10. Discuss in detail your opinion as to whether two individuals, convinced of the validity of Moore’s ethical theory, could nevertheless have disputes at the level of practical morality.

**Key to Selections**


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*Preface, p. vii.
 b p. 143.
 c pp. 1–3.
 d pp. 3–4.
 e p. 5.
 f pp. 6–8.

*pp. 8–9.
 b pp. 9–10.
 d pp. 10–12.
 e pp. 15–17.
 f pp. 20–21.

**Guide to Additional Reading**

**PRIMARY SOURCES**


**DISCUSSION AND COMMENTARY**


**Prima Facie Duty**

Sir William David Ross (1877–1971) was born in Scotland and educated at both Edinburgh University and Balliol College, Oxford. Ross was not only an authority on Aristotle’s philosophy but also a splendid example of Aristotle’s “ideal man.” Beyond Aristotelian scholarship and original contributions to ongoing philosophy, his career included educational leadership at Oxford and roles in public affairs. In short, Ross combined theoretical and practical wisdom. His moral philosophy, found primarily in *The Right and the Good* (1930) and *Foundations of Ethics* (1939), has had lasting influence. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his service in the ministry of munitions during World War I, and was knighted in 1938. During World War II, he performed excellent public service as chairman of three governmental committees. His administrative, academic service was also extensive. Ross served as Vice Chancellor of Oriel College, Oxford, for three years and was its provost for eighteen.

The ethical theory of W. D. Ross resembles that of G. E. Moore in important ways. Both theories hold that intrinsic goodness is an indefinable quality of things; moreover, both theories hold that certain statements about objects being intrinsically good are self-evidently true. There is a decisive difference between them, however, concerning the
status of our concepts of the obligatory: In Moore’s system the meanings of such terms as right, ought, and duty are linked to maximizing intrinsic goodness; in Ross’s system there is no such linkage. Ross contends that rightness is a distinct, indefinable characteristic of acts, that it is generally independent of whatever good may result from their occurrence, and that certain statements about the acts being morally right are self-evidently true.1

In making his case for ethical intuitionism, Ross insists that the difference between what he terms prima facie and actual duties makes all the difference. He warns that any ethical theory which neglects drawing this distinction in some effective way is systematically directed toward either too much or too little definiteness in its account of obligation. Such a theory fails to fit the beliefs and actions of ordinary morality, beliefs and actions that seem reasonable despite the persuasive attacks against them by ethical theorists.

Consider: It is self-evidently true that if I make a promise to someone, or request and accept assistance from someone, I thereby create a moral claim on myself in that person. I know immediately and without question that I ought to keep that promise and that I ought to reciprocate in some way. Now Ross terms the kind of act which has the characteristic of generating moral claims as “prima facie duty.”2

As just seen, Ross is an intuitionist in his doctrine of prima facie duty. But, as it turns out, this doctrine is more an account of the materials from which we must make a selection than it is an account of our actual obligations. In our daily lives, we are more frequently than not confronted with conflicting and competing prima facie duties. Furthermore, we do not find it to be self-evidently true that one such duty rather than another necessarily has jurisdiction. I ought, for example, to honor my promise to be home early, but I ought also to stay late and speak encouragingly to a friend in distress. Where does my actual duty lie? Notice that we don’t deny that there are conflicting duties here, but notice also that we want fuller knowledge of the context: Is an important purpose being served by my getting home early? How great is my friend’s distress? Aren’t other prima facie duties involved here? Our prima facie duties do not arise in a prearranged harmony of ranked priority nor do they occur singly. Ross contends that we can only bring our imperfect knowledge to bear in making our decisions, without any guarantee of an objectively correct answer. Our judgments about right action in all but the simplest actual cases are tentative rather than certain. The above-mentioned statement is not intended to deny that, in the abstract, some prima facie duties have a greater claim on us than others. As Ross insists, in The Right and the Good, “a great deal of stringency belongs to the duties of ‘perfect obligation’—the duties of keeping our promises, of repairing wrongs we have done, and of returning the equivalent of services we have received” (pp. 41–42).

In the full development of his theory, Ross does deal specifically with the relationship between actual and prima facie duty. His answer is what one might expect: The actually right action is the one which “would discharge in the fullest possible measure the various claims or prima facie duties that are involved in the situation.”3 Note, however, that, while this answer serves to clarify what we seek to realize, it affords little instruction about how we are to do so. It remains that the best that we can expect from anyone in a moral situation is a morally informed, carefully assessed judgment which is neither certain nor immediate.

