

ROSS ON DUTY AND IGNORANCE

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Article:

In his *Foundations of Ethics*, W. D. Ross continued to maintain the view, first developed in *The Right and the Good*, that "right" designates that which is morally suitable to the situation in which an agent finds himself.¹ But, as Ross notes, more needs to be said since an agent's situation contains two elements. The *objective element* consists of facts about the persons and things involved in the situation. That act which in fact is morally suitable to the situation as it actually is represents the objective element and is said by Ross to be objectively right. The *subjective element* consists of the agent's thoughts about the situation. That act which the agent, in view of his beliefs about the situation, thinks is morally suitable is called by Ross subjectively right (*FE*, p. 146).

Having identified these two elements, Ross asks "which of the characteristics—objective or subjective rightness—is ethically the more important, which of the two acts is that which we ought to do?" (*FE*, p. 147). In *RG* Ross was committed to the objective view on this issue. His purpose in Chapter VII of *FE* is to repudiate the objective view and to argue for the superiority of the subjective position. Ross attributes his conversion to H. A. Prichard's well-known lecture on this issue,² but Ross himself advances additional arguments. The purpose of this paper is to explain the philosophical motivation for Ross's about-face on the issue of duty and ignorance and to assess the adequacy of the arguments put forward to support such a change. Before turning to these tasks, however, some preliminary work must be done.

Part I

In order to enhance our understanding of the topic under discussion, two clarifications must be made. One concerns the nature of the issue itself; the other deals with the alternative positions that can be taken.

The dispute between advocates of the objective and subjective views is a normative one; in certain situations, these views disagree about what an agent ought to do. But this normative disagreement is at a higher level of generality than those we normally encounter. It is not the argument among egoists, utilitarians, Kantians, and others about what characteristics make an act right. Indeed, within each of these theories advocates of the subjective and objective views will emerge.³ Thus, for example, some utilitarians defend actual consequence utilitarianism; others, foreseeable consequence utilitarianism.⁴ That the issue arises within any theory of rightness, however, should not lead us to think that it is metaethical. The dispute is about how to assess an agent's conduct in particular circumstances; it is not about the meanings of moral terms, their logic, or more generally about what is going on when people engage in moral discourse.⁵

It is also misleading to describe this as a dispute between only two positions, the objective and subjective views, though that is how Ross and Prichard often depict it. According to them, the objective view holds that an agent's moral requirements depend on certain facts about the situation; an agent ought to do that act which *is* morally suitable to the situation as it *actually is*. And the subjective view maintains that what an agent is required to do

depends on his beliefs about the situation.⁶ So described, these two views will yield conflicting prescriptions only if agents have false beliefs about situations concerning which they must make moral decisions.⁷ But there are at least two possible sources of false beliefs: (i) an agent's relevant factual beliefs (about the situation) may be false or (ii) an agent's general moral beliefs may be false. Because errors of two different sorts are possible, a finer distinction is needed; as a result, three different positions emerge.

The *objective* view may be stated as before: an agent ought to perform that act which is morally suitable to the situation as it actually is. According to the objective view, what an agent ought to do is determined by what the correct moral theory says is right in that situation, independent of his beliefs.⁸ What I shall henceforth call the *subjective* view holds that what an agent ought to do is that which would be morally suitable if the situation were as the agent believes it to be. The subjective view holds fixed the moral principles by which an agent's conduct is to be assessed. What those principles are applied to is the situation as the agent believes it to be.⁹ The *putative* view, as I shall call it, maintains that what an agent ought to do is that which he believes is right.¹⁰ The putative view holds fixed neither the moral principles by which an agent's decisions are to be assessed nor the facts of the particular situation. If an agent's moral principles are correct and all of his relevant beliefs about the situation are also correct, then the objective, subjective, and putative views will all agree about what the agent ought to do. If an agent's moral principles are correct but his relevant factual beliefs are mistaken, then the subjective and putative views will prescribe the same course of action, but they will differ from what the objective view says that the agent ought to do. The subjective and putative views will differ only when the agent's moral principles are mistaken. Put simply, the objective view says that an agent ought to do that act which is objectively right; the subjective and putative views deny this.

Suppose that Ross's deontological account of rightness is correct. Suppose further that some agent falsely believes that act utilitarianism is correct, that his relevant factual beliefs are correct, and that the situation is such that act utilitarianism and Ross's theory yield conflicting prescriptions. In this case, since the agent's relevant factual beliefs are correct, the objective and subjective views yield the same prescription: the agent ought to do what *is* morally suitable in that situation. The putative view, however, recommends that the agent do that which he believes will produce better consequences than any alternative act.

The dispute among advocates of the objective, subjective, and putative views is a normative one because they disagree about how to assess an agent's conduct. When an agent's moral beliefs or relevant factual beliefs are false, these views will sometimes answer the question "Did the agent do what he ought to have done?" differently.¹¹

Part II

In *FE*, Ross defends what I have called the putative view. This is in sharp contrast with the objective view to which he is committed in *RG*. In this section I shall suggest that the reason that Ross changes his mind on this issue is that he alters his position on several other questions. These questions are: (1) When an agent has a moral requirement, what is it that he is required to do? (2) Is a necessary condition of an action's being an agent's duty that the agent can do it knowing or believing that it is his duty? (3) What is the relationship between ought judgments and agent evaluations?

