

ROSSIAN MORAL PLURALISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In this paper, we outline central features of David Ross's moral pluralism and show why it is an attractive subject for philosophy classes in secondary schools. We argue that Ross's pluralistic theory constitutes an important systematic alternative to monistic theories, such as Kant's moral theory and act utilitarianism, which often dominate ethics courses in secondary schools. Ross's theory also provides students with a much-needed theoretical framework for expressing an independent view which integrates elements from different theories covered in ethics courses. Based on our outline of Ross's version of moral pluralism, we also sketch a unit in which advanced level students are introduced to and discuss central elements of Ross's pluralistic moral theory. The overarching aim is to encourage students to engage with a potential limit of monistic theories and with an alternative normative approach to moral thinking, thereby refining their conceptual tools for expressing and discussing their own moral views.

Keywords: William David Ross; moral pluralism; contributory and overall judgements; prima facie duties and moral reasons; moral conflicts

1. Background: monism and pluralism in philosophy classes

Ethics units in current philosophy textbooks and lesson plans for ethics-related questions from relevant journals cover a considerable spectrum. Topics range from questions about the good life and the foundations of normative ethics to central problems of applied ethics and to the challenge posed by moral scepticism. Unfortunately, in this wide selection of topics there is hardly any material covering moral pluralism.¹ "Moral pluralism", in the sense that we have in

¹ This assessment is mainly based on experiences from the German-speaking context and on a review of recently published textbooks for philosophy courses as well as recent publications in the German journals *Ethik & Unterricht*, *Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie und Ethik* and *Praxis Philosophie und Ethik*. Neither have we found any teaching material on Ross's ethics in English, e.g. in the international journals *Teaching Philosophy* and *Journal for Philosophy in Schools*. We assume that our findings and suggestions are applicable to other languages and countries in which philosophy is taught in secondary schools, in particular to sixth form students. Cf. Burton et al. 2006 for a similar assessment regarding the lack of teaching material on Rossian moral pluralism more than a decade ago.

mind for the purposes of this paper, refers to alternatives to *monism* about moral principles. According to ethical monism, there is *one* fundamental overarching moral principle which covers the whole range of morally right and wrong actions. Examples for monistic theories are Kant's ethics and the act utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill.² In contrast, moral pluralism claims that there is more than one fundamental moral principle, i.e. more than one moral principle that cannot be derived from any further moral principles.³

We consider the absence of material covering moral pluralism regrettable for two reasons. First, as we will outline below, it means that a philosophically significant and influential position is likely to be missing from most philosophy classes in secondary schools. The second reason is that moral pluralism is a view which is fairly close to everyday moral thinking. Acquaintance with this philosophical theory can therefore help students to understand and express their own moral thinking more clearly. Why that is the case should become clear in the following exposition of the version of moral pluralism developed by the British philosopher William David Ross (1877-1971). Ross is not only a prominent exponent of moral pluralism, his treatise *The Right and the Good* is also a modern philosophical classic and well suited for the classroom setting.

However, Ross's ethical theory is fairly complex. It covers a variety of intertwined issues, with topics ranging from normative ethics and value theory to moral epistemology and metaphysics. In addition, crucial parts of Ross's theory unfortunately lend themselves to misunderstandings, given the vocabulary he uses to express them. These two factors may make it challenging to engage with Ross's view, and they might make it difficult for teachers to select aspects from his texts that are suitable for discussion in class. Given these potential complications, and given that Ross's view is not yet well represented in the context of teaching philosophy in schools, we start off by presenting certain important features of the position in some detail. Our exposition focuses on those aspects of Ross's theory that are, in our view, an important addition to ethics courses in secondary schools and suited for being covered in philosophy classes. These include the central claims of Ross's pluralistic moral theory and his view of moral thinking and reasoning, which we aim to describe as clearly as possible and in terms that make it easy for students to relate them to their own moral thinking.

2. Central features of Rossian pluralism

Central features of Ross's version of moral pluralism, which he mainly develops in the second chapter of *The Right and the Good*, can be summed up as follows (Ross 1930/2002; Wolf 1996; Stratton-Lake 2002; Skelton 2012: sect. 3-4).