Ross is at his most skillful in arguing that some positions about the nature of actual duties involve serious errors. At one extreme he finds infallible conscience theorists who subscribe to the view that we can always have immediate or direct knowledge of our actual duty. At the other, he finds Utilitarians of various sorts who subscribe to the belief that there is only one criterion for determining our actual duty, whatever the circumstances. Ross rejects the position of the former on several related grounds: (1), it fails to take into account the complexity of the concrete situations in which we must act; (2), it fails to face up to the fact that there are honest differences of opinion between people of good faith as to what ought to be done in a given context; (3), it simply assumes that there is no problem about selecting one’s actual duty from among the variety of moral claims simultaneously incumbent upon a person in a particular situation. He rejects the position of the latter on the ground that the single criterion upon which an actual obligation is supposed to rest—namely, whatever maximizes good—is both too simple for the diverse circumstances we face and too restricted in its scope.

Ross’s insistence that the Utilitarian principle is restricted in its scope is of special importance in understanding his position. Put positively, he

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1Ross was greatly influenced by his teacher H. A. Prichard (1871–1947), who maintained that some types of actions are right by their very nature and that one can apprehend when “something ought to be done” by a simple “act of moral thinking.”

2Ross Remarks: “I should make it plain . . . that I am assuming the correctness of some of our main convictions as to prima facie duties, or, more strictly, am claiming that we know them to be true. To me it seems as self-evident as anything could be, that to make a promise, for instance, is to create a moral claim on us in someone else. Many readers will perhaps say that they do not know this to be true. If so, I certainly cannot prove it to them: I can only ask them to reflect again, in the hope that they will ultimately agree that they know it.” The Right and the Good (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 20–21 fn.

thinks that there is, indeed, a *prima facie* duty to be beneficent, but he observes that this *prima facie* duty, no less than others, occurs only in connection with certain concrete situations. Thus, there are circumstances in which, just as the Utilitarians insist, beneficence takes precedence over all other considerations. By the same token, however, there are also circumstances in which the general welfare is beside the point, while one’s honesty or integrity is very much to the point.

1. Ross is convinced that ethical theories such as Utilitarianism fail to recognize the complex relations involved in circumstances of obligation. Note that he uses the term *prima facie* duty in this analysis to indicate the direction of his own thinking.

When a plain man fulfills 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 of the future. What makes him think it right to act in a certain way is the fact that he has promised to do so—that and, usually, nothing more. That his act will produce the best possible consequences is not his reason for calling it right. What lends color to the theory we are examining, then, is not the actions (which form probably a great majority of our actions) in which some such reflection as “I have promised” is the only reason we give ourselves for thinking a certain action right, but the exceptional cases in which the consequences of fulfilling a promise (for instance) would be so disastrous to others that we judge it right not to do so. It must of course be admitted that such cases exist. If I have promised to meet a friend at a particular time for some trivial purpose, I should certainly think myself justified in breaking my engagement if by doing so I could prevent a serious accident or bring relief to the victims of one. And the supporters of the view we are examining hold that my thinking so is due to my thinking that I shall bring more good into existence by the one action than by the other. A different account may, however, be given of the matter, an account which will, I believe, show itself to be the true one. It may be said that besides the duty of fulfilling promises I have and recognize a duty of relieving distress, and that when I think it right to do the latter at the cost of not doing the former, it is not because I think I shall produce more good thereby but because I think it the duty which is in the circumstances more of a duty. This account surely corresponds much more closely with what we really think in such a situation. If, so far as I can see, I could bring equal amounts of good into being by fulfilling my promise and by helping someone to whom I had made no promise, I should not hesitate to regard the former as my duty. Yet on the view that what is right is right because it is productive of the most good I should not so regard it. . . .

In fact the theory of “ideal utilitarianism” . . . seems to simplify unduly our relations to our fellows. It says, in effect, that the only morally significant relation in which my neighbors stand to me is that of being possible beneficiaries by my action. They do stand in this relation to me, and this relation is morally significant. But they may also stand to me in the relation of promisee to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman, and the like; and each of these relations is the foundation of a *prima facie* duty, which is more or less incumbent on me according to the circumstances of the case. When I am in a situation, as perhaps I always am, in which more than one of these *prima facie* duties is incumbent on me, what I have to do is to study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion (it is never more) that in the circumstances one of them is more incumbent than any other; then I am bound to think that to do this *prima facie* duty is my duty *sans phrase* in the situation.a

2. Ross now defines and clarifies his basic concept *prima facie* duty. His clarification includes a catalogue of the many types of duty. (He does not claim that his list is exhaustive.)