Regarding question (1), Ross first held that when an agent has a moral requirement, what he is required to do is perform a certain act. Ross characterizes an act as a production of a change in the state of affairs, or in some cases the maintenance of an existing state of affairs (*RG*, p. 42). If, for example, one has promised to return a book to a friend, what one is required to do is not merely to aim at returning the book nor to do what is likely to produce that result; rather, one is required to produce that result (*RG*, pp. 42-43). In spite of a great effort and painstaking care, one may fail to return the book; and, in spite of being careless, one may succeed in doing so. But only in the latter case has one done one's duty. Ross realized that, on this view, there is luck involved in doing what one ought to do. As he puts it, "There is therefore much truth in the description of the right act as a fortunate act" (*RG*, p. 31). Nevertheless, only the results can tell us whether one has done a duty. "The

attainment of the result proves the sufficiency of the means." "Success and failure are the only test, and a sufficient test, of the performance of duty" (*RG*, p. 45).¹²

Nine years later, however, Ross answers question (1) differently. He argues that when one has a moral requirement, one is required to aim at producing a certain state of affairs, or, as he sometimes says, to set oneself to perform a certain act. Ross claims that to say that one is required to do some action implies that there is a particular kind of activity whose nature it is to be the bringing about of something.

But there is no type of mental activity of which the general nature is to be the producing of a change in some physical object such as the moving of a hand or a foot. On the contrary, if we ask *how* we move a hand or a foot, the natural answer is that we do so by setting ourselves to do so. There is a type of mental activity of which the generic nature is to be the setting oneself to effect a change in a physical object, and of which setting oneself to move a hand or a foot is an instance. The change in the physical object, when it follows, is merely the result—the intended result, of course—of the mental activity. (*FE*, p. 153.)

One cannot be required to perform an act, then; the only thing to which one can be morally obliged is "self-exertion, a setting oneself to effect this or that change or set of changes" (*FE*, p. 160).

Turning to question (2), in *RG* Ross claims that we know the general principles of duty, the rules by which we must guide our lives. Knowing what is required in particular situations, however, is another matter.

Our judgements about our actual duty in concrete situations have none of the certainty that attaches to our recognition of the general principles of duty. (*RG*, p. 30.)

The source of our uncertainty, Ross maintains, is that any act has many characteristics, in virtue of some of which it may be *prima facie* right and in virtue of some of which it may be *prima facie* wrong. As Ross puts it,

And though we do not always recognize that a possible act has two such characteristics, and though there may be cases in which it has not, we are never certain that any particular possible act has not, and therefore never certain that it is right, nor certain that it is wrong. (*RG*, p. 31.)

So, because knowledge of what one ought to do in a particular situation depends on both general principles and the facts of the situation including the future consequences of one's acts, one can never be sure what one ought to do. In concrete situations, we have at best "probable opinions."

In *FE*, Ross reverses himself on question (2). He claims that "anything that we ought to do must be something that we not only can do, but can do with the knowledge or at least the opinion that it is our duty" (*FE*, p. 163). Ross here seems to appeal to a version of the principle that "ought" implies "can."¹³ Suppose that an agent ought to perform an act but does not know that he ought to do so. Even if the agent can do this act in that it is within his power and even if he can do the act intentionally in that it is an option that he knows (or believes) is available to him, this is not enough to satisfy Ross. Ross, in *FE*, says that if an agent is required to perform an act, then he must know (or believe) that he ought to do that act. And though Ross does not always distinguish explicitly between the subjective and putative views, this demand commits him to the putative position. This is so because the subjective view cannot satisfy the posited requirement in those cases where an agent's moral beliefs are false. Ross himself understands this, as he indicates when he says that his answer to the question "What is my duty?" possesses a "double dose of subjectivity"; the answer depends "on my opinion as to what is morally suitable to what is in my *opinion* the state of the facts" (*FE*, p. 164). And, of course, either opinion can be false.

It is worth noting that Ross's later answer to question (1) is also influenced by his understanding (and acceptance) of the principle that "ought" implies "can." This is because the later Ross thinks that performing an *act* is not within one's power in the appropriate sense. The term "act," according to Ross, designates causing a

certain change by setting oneself to cause it. What is not within one's power in the appropriate sense is causing the change. But self-exertion or setting oneself to do something is within one's power. To convince readers of this, Ross argues,

[I]f a man had, without knowing it, become paralysed since the last time he had tried to effect the given type of change, his self-exertion, though it would not produce the effect, would obviously be of exactly the same character as it would have been if he had remained unanalyzed and it had therefore produced the effect. The exertion is all that is his and therefore all that he can be morally obliged to; whether the result follows is due to certain causal laws which he can perhaps know but certainly cannot control . . . (*FE*, p. 160.)