² A moral principle is *fundamental* if, and only if, it cannot be derived from any other moral principle. Monist views can hence contain more than one principle, but only one fundamental principle. If, for example, the Categorical Imperative can be used to derive a principle according to which lying is wrong, Kant's moral theory contains more than one moral principle. Even in this case, however, it remains a monist view, since the principle concerning the morality of lying is a consequence of the Categorical Imperative, which in turn is not derived from any more fundamental moral principle, according to Kant.

³ Moral pluralism in this sense should not be confused with *political* pluralism, which is concerned with a plurality of incompatible value systems or world views held by different individuals or groups, and with the question of how governments or societies should respond to them (Mason 2006/2015).

First of all, Ross argues that there are two levels of moral judgement. On the one hand, there is the level of judgements about moral duties (that is, about which acts are right and wrong, all things considered), which play a central role in classic monistic moral theories, such as Kant's deontological ethics or act utilitarianism. Such judgements express an *overall assessment* of the moral status of an action and are used to *conclude* a deliberative process about actions. On the other hand, Ross emphasises that we also need to recognise that there are *contributory* judgements, which concern what Ross labels *prima facie duties*, such as the prima facie duty to keep one's promises. Judgements about prima facie duties specify *morally relevant properties* of acts that contribute to making acts right or wrong and that one needs to take into consideration in moral deliberation. Ross admits that the term "prima facie duty" is not an ideal choice for expressing this idea, as it invites a number of misunderstandings. Contrary to what the term suggests, "prima facie duty" is neither meant to refer to a certain *type of duty*, nor to something that only *appears* to be a duty (Ross 1930/2002: 20). Luckily, Ross's terminological choice does not provide an obstacle to engaging with his view, and contemporary scholars argue that the view can be reconstructed without loss in terms of *moral reasons* (Stratton-Lake 2002: xxxiif). According to this suggestion, that there is a prima facie duty to perform a certain act just means that there is a moral reason to perform it.⁴ Thus, the idea that one has a prima facie duty to keep one's promises can be helpfully understood as the claim that, from the point of view of morality, something counts in favour of keeping one's promises. Principles about prima facie duties in this sense are to be distinguished from mere heuristics or rules of thumb, which can be found in some versions of utilitarianism in the form of so-called secondary principles (see e.g. Hare 1981).

Second, according to Rossian pluralism there are *several irreducible* morally relevant factors that can be expressed in a number of moral principles about prima facie duties or moral reasons. Examples for these are the prima facie duty not to harm others, the prima facie duty to keep our promises, and the prima facie duty to act to make amends for a previous wrong. Saying that these factors are irreducible means that there is no supreme principle from which all principles about prima facie duties could be deduced.⁵

⁴ We use the term "reason" equivocally in everyday language. In the context of this paper, "a reason for action" does not refer to a *cause* or an *explanation* for this action, nor to the *motivation* of the agent. Instead, it refers to what is usually called a *normative reason*, i.e. something that *speaks for/against* performing or omitting a certain action and that can *justify* an act or omission. For instance, when we try to decide what to do and ask ourselves which reasons we have to do this or that, we do not ask ourselves what causes, explains or motivates our action, but rather, which considerations count for and against the various options we have. On the notion of a normative reason, see Alvarez 2016.

⁵ Note that one can be a pluralist in the sense of postulating more than one fundamental morally relevant principle or property without accepting the overall/contributory distinction. For example, a theory according to which both lying and killing are always morally *wrong* is pluralistic in this sense (if it conceives of both of these principles as basic), but does not specify the moral relevance of these properties in terms of moral *reasons* or mere prima facie duties. By the same token, there could be a monist theory that accepts the overall/contributory distinction, and according to which there is only one reason-giving property. Ross's account has a two-level structure *in combination* with a pluralistic view of morally relevant properties.

Third, contributory principles (or, more precisely, the moral reasons they concern) can, and often do, come into *conflict* with each other in individual cases. Such a moral conflict occurs when, in a particular situation, several moral reasons exist which the agent cannot comply with in equal measure (see below for an example).

Fourth, Ross believes that it is impossible to state plausible higher-order rules or principles for resolving such conflicts, i.e. principles that specify how different (combinations of) reasons are to be weighed or balanced in case they favour incompatible courses of actions.