I suggest “*prima facie* duty” or “conditional duty” as a brief way of referring to the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g., the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant. Whether an act is a duty proper or actual duty depends on all the morally significant kinds it is an instance of. . . .

There is nothing arbitrary about these *prima facie* duties. Each rests on a definite circumstance which cannot seriously be held to be without moral significance. Of *prima facie* duties I suggest, without claiming completeness or finality for it, the following division.

(1) Some duties rest on previous acts of my own. These duties seem to include two kinds, (a) those resting on a promise or what may fairly be called an implicit promise, such as the implicit undertaking not to tell lies which seems to be implied in the act of entering into conversation (at any rate by civilized men), or of writing books that purport to be history and not fiction. These may be called the duties of fidelity. (b) Those
resting on a previous wrongful act. These may be called the duties of reparation. (2) Some rest on previous acts of other men, i.e., services done by them to me. These may be loosely described as the duties of gratitude. (3) Some rest on the fact or possibility of a distribution of pleasure or happiness (or of the means thereto) which is not in accordance with the merit of the persons concerned; in such cases there arises a duty to upset or prevent such a distribution. These are the duties of justice. (4) Some rest on the mere fact that there are other beings in the world whose condition we can make better in respect of virtue, or of intelligence, or of pleasure. These are the duties of beneficence. (5) Some rest on the fact that we can improve our own condition in respect of virtue or of intelligence. These are the duties of self-improvement. (6) I think that we should distinguish from (4) the duties that may be summed up under the title of “not injuring others.” No doubt to injure others is incidentally to fail to do them good; but it seems to me clear that non-maleficence is apprehended as a duty distinct from that of beneficence, and as a duty of a more stringent character. It will be noticed that this alone among the types of duty has been stated in a negative way. An attempt might not doubt be made to state this duty, like the others, in a positive way. It might be said that it is really the duty to prevent ourselves from acting either from an inclination to harm others or from an inclination to seek our own pleasure, in doing which we should incidentally harm them. But on reflection it seems clear that the primary duty here is the duty not to harm others, this being a duty whether or not we have an inclination that if followed would lead to our harming them; and that when we have such an inclination the primary duty not to harm others gives rise to a consequential duty to resist the inclination. The recognition of this duty of non-maleficence is the first step on the way to the recognition of the duty of beneficence; and that accounts for the prominence of the commands, “thou shalt not kill,” “thou shalt not commit adultery,” “thou shalt not steal,” “thou shalt not bear false witness,” in so early a code as the Decalogue. But even when we have come to recognize the duty of beneficence, it appears to me that the duty of non-maleficence is recognized as a distinct one, as prima facie more binding. We should not in general consider it justifiable to kill one person in order to keep another alive, or to steal from one in order to give alms to another.

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. If the only duty is to produce the maximum of good, the question who is to have the good—whether it is myself, or my benefactor, or a person to whom I have made a promise to confer that good on him, or a mere fellow man to whom I stand in no such special relation—should make no difference to my having a duty to produce that good. But we are in fact sure that it makes a vast difference.  

3. After arguing that it is a mistake to regard every dutiful act as being so for one and the same reason, Ross then turns to the distinction between prima facie and actual or absolute duty.

I would contend that in principle there is no reason to anticipate that every act that is our duty is so for one and the same reason. Why should two sets of circumstances, or one set of circumstances, not possess different characteristics, any one of which makes a certain act our prima facie duty? When I ask what it is that makes me in certain cases sure that I have a prima facie duty to do so and so, I find that it lies in the fact that I have made a promise; when I ask the same question in another case, I find the answer lies in the fact that I have done a wrong. And if on reflection I find (as I think I do) that neither of these reasons is reducible to the other, I must not on any a priori ground assume that such a reduction is possible.  