This passage suggests that Ross no longer allowed what he did allow earlier: that luck can play a significant role in whether one performs one's duty. It should be stressed, though, that in *RG* Ross did not deny that "ought" implies "can;" he simply construed that principle differently.

Let us turn now to question (3). Here we are asking whether there is a necessary connection between ought-judgments and agent evaluations. If an agent can do what he ought to do but he blameworthy for his behavior, and if an agent can fail to do what he ought to do but be praiseworthy (or at least not blameworthy) for his behavior, then we shall say that there is no necessary connection between ought judgments and agent evaluations. But if an agent's doing what he ought to do entails that he is praiseworthy (or at least not blameworthy) for his behavior, or if an agent's failing to do what he ought to do entails that he is blameworthy for the behavior, then we shall say that there is a necessary connection between ought judgments and agent evaluations.¹⁴ In both *RG* and *FE*, Ross denies that there is a necessary connection between ought judgments and agent evaluations. But some of the cases that he can allow to demonstrate this claim in the former work cannot be allowed in the latter book.

In *RG*, Ross distinguishes sharply between ought judgments and agent evaluations. What one ought to do depends on the actual circumstances. My duty is "that which if I were omniscient I should see to be my duty" (*RG*, p.32). But agent evaluations—judgments of moral goodness or badness—depend on other factors. If a person performs an act that it is reasonable for him to think is his duty and if he does it for an appropriate reason (e.g., because he thinks it is his duty), then the agent is to be assessed positively even if the act turns out not to coincide with duty (*RG*, p. 32). Thus, the most obvious case of the divergence of ought-judgments and agent evaluations (i.e., where one is negative and the other is positive) is the case where an agent fails to do his duty because of nonculpable ignorance. This, of course, is not the only case where ought-judgments and agent evaluations can diverge. If a person sets out to do something contrary to duty or is acting carelessly, he may nevertheless, due to good fortune, do what he ought to do; but he will be assessed negatively. To illustrate this, Ross discusses the case of a man who is required to return a book to its owner. Though the man is quite careless in packing and dispatching the book, it is returned. The agent has done his duty, though as an agent he is to be assessed negatively (*RG*, p. 45).

Clearly, a defender of the putative view cannot allow ought judgments and agent evaluations to diverge in the two types of cases just discussed. And, indeed, in *FE*, Ross indicates some skepticism about his previous views on this issue. He says in several places that his reliance on the distinction between rightness and moral goodness to resolve certain paradoxes is no longer adequate (see, for example, *FE*, pp. 64 and 147). And he even comes close to endorsing the view that there is a necessary connection between ought judgments and agent evaluations when he says, "The notion of obligation carries with it very strongly the notion that the non-discharge of an obligation is blameworthy" (*FE*, p. 163). Nevertheless Ross continues to maintain that there is no necessary connection between ought judgments and agent evaluations. To do this, he points to two types of cases where the putative view can allow ought-judgments and agent evaluations to diverge (*FE*, p. 167). In one case the agent does what he thinks is his duty, but *not because* he thinks it is his duty. Perhaps he is motivated by the desire to be praised by others. In the other case a person may fail to do what he thinks is his duty, but be moved by some other good motive, such as kindness. For example, a parent may think that her child ought to be

punished, but fail to do so because of kindness. This is a case of moral weakness, but Ross thinks that the motive of the act indicates that the agent is morally good.

An even more basic change is at the heart of Ross's shift from the objective to the putative view. In *RG* Ross held that two types of moral judgments are fundamental: The assessment of acts (as objectively right or wrong) and the assessment of agents and their motives (as, for example, praiseworthy or blameworthy). In this work what an agent ought to do is that act which is objectively right. In *FE*, however, Ross suggests that ought-to-do judgments are more complex; they are closely linked to, but not identical with, agent evaluations. Thus in this later work Ross thinks that there is a need for a third moral category, ought-to-do judgments, a category not parasitic on either of the other two. Moreover, Ross suggests that ought-to-do judgments are ethically more important than judgments of objective rightness (*FE*, p. 147). And while in both *RG* and *FE* Ross holds that *objective* rightness can be determined independent of the agent's beliefs, it is only in the former that he maintains that what an agent ought to do can be established independent of that agent's beliefs. It is not that Ross's account of objective rightness changes; rather, his view about what an agent ought to do is altered.

Part III

Ross's defense of the putative view is complex. He advances criticisms of the objective view, he considers and attempts to answer objections against the putative position, and he tries to sketch positive arguments in favor of that view. Here, due to considerations of length, I shall restrict my discussion to an explanation of two of Ross's positive arguments for the putative position. Let us remind ourselves of the question to which the objective, subjective, and putative views offer competing answers: What in a particular situation ought an agent to do?

