

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

Prof. Vineet Sahu

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Week - 03

Lecture - 19

Ethical Rules (WD Ross)

Hello everyone. Now, we will talk about a variation, or a model of Deontological Ethics. We have talked about Deontological Ethics earlier. And now, we would like to see a model of, Non-Consequential or Deontological Ethics. Now, there is a philosopher called W.D.

Ross, who has postulated a theory of ethical rules, right, which is called the Prima Facie duties. So, Prima Facie in Latin means, in first glance. So, let me read out, this is an example of Deontological Theories. If you remember, as you recollect, Deontological Theories are theories, that hold something as intrinsically valuable.

Duty, intrinsically valuable. So, something that is intrinsically valuable, that is crucial about Deontological Ethics. But now, in Deontological Ethics, there are various theories. As we had come across, Immanuel Kant was one of the leading proponents of Deontological Ethics. He had his own version of Deontological Ethics.

Ethical rules are also, another version of Deontological Ethics. So, Deontological Ethics is a blanket or an umbrella term. And, there are many ethical theories, that have been developed within it. So, Deontological Ethics tells us a format of ethics, that ethics which are intrinsically valuable. But, what is intrinsically valuable, that is to be articulated by a theory.

So, please keep this in mind, in case there is ever a confusion between, whether Deontological Ethics is theory, or say ethical rules by Ross is a theory, prime of duty. So, what is intrinsically valuable, is described by the theory. So, for W.D. Ross, some ethical rules that he gives out, is what is intrinsically valuable.

So, let me give you a brief overview about, what is the rational, and what is the ethical rules got to do with. I will frequently be using the word, prima facie duty, so that, it not

only signifies the theory, but it also makes sense. By calling it, W.D. Ross, it also, it just gives us a name, but not the meaning in it.

And, I will take a side step here, and also tell you, that you might have come across, as you enter and progress in your theoretical studies, that very often you look at a person's name as a framework. Right. So, you have a Newtonian worldview. You have an Einsteinian worldview. You have a Kantian worldview.

Right. You may have heard, Descartes system. So, when we look at, to take people's name, as looking at a system, it is not only acknowledging the founder of the system, but also describing the philosophy of the system. Right. So, the Newtonian worldview, or Newtonian mechanics, would be different from, say, Einsteinian worldview. And, here, the founder and the philosophy of that particular system, is symbolised by the founder.

Right. So, when I say, a Kantian system, or in Mills Utilitarianism. So, that particular person is not just being accredited for being the founder, but is also a part of, is not being the founder, but is also giving a system. So, when we symbolise a system, with a person's or the founder's name, it is not only to pay respect to the founder, but also to describe it, as a shorthand for a philosophy. So, the Newtonian philosophy of looking at the world, is different from the Einsteinian philosophy. Descartes philosophy of looking at the world.

So, each founder also gives a philosophy of looking at the world. So here, that is why, we have names of people attached with theories, not just because they are the founders, but also it gives a neat shorthand for, what that particular philosophy of that theory is. So, instead of talking about the Rossian theory, I will stick to the terminology, Prima Facie duties here. So, that it also, because the noun would not mean much to you, but Prima Facie duties will help you, make sense of it, even more. So, Prima Facie duties is about, the first glance, the duties that you have in the first glance.

Prima Facie duties are duties, that become apparent or evident, on the first encounter, with a moral dilemma. Ross view is that, our actual moral duty, in any situation has to arrive by weighing our Prima Facie duties, and deciding which is most important. Yes, I missed introducing, the big picture of the particular theory. Now, look at Ross. Ross with his theory of Prima Facie duties, what does he want to do.

Let us have the fundamental question sorted out. Ross wants to put up a theory of moral decision making. He gives a set of laws, that are to be followed. So, to bring some sort of the laws, these laws that he gives, or the ethical rules that he gives, these are describing, what is intrinsically valuable.

Right. So, what is Ross contribution. The Prima Facie duties are, giving content to the intrinsic values. That these are intrinsic values, to be followed. So, in the broader ambit of Deontological Ethics, Ross introduces a theory, where he gives a set of laws or rules, which are intrinsically valuable. Only, we need to calibrate it, depending on the situation.

So, he gives something, which is intrinsically valuable. And, that is why, his theory is a Deontological Theory. Because, he gives something, which is intrinsically valuable. So, our actual moral duty, Ross view is that, our actual moral duty, in any situation, has to be arrived at, by weighing our Prima Facie duties, and deciding, which is the most important. So, here is a B, that should be, has to be arrived at, by weighing our Prima Facie duties, and deciding, which is the most important.

Right. So, how does this come out to be. Let us say, how do you take a decision. We will come to the list of laws. Maybe, I will just show you a glimpse of the laws, that he talks about, before we make the decision.