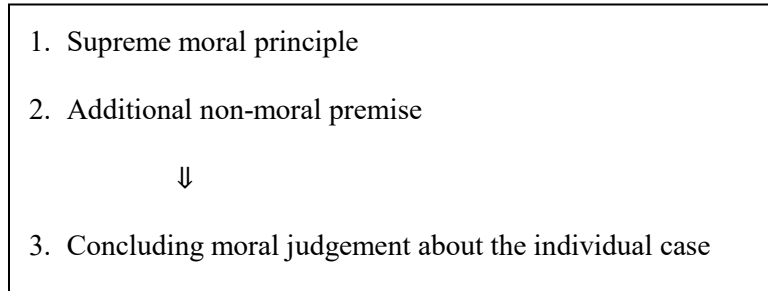
Fifth, according to Ross, we need *Moral Judgement* in cases of conflict in order to decide what is morally right or wrong. In this context, Moral Judgement is to be understood as a *capacity* to competently evaluate an individual case and to weigh competing morally relevant factors present in that case, without relying on rules that specify how different reasons are to be weighed.⁶ Ross does not have a detailed theory of how the capacity of Moral Judgement operates (i.e. an account of which specific abilities it involves and of when it operates well), although he claims that instances of this capacity can lead to justified judgments (Ross 1930/2002: 31).⁷ According to Ross, judgements about right or wrong in particular cases are hence not a question of individual decisions, let alone subjective preferences. He does not believe that all judgements about these matters are equally justified.⁸

The specific nature of Ross's position can best be elucidated by means of a comparison with *overall principles* of classic monistic alternatives, such as (certain versions of) Kant's categorical imperative or the moral principle of classic act utilitarianism. Applying these overall principles results in judgements with which instances of moral deliberation can be brought to a conclusion, that is, in judgements that express what is, *all things considered*, right or wrong, morally required, prohibited or permitted. The application of an overall principle to a given case amounts to *settling the question* of what is the right or wrong thing to do in that case. Furthermore, applying overall principles of classic monistic theories merely requires subsuming the particular case under the respective principle. This means that we can deduce a particular moral judgement from such a moral principle in combination with a suitable non-moral description of the situation (Schmidt 2012: 513f. and 516). No further moral judgement or weighing is required. This can be represented in the following schema.

⁶ Here and in the following, we use capital letters to distinguish this specific capacity from moral judgements, i.e. from mental states with a certain propositional content.

⁷ Some of Ross's remarks suggest that such judgements have a perceptual element, but his remarks are not developed into a full-fledged theory (Ross 1930/2002, 42).

⁸ Two features of Ross's epistemological view that we will not discuss in this paper are the following: First, Ross takes principles about prima facie duties to be *self-evident* and a possible object of knowledge. Second, to judgements about what one morally ought to do, all things considered, Ross ascribes a much weaker epistemic status. Although they can be justified – Ross speaks of “probable opinion” in this connection –, they cannot amount to knowledge (Ross 1930/2002, 29f.). Ross's moral pluralism is independent of these two assumptions, and one might combine a Ross-style moral pluralism with a different epistemological approach. A further aspect of Ross's ethical theory that we will ignore here is his *non-naturalist* and *realist* conception of moral judgements. Ross believes that there are moral properties, which are part of the fabric of the world, and he furthermore takes these properties to be robustly mind-independent (e.g. Ross 1930/2002, 14f., 82 and 84f.; Stratton-Lake 2002, xiv-xvi.) Again, this is a view that is independent of Ross's moral pluralism.



*Illustration 1. Schema for classic moral monism*⁹

Let us further illustrate this schema with two examples for its application.

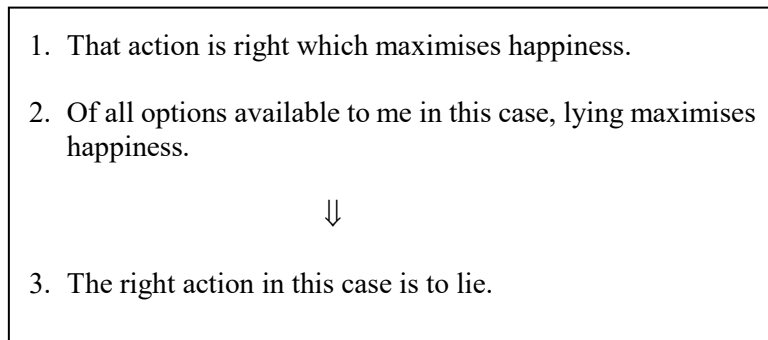
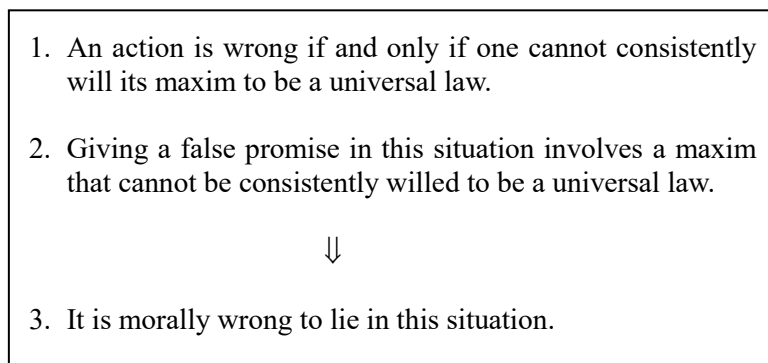