Ross's first argument sets out as its critical premiss a condition which (Ross holds) any adequate account of what a person ought to do must fulfill: "that the act which a man in any situation ought to do is that which it would be *reasonable* for him to do if he wanted to do his duty in that situation" (*FE*, p. 156). Ross does not argue for this premiss; he simply takes it as a given. Ross's next step is to convince the reader that the objective view cannot satisfy this condition. There may be some change that an agent can *in fact* produce which will be objectively right. But suppose that no human being can foresee how this change can be brought about. Ross offers an example (*FE*, pp. 156-57). Imagine that one has promised to return a borrowed item to a friend. As it turns out, if the item is dispatched in one way, a method thought to be careless, it will reach its destination; but if it is dispatched in another way, by a method thought to be careful, it will not reach its destination. If no human foresight can ascertain these facts, then no reasonable person who wants to do his duty will dispose of the item via the careless method. Therefore, the objective view is inadequate; it sometimes requires agents to do what no person who wanted to do his duty would have reason to do. But the putative view does satisfy the postulated condition.

Two comments on Ross's first argument are in order. First, even if one endorses the argument wholeheartedly, it does not establish the putative view. It only refutes the objective position; it leaves the subjective view unscathed. And second, even if we accept the major premiss of Ross's argument, there is an ambiguity which must be discussed. There are different senses in which a person might have a reason to do something. In one sense, what one might call the subjective sense, in order for one to have a reason to do something one must be aware of it. In another sense, what one might call the objective sense, one can have a reason for doing something even though one is unaware of it. It seems clear that in the major premiss of Ross's argument he is using the term "reasonable" in the subjective sense. It is hardly surprising, then, that the objective view regarding what a person ought to do conflicts with Ross's condition of adequacy. It is not implausible to suggest that utilizing this premiss to argue against the objective position is question-begging. An advocate of the objective view would, no doubt, defend a different account of what it is reasonable for an agent to do.

Let us turn now to the second argument. Ross states it briefly, but his intent is clear enough. He advances as a condition of adequacy on any account of what agents ought to do the following: "that anything that we ought to do must be something that we not only can do, but can do with the knowledge or at least the opinion that it is our duty" (*FE*, p. 163). It is clear, as discussed earlier, that the objective view does sometimes require agents to

perform acts that they do not know or believe it is their duty to perform; this occurs whenever they are ignorant of moral or factual truths relevant to their situation. But the subjective view also fails to satisfy this condition posited by Ross. If an agent is ignorant of a moral principle or its relative weight as it applies to his situation, he cannot do what is required with the knowledge or even the belief that that is what he ought to do. By contrast, the putative view does satisfy this principle; it never requires one to do something unless one knows or believes that one is required to do so.

The inference from the major premiss of Ross's second argument to the conclusion that the putative view is correct is so direct that one must be suspicious. Arguments that are this easy are usually guilty of question-begging; and, indeed, there is some reason to believe that this argument is guilty of just that. Ross's premiss states, in effect, that if an agent ought to do something then it at least must be the case that he believes he ought to do it. By denying that either factual or moral ignorance can prevent one from knowing what one ought to do, Ross is ruling out the objective and subjective positions by fiat. In the absence of other arguments, Ross has not given us strong positive reasons for adopting the putative view.

Part IV

Let us turn now to some of the difficulties that plague the putative view. The first problem is one that all three views face, that of endorsing counterintuitive judgments. Ross, in fact, makes just this point against the objective position. He argues that according to the objective view an agent may deliberately embark on a course of action that he believes (correctly) is morally wrong, yet, due to an accident, succeed in doing his duty (*FE*, p. 150). Thus, due to good fortune, the objective view must assess positively the conduct of an agent motivated by malice.¹⁵ But the putative view is open to a similar objection; in some situations it implies that an agent ought to do that act which in fact has the worst possible consequences. This will be the case when an agent's false moral or factual beliefs lead him to hold that he ought to do a certain act, and in fact that act has worse consequences than any alternative. Ross is correct to point out that it sounds odd to say, as in extreme situations defenders of the objective view must, that an agent ought to do that which he (falsely) believes is the worst alternative open to him. But it sounds at least as odd to say, as advocates of the putative view sometimes must, that an agent ought to do that which in fact is the worst alternative available.

Second, it seems that on Ross's version of the putative view there is no such thing as *trying but failing* to do one's duty. Recall that according to Ross moral requirements do not range over actions; instead, an agent is required to set himself to perform certain acts. And when one combines this with the putative view, what an agent is required to set himself to do is that which he believes is his duty. This seems particularly odd since Ross is a cognitivist in ethics; that is, he believes that moral judgments express beliefs about the world which are true or false. Since moral judgments are not simply a matter of opinion, it would seem that even an agent who is sincerely trying to do his duty could fail (due to a *cognitive* error). But Ross's view cannot allow for this. It seems that the only case where Ross might be able to allow for *trying but failing* to do one's duty is the case of moral weakness. An agent may want to do his duty but also want to do something else which is incompatible with doing his duty. If an agent gives in to the desire that conflicts with doing his duty, then he might be described as trying but failing to do his duty. But there seems to be no other way that Ross's version of the putative view can allow for trying but failing to do one's duty.