I think, that will. He lists out, these are the duties, according to Ross. Right. So, he puts out a set of six duties. The first duty being, having two parts. Let me briefly go over them, so that they can make sense to you.

Right. That, these are things, which are intrinsically valuable. These are duties, to be done, no matter what. Right. So the choice is not, between doing this or not, but between choosing, which duty over the other, calibrating. That is the only freedom, or the discretion, that a human agent has.

So, this Prima Facie duties theory, is giving us almost a compass, a way, to make a moral decision. Right. That, if we have a circumstance, or a moral situation, how do we think through it. We apply that, Prima Facie, these are the rules, that will be applied. And, within these laws or rules, we need to decide, which one has to be given precedence over the other.

Right. So, let us say, let us quickly briefly look at, what are the duties, that Ross talks about. Duties from the previous acts of the agent. That means, things that come from the past. Duties of fidelity. That means, keeping one's commitment, implicit or explicit.

And, duties of reparation. What is duties of reparation. Making good a wrongful act. Let us think of an example, that if you have wronged somebody, you have a fundamental duty to correct that wrong, to make right that wrong. That is something, that comes from your previous acts.

Duties of fidelity. Because, you have made a commitment. So, you need to live up to it. So, this is the primary or the first duty, that comes about. The duties from previous acts of the agent.

Second, it is duties of gratitude. So, repay obligations. The first is the duty, that comes from the previous acts of the agent. And, the second is duties of gratitude. That where, you have received something, you need to repay obligations.

So, this is the duties of gratitude. Then, comes the duties of justice. Duties of justice talks about, preventing inequitable distribution. So, wherever one is in the position to take a step, to prevent inequitable distribution, these are the duties of justice, that is intrinsically valuable. That, all of these are intrinsically valuable duties. Duties of beneficence, or make better the lives of other beings.

So, duties of beneficence, that how can you affect and help, make better the lives of others. Then, there is the duties of self-improvement. That how do you, cause your own growth, growth in the agent's own virtues or intelligence. Right. So, there is a duty, towards one's self-growth also.

And finally, duties of maleficence, that you are not to injure others. So, these are the six duties, with the first one having two parts, that Ross lists out as something, which is intrinsically valuable, and which needs to be followed. Right. But then, the question comes, how do you decide on this. Perhaps, you may like to pause the video, and go through these six duties, which apparently appear simple, but they are quite beautifully conceptually connected.

And give a step-by-step notion of, what is intrinsically valuable. That these things, need to be done, irrespective of the consequences, that they bring about. These are our fundamental duties. And, that is why, you would notice the term, duties attached to each of these particular claim. We talk about duties, duties of non-maleficence.

That means, not injuring others. So, that is also part of our duty. So, this is a simplified version of Ross theory. So, that one gets to understand, what kind of a theory is a deontological theory. Now, having given these duties, that we come across these duties, as something which is intrinsically valuable, how do we make a decision. And, here we will go back to the previous slide, that talks about, what about the decision.

How is the decision to be taken. The decision is to be taken by the agent, in due cognizance of the particular situation. Is this set of six rules, algorithmic and magical, that you just feed it into the form of an algorithm, and it should be able to take decisions.

Well, no. Ross has of course, been thoughtful enough to understand, that this cannot be a mechanical application of these rules.

So, not a mechanical application of the rules. So, the decision to be taken by the agent, is in due cognizance of a particular situation. What does this mean. Okay. Sorry about that. Now, there can be a hierarchy amongst duties, when other components are equal.

That means, there can be a hierarchy. However, that hierarchy is not an absolute hierarchy amongst duties. So, there is a decision, that has to be taken by the moral agent. The ethical rules mentioned, the six ethical rules are intrinsically valuable. But they are not mechanically, or automatically applicable to a circumstance.

The agent has to take due cognizance. That means, has to be aware, to factor in, what is the duty, that should take precedence over the other, if there is a need for recalibration. And then, apply these particular duties. There can be a hierarchy amongst duties, when other components are equal. That means, given that other components are equal, then we can follow the same law of application of duties, say number one goes first, two goes second, and third. But, there can be no absolute hierarchy amongst the duties.

Now, so what is the upshot. Well. Is it the middle path, that Ross is talking about. Ross theory remains absolutistic, yet attempts to cater to the particularities of varied moral dilemmas. I will pause here, to spend a moment on this particular point. Does this sound paradoxical, or self-contradictory.

Let us take a look at this. Ross theory remains absolutistic. It is absolutistic. Why is it absolutistic. Because, it gives six rules to be followed. Yet attempts to cater, the particularities of a varied moral dilemmas.