It is necessary to say something by way of clearing up the relation between prima facie duties and the actual or absolute duty to do one particular act in particular circumstances. If as almost all moralists except Kant are agreed, and as most plain men think, it is sometimes right to tell a lie or to break a promise, it must be maintained that there is a difference between prima facie duty and actual or absolute duty. When we think ourselves justified in breaking, and indeed morally obligated to break, a promise in order to relieve someone’s distress, we do not for a moment cease to recognize a prima facie duty to keep our promise, and this leads us to feel, not indeed shame or repentance, but certainly compunction, for behaving as we do; we recognize, further, that it is our duty to make up somehow to the promisee for the breaking of the promise. We have to distinguish from the characteristic of being our duty that of tending to be our duty. Any act that we do contains various elements in virtue of which it falls under various categories. In virtue of being the breaking of a promise, for instance, it tends to be wrong; in virtue of being an instance of relieving distress it tends to be right. Tendency to be one’s duty may be called a parti-resultant attribute, i.e., one which belongs to an act in virtue of some one component in its nature. Being one’s duty is a toti-resultant attribute, one which belongs to an act in virtue of its whole nature and of nothing less than this.
4. Ross’s ethical intuitionism is exhibited in connection with his doctrine of prima facie duty. A proposition such as “keeping promises is right” is self-evidently true.

Something should be said of the relation between our apprehension of the prima facie rightness of certain types of act and our mental attitude towards particular acts. It is proper to use the word “apprehension” in the former case and not in the latter. That an act, qua fulfilling a promise, or qua effecting a just distribution of good, 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; 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. 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 were 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 our reason that is involved in our confidence in mathematics; and we should have no justification for trusting it in the latter sphere and mistrusting it in the former. In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.4

5. Ross is not an intuitionist concerning our actual duties.

Our judgments about our actual duty in concrete situations have none of the certainty that attaches to our recognition of the general principles of duty. A statement is certain, i.e., is an expression of knowledge, only in one or other of two cases: when it is either self-evident, or a valid conclusion from self-evident premises. And our judgments about our particular duties have neither of these characters. (1) They are not self-evident. Where a possible act is seen to have two characteristics, in virtue of one of which it is prima facie right, and in virtue of the other prima facie wrong, we are (I think) well aware that we are not certain whether we ought or ought not to do it; that whether we do it or not, we are taking a moral risk. We come in the long run, after consideration, to think one duty more pressing than the other, but we do not feel certain that it is so. 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. For, to go no further in the analysis, it is enough to point out that any particular act will in all probability in the course of time contribute to the bringing about of good or of evil for many human beings, and thus have a prima facie rightness or wrongness of which we know nothing. (2) Again, our judgments about our particular duties are not logical conclusions from self-evident premises. The only possible premises would be the general principles stating their prima facie rightness or wrongness qua having the different characteristics they do have; and even if we could (as we cannot) apprehend the extent to which an act will tend on the one hand, for example, to bring about advantages for our benefactors and on the other hand to bring about disadvantages for fellow men who are not our benefactors, there is no principle by which we can draw the conclusion that is on the whole right or on the whole wrong. In this respect the judgment as to the rightness of a particular act is just like the judgment as to the beauty of a particular natural object or work of art. A poem is, for instance, in respect of certain qualities beautiful and in respect of certain others not beautiful; and our judgment as to the degree of beauty it possesses on the whole is never reached by logical reasoning from the apprehension of its particular beauties or particular defects. Both in this and in the moral case we have more or less probable opinions which are not logically justified conclusions from the general principles that are recognized as self-evident.4

6. Ross’s most distinctive contribution to ethical theory is found in his answer to the following question: Can one conclude from the fact that our prima facie duties are self-evidently true that our actual duties are also self-evidently true? He answers in the negative. Ross insists that while the properties, for example, of a given mathematical object such as a triangle are consistent with one another, the properties of a moral act are not necessarily nor usually consistent.

The general principles of duty are obviously not self-evident from the beginning of our lives. How do they come to be so? The answer is, that they come to be self-evident to us just as mathematical axioms do. We find by experience that this couple of matches and that couple makes four matches, that this couple of balls on a wire and that couple make four balls; and by reflection on these and similar discoveries we come to see that it is of the nature of two and two to make four. In a precisely similar way, we see the prima facie rightness of an act which would be the fulfillment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the
fulfillment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend *prima facie* rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfillment of promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident *prima facie* rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of *prima facie* duty. From this, too, perhaps along with the apprehension of the self-evident *prima facie* rightness of the same act in virtue of its having another characteristic as well, and perhaps in spite of the apprehension of its *prima facie* wrongness in virtue of its having some third characteristic, we come to believe something not self-evident at all, but an object of probable opinion, viz., that this particular act is (not *prima facie* but) actually right.