A closely related problem is that the putative view allows no room for a *justified but false moral belief*. The putative view implies that if an agent genuinely believes that he ought to set himself to perform a certain act, then he ought to set himself to perform that act. The putative view, as defended by Ross, seems to allow for no distinction between *moral belief* and *moral knowledge*.¹⁶ If Ross were a noncognitivist, this consequence would not be surprising; but he is a cognitivist. And other areas that admit of correct and incorrect answers have a place for justified but false beliefs. That on Ross's view ethics should turn out to be so different from other cognitive matters in this respect gives one reason to be suspicious. So unless advocates of Ross's putative view can show that this consequence does not follow from his position or unless they can show that ethics is sufficiently different from other cognitive areas to warrant this consequence, we will have reason to reject Ross's view.

The fourth difficulty concerns the assessment of others' moral decisions. The objective view allows an obvious basis for criticizing an agent's moral decisions. If the putative view is correct, however, it seems that moral spectators cannot determine whether another agent has done what he ought to have done. One reason for this is that the putative view makes an agent's moral requirements a function of his factual and moral beliefs, and often we do not know what another's beliefs are. But there is a more fundamental reason why this position renders moral spectators unable to assess the decisions of others. According to Ross, a moral agent is required "to set himself" to do a certain act, say *X*. But since setting oneself to do *X* is compatible with all sorts of external behavior that does not involve doing *X*, others will be hard pressed to know whether another has done what he ought to do. In fact, even if others know that because of his factual and moral beliefs an agent ought to set himself to do *X*, and even if that agent does *X*, others still cannot know that the agent did what he ought to do. After all, the agent may have set himself to do something other than *X*. That the putative view renders an agent's moral decisions virtually immune from the criticism of his fellows is a defect of that position because one of the important functions of moral theories is to assess the conduct of others.

A fifth problem for the putative view concerns the way that we regard moral decisions. Most people believe that they ought to be cautious before acting and, if possible, to re-assess the situation in order to be more confident that their moral judgments are correct. In short, most believe that their judgments about what they ought to do in particular situations are open for revision. But it is hard to see how the putative view can account for this. If what an agent really ought to do is a function of his factual and moral beliefs, nothing is gained *morally* if that agent alters some of those beliefs.¹⁷ It is also difficult to see how defenders of the putative view can make sense of the phenomenon of moral doubt. If an agent knows that he acted in accord with his factual and moral beliefs at the time, then if he accepts the putative view he knows that he did what he ought to have done. So the putative view seems to imply that one who experiences doubt about a past moral decision is confused.¹⁸ But surely moral doubt is both a common and intelligible experience.

Finally, at one point, Ross does argue that an agent can have a mistaken moral conscience (*FE*, p. 165). As he puts it, "If to act in accordance with one's conviction is always, in one sense, to do one's duty, it remains true that one's conscience may be very much mistaken and in need of improvement." Ross's explanation of the notion of a mistaken conscience suggests that he holds the following: when an agent has done what is *only* putatively right, that agent has done what he really ought to have done; but it would have been better had he done what is objectively right. Ross thinks that the reason we must say that an agent ought to do what is putatively right is that it is putative rightness "to which praise is appropriate." Nevertheless, an agent who does only what is putatively right should not be content.

He should be rather ashamed of having done an act which owes its rightness to its harmony with incorrect moral insight or incorrect opinion about the facts, and should realize that it would have been better if he could have amended his moral insight or his opinion of the circumstances, or both, so that in doing what was right in the third sense he would have also been doing what was right in the second or even in the first. (*FE*, p. 165.)

But what does Ross mean by "better" here? He cannot mean morally better, since he says (*FE*, p. 165) that putative rightness is morally the most important sense of rightness. One is tempted to say that Ross means that the consequences would be better if an agent did what was objectively right rather than what was subjectively or putatively right (when the three conflict). But since Ross is neither a consequentialist nor is his theory of rightness extensionally equivalent with a consequentialist theory, there can be no guarantee that doing what is objectively right (according to Ross's view) will produce better consequences than doing what is subjectively or putatively right (again, when there is a conflict among the three). To illustrate, consider the following. Suppose, as Ross does, that (act) utilitarianism is not the correct theory of rightness. Suppose further, though, that *P* falsely believes that utilitarianism is the correct moral theory. And suppose that *P* is now facing a situation in which utilitarianism and the correct moral theory (as espoused by Ross) yield conflicting prescriptions. By hypothesis, getting *P* to do what is objectively right will not produce better consequences than his doing what

he believes is right. So one must wonder why, on Ross's view, it would be better if the agent had "amended his moral insight."¹⁹

In any case, it is difficult to understand how Ross can talk about a mistaken moral conscience at all. He does distinguish putative, subjective, and objective rightness. But when he declares that an agent ought to do what is putatively right, one must be puzzled about the attributions of *moral error* to an agent who has done just that. If an agent has done what he ought to have done, wherein lies the error? The notion of a moral mistake makes sense in a context in which an agent has failed to do his duty, but not when an agent has fulfilled those requirements. It is true, of course, that we want to say that someone who has done *only* what is putatively right has made a mistake; but his may simply lend credence to the claim that what one really ought to do is something else.