Illustration 2. Application of the schema for classic moral monism to act utilitarianism



*Illustration 3. Application of the schema for classic moral monism to the Categorical Imperative*¹⁰

⁹ See Althoff 2015: 146f. for a similar schema. Althoff’s textbook article presents the schema, which is based on Aristotle’s practical syllogism, as a general help for structuring a moral justification for an action in a particular situation.

¹⁰ For the sake of simplicity, we restrict ourselves to one of the many formulas of the Categorical Imperative, namely the so-called “universal law“ formula. Kant’s own formulation is slightly different (and in the grammatical imperative mood), but we take it that the differences are not relevant for the purpose of our illustration (see Suikkanen 2015, 97 for a similar formulation). The schema for monism might not adequately capture the proper application of other formulas of the Categorical Imperative.

Ross's prima facie principles, on the contrary, only allow us to immediately deduce that there are certain moral reasons for or against an action. Hence, those principles mainly specify *input* into our moral deliberation and thereby guide us in our moral deliberation and judgements, whereas they do not allow us to conclude directly what to do (Schmidt 2012: 535f.).

To move from judgements about *reasons* to overall judgements about what *ought* to be done, further moral judgements are necessary. Here we need to distinguish between two different types of cases. In cases of the first type, there are no conflicting moral reasons. In such cases, the right (or wrong) actions are those actions for which (or against which) the relevant reasons speak. Cases of the second type are situations in which reasons are in conflict with each other. On Ross's view, such situations require that we weigh and judge without a rule-governed decision procedure which reasons are strongest, all things considered. This second case can be represented in the following schema.

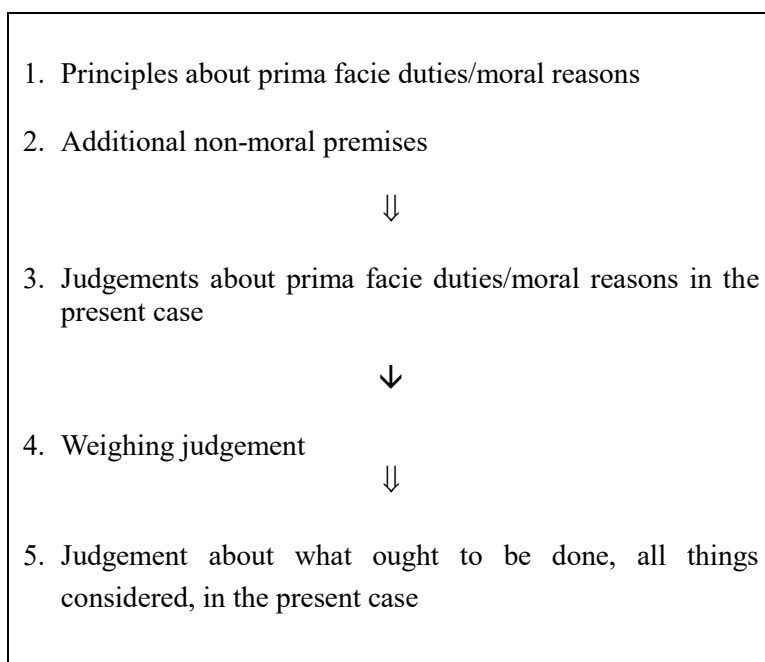


Illustration 4. Schema for Rossian moral pluralism¹¹

Let us also illustrate the application of this schema with an example.

¹¹ The double arrow represents a logical deduction, the simple arrow stands for the application of the capacity for Moral Judgement.