In this respect there is an important difference between rightness and mathematical properties. A triangle which is isosceles necessarily has two of its angles equal, whatever other characteristics the triangle may have—whatever, for instance, be its area, or the size of its third angle. The equality of the two angles is a parti-resultant attribute. And the same is true of all mathematical attributes. It is true, I may add, of *prima facie* rightness. But no act is ever, in virtue of falling under some general description, necessarily actually right; its rightness depends on its whole nature and not on any element in it. The reason is that no mathematical object (no figure, for instance, or angle) ever has two characteristics that tend to give it opposite resultant characteristics, while moral acts often (as everyone knows) and indeed always (as on reflection we must admit) have different characteristics that tend to make them at the same time *prima facie* right and *prima facie* wrong; there is probably no act, for instance, which does good to anyone without doing harm to someone else, and vice versa.7

7. Ross is confident that no reflective person regards the terms duty or right as synonymous with “productive of the best possible consequences.” Moreover, he argues that we do not apprehend in a priori fashion or on an empirical basis an invariant relationship between what is dutiful (*prima facie* or actual) and what is productive of the best consequences.

Supposing it to be agreed, as I think on reflection it must, that no one means by “right” just “productive of the best possible consequences,” or “optimific,” the attributes “right” and “optimific” might stand in either of two kinds of relation to each other. (1) They might be so related that we could apprehend a priori, either immediately or deductively, that any act that is optimific is right and any act that is right is optimific, as we can apprehend that any triangle that is equilateral is equiangular and vice versa. Professor [G. E.] Moore’s view is, I think, that the coextensiveness of “right” and “optimific” is apprehended immediately. He rejects the possibility of any proof of it. Or (2) the two attributes might be such that the question whether they are invariably connected had to be answered by means of an inductive inquiry. Now at first sight it might seem as if the constant connection of the two attributes could be immediately apprehended. It might seem absurd to suggest that it could be right for anyone to do an act which would produce consequences less good than those which would be produced by some other act in his power. Yet a little thought will convince us that this is not absurd. The type of case in which it is easiest to see that this is so is, perhaps, that in which one has made a promise. In such a case we all think that *prima facie* it is our duty to fulfill the promise irrespective of the precise goodness of the total consequences. And though we do not think it is necessarily our actual or absolute duty to do so, we are far from thinking that any, even the slightest, gain in the value of the total consequences will necessarily justify us in doing something else instead. Suppose, to simplify the case by abstraction, that the fulfillment of a promise to A would produce 1,000 units of good for him, but that by doing some other act I could produce 1,001 units of good for B, to whom I have made no promise, the other consequences of the two acts being of equal value; should we really think it self-evident that it was our duty to do the second act and not the first? I think not. We should, I fancy, hold that only a much greater disparity of value between the total consequences would justify us in failing to discharge our *prima facie* duty to A. After all, a promise is a promise, and is not to be treated so lightly as the theory we are examining would imply. What, exactly, a promise is, is not so easy to determine, but we are surely agreed that it constitutes a serious moral limitation to our freedom of action. To produce the 1,001 units of good for B rather than fulfill our promise to A would be to take, not perhaps our duty as philanthropists too seriously, but certainly our duty as makers of promises too lightly.8

8. Ross continues his attack on the foregoing views, paying special attention to the inductive basis. He concludes that considerations about duty are generally independent of our calculations regarding the best possible consequences.

The coextensiveness of the right and the optimific is, then, not self-evident. And I can see no way of proving it deductively; nor, so far as I know, has anyone tried to do so. There remains the question whether it can be established inductively. Such an inquiry, to be conclusive, would have to be very thorough and extensive. We should have to take a large
variety of the acts which we, to the best of our ability, judge to be right. We should have to trace as far as possible their consequences, not only for the persons directly affected but also for those indirectly affected, and to these no limit can be set. To make our inquiry thoroughly conclusive, we should have to do what we cannot do, viz., trace these consequences into an unending future. And even to make it reasonably conclusive, we should have to trace them far into the future. It is clear that the most we could possibly say is that a large variety of typical acts that are judged right appear, so far as we can trace their consequences, to produce more good than any other acts possible to the agents in the circumstances. And such a result falls far short of proving the constant connection of the two attributes. But it is surely clear that no inductive inquiry justifying even this result has ever been carried through. The advocates of utilitarian systems have been so much persuaded either of the identity or of the self-evident connection of the attributes “right” and “optimific” (or “felicific”) that they have not attempted even such an inductive inquiry as is possible. And in view of the enormous complexity of the task and the inevitable inconclusiveness of the result, it is worth no one’s while to make the attempt. What, after all, would be gained by it? If, as I have tried to show, for an act to be right and to be optimific are not the same thing, and an act’s being optimific is not even the ground of its being right, then if we could ask ourselves (though the question is really un-meaning) which we ought to do, right acts because they are right or optimific acts because they are optimific, our answer must be “the former.” If they are optimific as well as right, that is interesting but not morally important; if not, we still ought to do them (which is only another way of saying that they are right acts), and the question whether they are optimific has no importance for moral theory.\(^b\)