Part V

The difficulties just articulated for the putative view are significant. Moreover, it seems that in some obvious sense the putative and subjective positions presuppose the objective one.²⁰ The putative and subjective views focus on an agent's beliefs, both moral and non-moral, and those beliefs are not about nothing. They are beliefs about what the situation is really like and what it is right for an agent to do in such a situation. These beliefs are without content unless the objective view is presupposed as the ideal. These beliefs are anchored by the truth of that at which they aim—the relevant moral and non-moral facts.²¹ At the very least, objective rightness serves as the ideal toward which agents are striving. But none of this proves that what an agent ought to do is that act which is objectively right.

It is tempting to say, as Kurt Baier does,²² that the various questions surrounding this issue are easily answered if one makes the appropriate distinctions, such as between the prospective and retrospective points of view and between the perspective of the agent and that of the critic. But I do not think that it is entirely fair to suggest that Ross's view results simply from failing to make these distinctions. Ross was certainly aware that in undertaking to act an agent could not seriously ask himself, "Should I do what I think is right or what is really right?" Ross's approach was to distinguish three senses of rightness and then to ask, "What ought that agent to do?" Ross was not unaware of the different perspectives, but he simply thought that the answer to what an agent ought to do (ought to have done) does not differ depending on the perspective one takes. And the purpose of Chapter VII of *FE* is to argue that what an agent ought to do is that which is putatively right.

Ross's version of the putative view assumes a strong connection between what one ought to do and when one is worthy of praise (*FE*, pp. 163-65). As evidence that one ought to do what is putatively right, Ross cites the fact that a person who does what he mistakenly believes is objectively right is at least less blameworthy than one who succeeds in doing what is objectively right not intending to do so. Acting according to one's convictions is in some sense better than fortuitously doing what is objectively right. And that sense is, apparently, that one who acted on one's convictions is at least not blameworthy, and perhaps is deserving of praise. The objectivist, of course, can make the same judgments about praise and blame that Ross in his putative mood makes; the objectivist simply denies that this tells us anything directly about what the agent ought to do. Indeed, an objectivist can say, as it seems natural to do, that an ancient Greek slaveholder was engaged in an impermissible practice even if he was not blameworthy for doing so.²³ By contrast, the defender of the putative view would seem to have to say that he is not even violating any duty. To say the least, this seems awkward.

Conspicuous by its absence in Ross's account of duty and ignorance is a discussion of culpable moral ignorance. But there may be a good reason for this; the putative view may not allow for culpable moral ignorance. Even if some of an agent's moral principles are incorrect, the putative view cannot direct him to work to correct these principles. We must assume that the agent does not know that his moral principles are incorrect (since sincerely held moral beliefs are held as true). Recall that according to Ross (*FE*, p. 163) if an agent cannot perform an act knowing (or at least believing) that he ought to perform it, then it is not the case that he ought to perform it. Thus if an agent holds a principle sincerely, he has no reason to question it and so cannot be blamed for failing

to do so. It seems, then, that one can never be culpable for sincerely held moral principles.²⁴ Of course, this immediately brings to mind extreme principles held sincerely, such as those defended by racists and Nazis.

Ross's version of the putative view seems to commit him to the principle that people always ought to act on their moral convictions. In suggesting this, Ross is trying to capture something important, namely, how we value conscientious conduct or conduct from principle. But advancing the putative view in order to accommodate this important moral notion may have been a mistake. At least three difficulties come to mind. First, to some degree the objective view itself can account for the value we attach to conscientious conduct. While objectivists cannot say that an agent who acts according to his convictions has always done what he ought to have done, they can say that often such an agent is morally good.

The second difficulty is that the putative view overestimates the value of conduct in accord with one's principles. Recall that in defending the putative view Ross still wants to allow that agent evaluations can diverge from judgments about whether a person did what he ought to have done; for example, an agent may have done what he ought to have done, but from a bad motive. Suppose that I falsely believe that always punishing students for doing acts of type *X* is objectively right. And suppose that one of my students, John, does an act of type *X*. I punish John, but from malice and not because I think that is what morality requires. According to the putative view, I may be blameworthy for my behavior, but there is still moral value in my conduct: I have done what I ought to have done, namely, what is putatively right. But if my belief about what is objectively right is mistaken (as we have supposed) and if I have acted from a bad motive, it is hard to see why there is any moral value in my conduct.