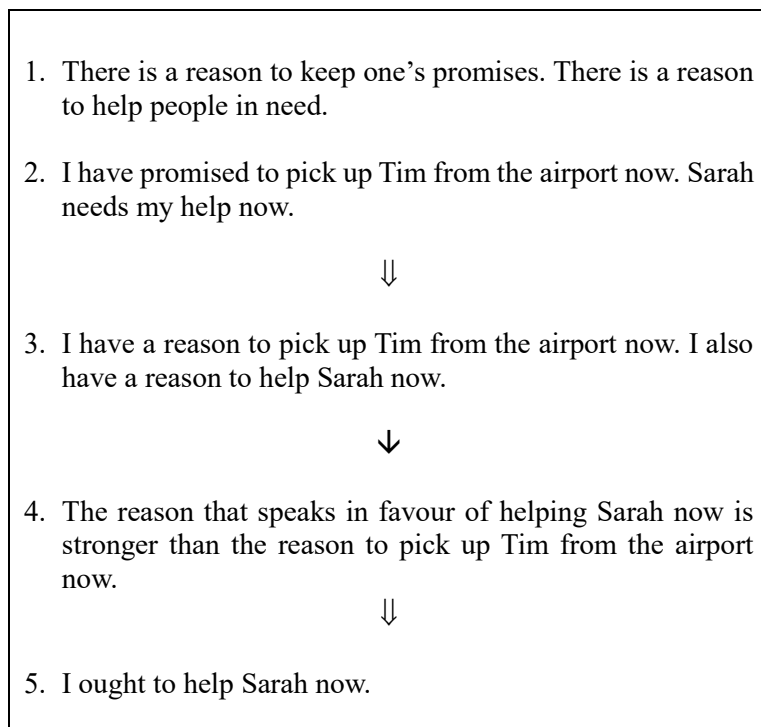


Illustration 5. Application of the schema for Rossian moral pluralism

To sum up, classic monistic theories understand the process of reaching a verdict in an individual case, provided that we have knowledge of the case's non-moral features, as purely subsumptive. That is, in addition to a deductive ability, only the knowledge of the relevant principle and of additional non-moral premises is needed for this process. On Ross's pluralistic account, by contrast, the exercise of Moral Judgement is needed as a necessary additional step in cases of conflicting moral reasons. This capacity manifests itself in *weighing judgements*, which are concerned with the comparative strength of the moral reasons under consideration. Exercising Moral Judgement is necessary on Ross's model, because we cannot come to a verdict about which action is right or wrong without an assessment as to which reason is stronger in the given situation, and because, according to Ross, there are no higher-order weighing principles that we could apply to determine the comparative weight of reasons in a particular situation.

3. Philosophical merits of Rossian moral pluralism

There are various reasons why Ross's moral pluralism is an attractive alternative to monistic conceptions. This is reflected in the fact that Ross-style pluralism is treated as an important theoretical option, not only in debates about foundational ethical questions (Dancy 1993; Audi 2004; Hooker 1996; Schmidt 2012; Gertken 2014), but also in standard textbooks on ethics for undergraduate university courses (Timmons 2013; Shafer-Landau 2014; Suikkanen 2014).

Generally speaking, Ross's two-level model of moral judgement is appealing because the conceptual distinction between reason judgements and judgements about overall rightness and wrongness allows for a plausible description of moral conflicts. In everyday contexts as well as

in textbooks, such conflicts are often referred to as “dilemmas”. However, they are rarely actually understood as *tragic dilemmas*, in which agents act wrongly no matter what they do. On the one hand, it is questionable whether such tragic dilemmas can even be described consistently (Boshammer 2008). On the other hand, we cannot reasonably understand *every* moral conflict as such a tragic dilemma, even if there are some cases that should be understood in that way (Gertken 2014: 175f.). At least in *some* cases of moral conflict we can reasonably judge that there is a right action available to the agent and at the same time insist that the conflict is not merely an *apparent* conflict, which only seems to exist due to the agent’s misleading or incomplete evidence. It is hard to see how theories whose principles are merely formulated on the overall level, such as Kantianism or act utilitarianism, can account for this phenomenon. Although it can be considered a virtue of act utilitarianism that the theory does not allow for tragic dilemmas, it does not allow for non-tragic conflicts either. Depending on one’s favoured interpretation of the Categorical Imperative, Kantian ethics might imply that agents cannot avoid acting wrongly in some cases (since all relevant options open to them would involve maxims that cannot be willed as a universal law), but it is again hard to see how one might be able to accommodate the idea that there are non-tragic moral conflicts within the framework provided by the Categorical Imperative.¹²