So, that means, moral dilemmas can differ. How does Ross theory attempt to cater to this, varieties of moral dilemma. By keeping the hierarchy between these rules, as situation dependent.

Right. So, agent dependent. So, the rules are absolute. But, the hierarchy depends on the particular situation. This is what makes it. This makes it absolute. This makes it accommodative.

That is a very interesting combination, that puts up. When one has absolute rules, they tend not to be accommodative. They cannot accommodate the peculiarities of a situation. Right. So, let us take a standard example. And, that is why, always please connect these theories, with lived experiences.

These come late to the class. Right. There can be an absolute rule, that anybody who is come late to the class, will not be given attendance. Right. That is an absolute rule. But, that rule can also be foolish or ineffective, when it does not take into account, the particularities of a situation.

Suppose, there is a political protest outside the college. And everybody is held up. And therefore, or at least a batch of students are held up. Now, if they come in late, that is when the teacher takes a decision. That, yes, we have a law, that anybody who is late to class, will not be marked present. But, in these circumstances, she or he, the students may be marked present.

That is, what is the accommodative component. So, absolute rules are simple. But, they do not have the power of accommodation, or taking care of the particularities of a situation. But, how then is the hierarchy amongst the rules decided. That is the question, that how do we decide the hierarchy amongst the rules.

That is a valid question, that comes about. Now, is it moral intuition. Is it moral intuition, that how do you decide the moral hierarchy. Do we have a moral sense, that moral qualities supervene on sensible qualities. Are we making essentially moral judgements. Can there ever be a uniformity in moral judgements.

Now, this is a question, an angle of critique, that I leave open to you. Because, this is where, you will sit on judgement on a theory. And, to critique, or to find the limits of. So, remember another crucial distinction, that when I use the word, or when the word critique is used off, it does not mean criticise.

It does not mean criticise. Rather, it means to set the limits of. This is what, my teacher had once taught me, a clarity that helps me, use the word critique very sensibly. Critique is not an act of criticism, which in colloquial language, very often is used, as to always play the devil's advocate, or always find fault with the established claim. To critique a theory, or as used in academic literature, is to set the limits of. So, when I critique, the primer face duties theory, I would say that, the one point used is well, how does one recalibrate, or to use the application of the moral rules, given by Ross. Do we have a moral sense, or do moral qualities, supervene on sensible qualities.

Are we essentially making moral judgements. Can there be a uniformity in judgements. That means, if somebody would hold duties of reparation, in this particular circumstance, as secondary to say, duties of justice. Whereas, somebody else may hold it, the other way round. So, these are the difficulties, that also come with Ross theory.

But, we are not here doing a specialised study of primer face duties of Ross. Rather, we are trying to look at an example of, what an example of Deontological Ethics is. So finally, a uniformity in judgements, requires a uniformity in human nature. So, that means, for Ross, what are the assumptions, that Ross is probably holding. That, he holds that, a uniformity in judgements, will require a uniformity in human nature. Our moral ideas and moral judgements, are based on certain common facts, about human nature.

So, our moral ideas and moral judgements, are based on certain common facts, about human nature. Within our enormous variety, lies some essential similarities. And, that is the source of our morality. So, the critique that was raised in the earlier page, is now trying to be answered.

That well, a uniformity in judgement, requires a uniformity in human nature. What was the critique. The critique was that well, different people may value hierarchies differently, in different circumstances. So, arguing for Ross, one could say that well, Ross expects or requires, that a uniformity in judgement, requires a uniformity in human nature.

Is that too much to ask for. No. Because, it is not saying that, all of us are identical. But, our moral ideas and moral judgements, are based on certain common facts, about the human nature. What are certain common facts. That say, we find unprovoked violence, incorrect.

There may be outliers, there may be people or moral agents, who may disagree with it. But, when we make a law, we look at, which is almost a universally accepted claim. Perhaps, nothing is universally accepted. There will be truant reasoning, there will be peculiarly different people. So, within our enormous variety. So, this accepts, acknowledges that, there is an enormous variety, in the kind of people we are.

Still, there are some essential similarities. And, that is the source of our morality. So, essential similarities, and that is the source of our morality. So, with this, we come to understand, what Ross theory about Primer-Fecy duties is, which is a typical example of Deontological Ethics. So, I hope you have had a brief idea, about what Deontological Ethics is. And, take a look at, or understood an example of Deontological Ethics, which is Primer-Fecy Duties Theory, by W.

D. Ross. A simple rendition of it, that will help you make sense of it. Right. So, with this, we end our discussion of, W.D. Ross Primer-Fecy Duties Theory of Ethical Rules, which is an example of Deontological Ethics. Thank you. .