The third difficulty is an internal one. In attempting to capture the value of action according to principle, Ross seems to hold that an agent ought to do *X* if and only if that agent sincerely believes that he ought to do *X*. But since this principle has the status of being indefeasible, it seems quite contrary to the spirit of Ross's ethical writings. Of course, someone might point out that Ross's position that no moral principles are indefeasible is limited to first-order rules—for example, the requirements to keep promises and to discharge debts of gratitude—and that the principle that I cite is a second-order one. This is true, but the status given to the principle still seems contrary to the spirit of what I call Ross's "irreducible pluralism"—the view that there is nothing that all and only right actions have in common except their rightness.²⁵ In addition, it seems that this principle commits Ross to endorsing the genuineness of interpersonal moral conflicts. By "interpersonal moral conflicts," I mean a situation in which agent *A* ought to do *X*, agent *B* ought to do *Y*, but it is not possible both for *A* to do *X* and for *B* to do *Y*. Given what Ross says about resolving moral conflicts that a single agent faces, I should think that he would feel uncomfortable with this result.²⁶

While my aim in this essay has not been to say which position on the issue of duty and ignorance is the most plausible, I would like to close with two general comments which I think have some bearing on a satisfactory resolution of this issue. The first comment raises a question about the application of the three positions to a particular type of situation. Suppose that an agent is ignorant of the facts to which his moral principles are to apply, but he realizes that he is ignorant. The agent's problem is not that he has *false* beliefs, but rather that he has *no beliefs* at all. The agent's position is that he recognizes the complexity of the situation and acknowledges that he lacks relevant information. It seems that what the putative and subjective views must say about such a situation is that there is nothing that the agent ought to do (until he has formulated beliefs about the relevant factual matters). The objective view, of course, says that there is something in such situations that the agent ought to do, though he may not be culpable for not knowing or not doing what he ought to do.

The second comment concerns the alternative positions that might be adopted on the issue of duty and ignorance. Following Carritt, I have distinguished three possibilities; but a fourth is available. According to the objective view, what an agent ought to do depends on the correct theory of rightness and the situation as it actually is. According to the subjective view, what an agent ought to do is determined by the correct theory of rightness and the *agent's* beliefs about his situation. But one might hold a position that falls between these two. One might say that what an agent ought to do depends on the correct theory of rightness and the situation as it

probably is (that is, what the evidence suggests to a normal person).²⁷ Whether this view will fare better than the others is a matter for further discussion.

My aim has been to show that Ross's version of the putative view lacks credibility and coheres poorly with much else of what he has to say. If this is correct, then Ross's conversion from the objective view to the putative view is one of the stranger episodes in the history of ethics.²⁸

NOTES

1. W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 146. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text and designated "FE". References to *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930) will also be cited parenthetically in the text and designated "RG".
2. H. A. Prichard, "Duty and Ignorance of Fact," in *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 18-39. Prichard's lecture was originally delivered in 1932.
3. Though I say that this dispute arises within each of these theories, this is somewhat misleading. The question of duty and ignorance within the Kantian theory is complex. For some brief remarks on this, see Onora Nell, *Acting on Principle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), chaps. 6, 7.
4. For a discussion of this topic, see Marcus G. Singer, "Actual Consequence Utilitarianism," *Mind*, vol. 86 (1977), pp. 67-77, and Bart Gruzalski, "Foreseeable Consequence Utilitarianism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 59 (1981), pp. 163-176.
5. An example of a principle that is normative but at a higher level of generality is this: if an agent knows that, because of his own moral weakness, he is likely to do something wrong in circumstances *c*, then he ought to avoid *c* to the extent possible. Other examples are principles of dated rightness developed in Holly S. Goldman, "Dated Rightness and Moral Imperfection," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 85 (1976), pp. 449-487.
6. See Prichard, *op. cit.*, p. 25 and Ross, *FE*, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-47.
7. I say "only if" but not "if." Having false beliefs about a situation is not sufficient to guarantee that the two views will yield different judgments. The false beliefs may not affect the moral decision to be made.
8. For the sake of simplicity, I state the objective view and the other two positions in terms of Ross's theory. These could be easily altered to accommodate other theories, however.
9. The subjective view lends itself to even more complexity. The correct moral principles can be applied to the situation as the agent believes it to be, or to the situation as a *normal* person *reasonably* believes it to be. On either account, fallibility of the agent's beliefs is assumed; but the former account allows for more subjectivity than the latter.
Some have thought that the objective view can be reduced to a tautology, namely, that one ought to do what one ought to do, and that the subjective view sometimes makes a contradictory recommendation, namely, that one ought to do what one ought not to do. But this is a mistake. Chapter 7 of *FE* is motivated by the belief that ought-to-do judgments are in principle different from judgments assessing agents' actions as (objectively) right or wrong, and Ross's concern is to give a plausible account of ought-to-do judgments and to show what connection, if any, those judgements have with rightness.
10. The labels on which I settle—"objective," "subjective," and "putative"—are suggested by E. F. Carritt, *Ethical and Political Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), chapt. 2, especially pp. 14 and 22. My description of these positions is somewhat different from Carritt's.
11. Some have thought that Ross was guilty of a gross confusion, that he believed that an agent could ask himself *before* acting, "Should I do what is objectively right or what I think is right?" But Ross is not guilty of this confusion. A careful reading of Chapter 7 of *FE* reveals that Ross focuses on *third-person* ought-to-do judgments and occasionally on first-person past ought-to-do judgments, and these are precisely the cases where we can (or at least we think we can) distinguish between objective and subjective rightness.