In contrast, given the conceptual framework of Ross’s two-level understanding of moral judgements, non-tragic conflicts can plausibly be described as situations in which several moral reasons count in favour of mutually incompatible courses of action. Considering these options, however, can lead to the understanding that, all things considered, the reasons for one of the available actions outweigh the others and that therefore (only) that action is required or at least permissible.¹³ Ross’s model of moral judgements furthermore accounts for the view that at least in some cases of conflict, a feeling of regret is adequate. That is so because those reasons that are outbalanced and count in favour of a different decision than the one that is overall morally required do not thereby lose their normative weight or significance. For instance, even if, all things considered, I should break a promise in order to help someone in need, this does not make the fact that I made a promise normatively irrelevant. This fact can give me a reason to offer an explanation for what I did. Also, it makes regret adequate even in cases in which

¹² That neither act utilitarianism nor Kantianism allow for non-tragic moral conflicts is not due to the fact that these theories are monist. Rather, it is explained by the fact that they are *entirely* formulated on the level of *overall* judgements. As far as the task of accommodating non-tragic moral conflicts is concerned, pluralistic theories with more than one fundamental moral principle would not do any better, as long as these are entirely overall principles. In so far as overall principles conflict, the results will either be inconsistent (the principles imply that one course of action is both right and wrong) or lead to tragic dilemmas (the principles imply that all options open to the agent are morally wrong).

¹³ As noted above, this does not rule out that some conflicts may be tragic dilemmas, i.e. cases in which no right option is available to the agent. Given the Rossian framework, the question of whether tragic dilemmas exist depends, among other things, on substantial issues concerning what moral reasons there are and how they relate to each other – such as the question of whether some moral reasons are *incomparable* with each other with regard to their strength.

remorse would be out of place, since remorse is best understood as an emotion that is an appropriate reaction to cases of *wrongdoing*.¹⁴

Regarding the specific content of Ross's version of moral pluralism, one of his central claims is that there is a plurality of morally relevant factors that matter in their own right and that can come into conflict with each other. This view is supported by the fact that it captures an important part of moral experience, namely the complexity and diversity of moral life and thought, as Ross himself also points out (Ross 1930/2002: 18f.). Although, according to act utilitarianism, for example, it can be *epistemically difficult* (if not impossible) to find out what the right action is in a particular context, monism implies that there is nevertheless *just one* morally relevant factor which needs to be taken into account whenever we ask ourselves what the right thing to do is. The view that there are several morally relevant factors that matter in their own right gains further support from the fact that, for instance, in several areas of applied ethics, pluralistic approaches are highly influential (note especially the central role played by Tom L. Beauchamp's and James F. Childress's *principlism* in current bioethics; Beauchamp/Childress 1979/2013). Ross's version of moral pluralism furthermore provides an attractive middle ground between act utilitarianism and Kantianism insofar as it can treat facts about well-being (or valuable consequences of actions more generally) as morally relevant, without assuming that such considerations are the *only* ones that matter in their own right.

The claim that there are no plausible higher order principles for solving moral conflicts is the most contentious aspect of Ross's specific version of moral pluralism. However, it seems attractive to the extent that it proves difficult to defend plausible candidates for weighing principles which are not vulnerable to counterexamples. Given that despite their initial plausibility, monistic theories often also have highly counterintuitive implications, looking for principles that imply judgements about the rightness and wrongness of all actions might be a fruitless endeavour. This is equally true for more restricted overall principles that are meant to cover cases of conflicting moral reasons.¹⁵

4. Rossian moral pluralism in the philosophy classroom

From a subject-didactic perspective, the main reasons for introducing Rossian moral pluralism to students are the following. First of all, there is the philosophical significance of the view. As we have stated above, pluralistic conceptions play an important role both in current debates concerning the foundations of ethics and in applied ethics. This speaks in favour of discussing such conceptions in the philosophy classroom, especially since Ross's view is also much closer to everyday moral thinking and reasoning than most monistic views, given their high level of abstraction and lack of conceptual space for non-tragic moral conflicts.

¹⁴ For a more detailed account of moral conflicts which elucidates the relation between defeated prima facie duties or moral reasons and regret, see Brink 1994: 220-223. On the distinction between regret and remorse, see McConnell 2014: sect. 6.