9. In offering an ultimate defense of his theory that our obligations do not reduce to a mere production of good consequences, Ross employs a telling example.

There is one direction in which a fairly serious attempt has been made to show the connection of the attributes “right” and “optimific.” One of the most evident facts of our moral consciousness is the sense which we have of the sanctity of promises, a sense which does not, on the face of it, involve the thought that one will be bringing more good into existence by fulfilling the promise than by breaking it. It is plain, I think, that in our normal thought we consider that the fact that we have made a promise is in itself sufficient to create a duty of keeping it, the sense of duty resting on remembrance of the past promise and not on thoughts of the future consequences of its fulfillment. Utilitarianism tries to show that this is not so, that the sanctity of promises rests on the good consequences of the fulfillment of them and the bad consequences of their nonfulfillment. It does so in this way: it points out that when you break a promise you not only fail to confer a certain advantage on your promisee but you diminish his confidence, and indirectly the confidence of others, in the fulfillment of promises. . . . It may be suspected . . . that the effect of a single keeping or breaking of a promise in strengthening or weakening the fabric of mutual confidence is greatly exaggerated by the theory we are examining. And if we suppose two men dying together alone, do we think that the duty of one to fulfill before he dies a promise he has made to the other would be extinguished by the fact that neither act would have any effect on the general confidence? Anyone who holds this may be suspected of not having reflected on what a promise is.

I conclude that the attributes “right” and “optimific” are not identical, and that we do not know either by intuition, by deduction, or by induction that they coincide in their application, still less that the latter is the foundation of the former. It must be added, however, that if we are ever under no special obligation such as that of fidelity to a promisee or of gratitude to a benefactor, we ought to do what will produce most good; and that even when we are under a special obligation the tendency of acts to promote general good is one of the main factors in determining whether they are right.\(^i\)

Questions

1. What does Ross mean by “prima facie duty”?
2. How does Ross, an intuitionist, account for the fact that two people of moral character can disagree about what is actually right in a given situation?
3. How receptive would he be to the Kantian conception of the Categorical Imperative?
4. Wherein do Ross and Moore agree and differ concerning their ethical intuitionism? How important is their disagreement?
5. Give an example which tends to support Ross in his criticism of Utilitarianism. Explain.
6. How would Ross argue against those who claim that one’s actual duty in any situation depends entirely upon how the person feels about it?
7. Do you think that Ross’s theory comes close to capturing the moral convictions of the average person? Discuss.
8. Is it self-evidently true that when I make a promise, all things being equal, I ought to keep it or is it merely a matter of one’s cultural background?
9. Do you agree with Ross’s contention that it is false to subsume all duties under the duty of beneficence?
10. In a situation in which there are several claims incumbent upon us simultaneously, is Ross's account capable of determining which course of action is right? Does each *prima facie* duty impose as great a claim upon us as any other?

**Key to Selections**

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**Guide to Additional Reading**

**PRIMARY SOURCES**


**DISCUSSION AND COMMENTARY**


**Ethics as Emotive Expression**

A. J. AYER

Alfred J. Ayer (b. 1910), Professor of Mind and Logic at the University of London, was a scholar at Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford. He lectured at Christ Church from 1932 to 1935, and from 1935 to 1944 was a research scholar there, receiving his M.A. degree, in 1936. From 1944 to 1946, Professor Ayer was a Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, and Dean of Wadham during 1945–1946. During World War II, he served in the Welsh Guards and performed intelligence duties. Also, in 1945, he was an attaché to the British Embassy in Paris. His appointment as Grote Professor of Philosophy at the University of London came in 1946; the academic year 1948–49 Ayer spent as a visiting professor at New York University. One of the clearest expositors of logical positivism, Ayer has written, besides a number of articles, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936, revised in 1946), *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940), *Logical Positivism* (1959) and *The Origins of Pragmatism* (1968).