It is clear that the objective and putative views make different retrospective ought-to-do judgments. But there may even be cases where they make different prospective judgments. Suppose that you sincerely believe that you ought to do *X* and I sincerely believe that your doing *Y* would be objectively right (and

doing *Y* is incompatible with doing *X*). I argue long and hard in order to change your mind, but to no avail. If I believe that there is no hope that you will change your mind and if I am an advocate of the putative view, I will now agree that you ought to do *X*; but if I am an advocate of the objective view, I will insist that you ought to do *Y*.

12. Ross, no doubt, should have been more careful here and emphasized that on some scenarios the book may end up in the hands of the owner even though the agent did not bring it about that the book was returned. In such a situation it may be false to say that the agent discharged his duty, but it is still the case that he is no longer required to return the book.
13. In part, Ross seems to have shifted from a nonepistemic to an epistemic understanding of "can." For a discussion of the distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic senses of "ability," see Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 203ff.
14. For one who defends the view that there is a necessary connection between ought-judgments and agent evaluations against certain objections (though ones not directly related to this paper), see Norman O. Dahl, "'Ought' and Blameworthiness," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 64 (1967), pp. 418-428. For a more ambitious defense of the thesis, see Michael Stocker, "Act and Agent Evaluations," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27 (1973), pp. 42-61.
15. G. E. Moore, a defender of one version of the objective view—namely, actual consequence utilitarianism—discusses this objection in *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), pp. 81-82. Moore argues that the objection can be defused if we distinguish carefully between act and agent evaluations.
16. There is one kind of false belief about what one ought to do for which the putative view can allow. Suppose that an agent believes that he ought to keep all of his genuine promises. Suppose further that he believes that his promise to Jones to do *X* is *not* a genuine one. If on the basis of these two beliefs alone the agent concludes that he ought to keep his promise to Jones to do *X*, then he has a false belief about what he ought to do even on the putative view. As Ross might put it, there is a lack of harmony between his moral and factual beliefs and the conclusion that he draws; the conclusion is not warranted by the premisses. But though the agent has a false belief about what he ought to do, he certainly does *not* have a *justified* false belief.
17. Contrary to what I say here, Ross might argue that there is something gained if an agent replaces his false factual and moral beliefs with true ones (and acts on the true beliefs). What is gained is a net increase in objective rightness with no loss of moral goodness (since on the putative view an agent is still doing what he ought to do, assuming that his change of mind is genuine). But there are problems with this claim. Such a response seems to presuppose that each agent is always required to try to discover what is objectively right. If the putative view is committed to that, it suggests that objective rightness is more important than what one ought to do (as specified by the putative view); and not only is this contrary to what Ross maintains (*FE*, p. 147), but it also seems to be too great a concession to the objective view.
It is possible that because of a change of beliefs an agent is more likely *to do* what he thinks is his duty. This might occur, for example, if an agent came to believe that doing his duty is really in his own interests. But when I say that nothing is gained morally, I mean that if we assume that what an agent ought to do is a function of his moral and factual beliefs, then if the agent acts in accord with those beliefs he has done what the putative view says that he ought to have done (regardless of what those beliefs are).
18. The putative view can allow for at least one instance of moral doubt: an agent may wonder if he deceived himself and did not act in accord with his real factual and moral beliefs. But the putative view cannot allow that the *typical* case of moral doubt makes sense, namely, where an agent doubts whether he did what he really ought to have done; or at least it cannot allow for this without conceding that objective rightness is more important morally than putative rightness.
19. Ross might argue that it would be better if the agent changed his moral views because, if he acted accordingly, this would result in a net increase in objective rightness. But this is subject to the same problems discussed in note 17 above.

20. Henry Sidgwick makes this point in *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, seventh edition, 1981/1907), p. 394, when he says that "the very notion of subjective rightness or goodness of will implies an objective standard, which it directs us to seek, but does not profess to supply."
21. For some of these same points, see Ramon M. Lemos, "Duty and Ignorance," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18 (1980), pp. 310-11.
22. Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 143-47.
23. This same point is made in a different context by Allen E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), pp. 153-54.
24. Suppose that one came to believe that one's principles about what is objectively right were false, but one failed to work to correct those principles (because of weakness or laziness). Even on the putative view, such an agent would be culpable, it seems. But in such a case the agent's original moral beliefs would no longer be held *sincerely*.
25. Ross might reply that only objectively right acts have nothing in common except their rightness, and that all putatively right acts have in common just what his account says they do; thus a more general account about what agents ought to do is possible. Ross might say this, but it seems a bit *ad hoc*. And given that this would constitute a radical departure from the position in *RG*, one would expect that it would have been spelled out explicitly.
26. In all fairness to the putative view, the objective view too may have to endorse the reality of interpersonal moral conflicts. The issues raised for ethical theory by multi-person moral dilemmas are complex and are discussed in my "Interpersonal Moral Conflicts," unpublished.
27. Such a view (for utilitarianism) is developed in Gruzalski's "Foreseeable Consequence Utilitarianism."
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