dutiful action exhibits

the right intention. Whereas, an action is morally good, where the agent has a good motive behind it, irrespective of whether it is /is not a right / dutiful action. Therefore a good action may not be a right action and a right action may not be a good action. After having related / distinguished moral goodness with / from right or duty, Ross moves towards showing how the concepts are tied together under the common notion of intuition. He says that all the concepts of goodness, rightness or duty are recognised intuitively. To quote Ross, “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” (*W.D. Ross, The Right and the Good, 1930*)

As we intuit the moral principles and thereby perform an action, we do not evaluate/judge an action intuitively on the basis of its consequences. This clarifies that the version of intuitionism as propounded by William. D. Ross is unique in its approach and is unlike the consequentialist Intuitionism of Moore. Moore sees the goodness of an action performed intuitively on analysing the nature of the action, whereas Ross prefers to do good actions as guided intuitively by principles. This hints to Ross’s inclination as a deontologist in his approach towards ethical intuitionism.

Deontological (duty-based) ethics is concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions. Under this form of ethics we cannot justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences, which is why it is sometimes called 'non-Consequentialist'. The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means 'duty'. Duty-based ethics is usually what people talk about when they refer to 'the principle of the thing'. Duty-based ethics teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced. As Ross said, “Some kinds of action are wrong or right in themselves, regardless of the consequences. Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules. Someone who follows Duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm (or less good) than doing the wrong thing. People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result. So, for example, the philosopher Kant thought that it would be wrong to tell a lie in order to save a friend from a murderer.

If we compare Deontologists with Consequentialists we can see that Consequentialists begin by considering what things are good, and identify 'right' actions as the ones that produce the maximum of those good things. Moore was a Consequentialist in the sense that he relied on intuiting the moral nature of an action in accordance with the consequence which followed there from. Deontologists like Ross appear to do it the other way around; they first consider what actions are 'right' intuitively and proceed from there. So a person is doing something good if they are doing a morally right action as guided by the intuitive moral principles.

Ross, though a deontological intuitionist, was not a deontologist in the absolutist sense like Immanuel Kant. He was an objectivist intuitionist. Many philosophers believe he created a stronger form of deontological ethics than Kantianism. Ross begins with intuitionism, which is the position that people immediately grasp right and wrong. An intuition is a truth we apprehend directly; no reasoning or evidence is necessary. For example, we intuit that we are currently conscious or that the rose is red. No reasoning is necessary to know these claims. Ross believed that moral intuitions are like sense perceptions. For example, we see a round object, and then notice it is red, and so on. Roundness and redness are immediate intuitions. We immediately intuit that parallel lines never meet on a plane surface. These are self-evident and cannot be proved. More importantly, they are not absolute. For example, redness does not always override roundness or blueness.

According to Ross, as we become educated and more experienced, we become better at intuiting the morally correct act in each situation. For example, we have an intuitive duty to keep promises and improve ourselves. So, Ross believed we have an immediate duty to keep promises, be faithful, and so on. For example, we should presume to keep promises unless a conflicting duty overrides us. So, we should keep our promise to meet our friend for coffee, but this obligation is overridden when we encounter a car accident. Our primary moral obligation is then to help them, not to keep the promise. In this case, beneficence overrides promise keeping. So, Ross is not an absolutist, but he is an objectivist, and it seems his system better captures how moral people actually reason. Both promise-keeping and beneficence are objectively valid, but neither is absolutely decisive. Promise-keeping overrides beneficence in some cases, beneficence overrides promise-keeping in other

cases, and so on. In a similar way, both earth's gravity and the laws that propel a rocket engine are objective, but the rocket engine wins out when it escapes Earth. Now, *actual duties* are what we should do in each case. For example, your actual duty is to help the victims of the car accident, while your conflicting prima facie duties are to keep promises and be benevolent. In this case, benevolence overrides promise keeping and becomes your actual duty. Again, Ross' system is not absolutist because every objective value is sometimes overridden by other objective values. Therefore, though Ross is an objectivist, he is not an absolutist, rather a relativist. Ross's theory also captures the idea that intelligent, wise, and experienced people intuit the morally best action in each situation. The wise and good action is not a matter of applying the categorical imperative or calculating consequences. Nor it is a matter of blindly following your culture or exclusively pursuing your own self-interest. Rather, it is a matter of intuiting the right action based on many irreducible principles, emotions, a priori categories, and experiences.

One criticism of Ross' Deontological Intuitionism is that, it does not seem people can argue for intuitions. We either see they are true or we don't. We either see that justice is good or we don't. No reasoning is necessary, and this seems to be a weakness of all forms of intuitionism. So, perhaps relying on intuitions in ethics should be no more problematic than relying on them in other fields. Again intuitionists like Ross do not claim intuitions are infallible. Just as our sensory intuitions can be mistaken, so can our moral intuitions be. It will therefore be highly optimistic though ambitious to claim that *Ethical Intuitionism* may be justified by an attempt to synthesize the views of Ross and Kant. From Kant, we may learn that universalizing reason leads to intuitions, whereas from Ross, we may accept the intuitions are not absolute.

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