¹⁵ Of course, whether such principles do exist is a question that can only be settled by ethical argument, and we do not mean to suggest that there is a definitive case for the non-existence of weighing principles. Our point is merely that claiming that weighing principles exist is a substantial commitment of an ethical theory, and that Ross's denial that such principles can be specified in a plausible way is not a refusal to theorise, but an informed scepticism about the limits of moral principles that deserves to be taken seriously as a theoretical option.

Ross's account is also a fruitful subject matter specifically for philosophy classes which aim to facilitate *problem-oriented learning*, an approach that, roughly speaking, encourages students to philosophise themselves by thinking about philosophical problems (Tiedemann 2012). According to our observations, at least in the German-speaking context, the model of moral deliberation characteristic of a Rossian pluralistic moral theory is often tacitly presupposed by typical teaching methods and contents of such philosophy classes, albeit without being introduced and discussed explicitly as an ethical theory. From ordinary moral and non-moral decisions in their daily lives, students are usually already acquainted with the procedure of making pro and con lists of the advantages and disadvantages of different options, which can be ordered by their importance and used as a basis for an overall judgement about what to do. This method is also commonly used in classroom discussions of specific moral problems, not least because this allows teachers to tie their teaching in with an approach to moral decision-making familiar to their students.

Such a deliberative approach, however, cannot be reconstructed plausibly within the conceptual framework set out by overall ought-principles and valid deductive arguments. In contrast, the deliberative approach is reflected explicitly within the Rossian theory. For conceptual reasons, the ought-principles of monistic theories cannot be weighed or balanced, just as, for instance, valid deductive arguments for or against a thesis cannot be weighed or balanced. In contrast, *reasons* for or against an action are by their very nature entities which have a certain *strength* or *weight* and which allow for the sort of comparisons and rankings involved in weighing procedures. This means that the monistic theories standardly discussed in philosophy classes are hardly compatible with the described manner of deliberation and discussion. Hence there is a striking gap between a common methodological approach in philosophy classes and the theoretical framework offered to students for reflecting this approach. Teaching a unit on Rossian moral pluralism helps to close this gap.

The problem just sketched is aggravated by the fact that philosophy students are regularly expected to reach an independent, well-balanced judgement whilst taking into account the philosophical theories discussed in class. In Germany and Switzerland, this expectation can, for example, be found in the official guidelines for the written *Abitur* (A-level) exams as well as in textbooks and models for lesson planning (see e.g. Giesinger 2004; Kultusministerkonferenz 2006; Franzen 2016: 90f.). Yet if the students have, let us say, been introduced to Kant's moral theory and act utilitarianism in a unit on normative ethics and are subsequently asked in an exam to come to a well-founded judgement regarding some scenario, then what they are lacking is a fitting theoretical element which allows them to develop an independent, coherent view that integrates elements from different monistic theories. Given the presumably widely-shared assessment that both Kant's moral theory as well as act utilitarianism capture *some* aspects of moral thinking adequately, but not others, a pluralistic moral theory, such as the one developed by Ross, offers a helpful theoretical framework for students' attempts to reconcile the different advantages of both Kantianism and act utilitarianism (although, of course, the pluralistic framework would also have to be examined critically in its own right).

5. Sketch of a unit on Ross's moral pluralism

The unit on Ross's moral pluralism for advanced level students (i.e. students between the ages of sixteen and eighteen) that we sketch here consists of five main steps and comprises about eight or nine lessons of 45 to 60 minutes. It follows a unit on monistic theories such as act utilitarianism and Kant's moral theory.

The first lesson should serve to draw the students' attention to the way that monistic theories describe and judge cases of moral conflict, and to ask them to compare this with their own understanding of such cases. They may be asked, for example, to apply a formula of Kant's Categorical Imperative and the utilitarian Greatest Happiness Principle to the following types of conflict cases: a) A has made two promises and would have to break one to keep the other; b) B can help someone in need, but can only do so by breaking a promise; c) Both A and B are in need of help. C can help either A or B, but C cannot help *both* A and B. Students should then be asked whether there is something they think should be said about those cases from the point of view of an ethical theory which *cannot* be said within the context of Kant's ethics or act utilitarianism.

This first step is meant to set the stage for the following discussion of Ross's moral pluralism, and it should not aim to produce a certain philosophical result, such as the assessment that monistic theories lack a plausible understanding of cases of moral conflict or misrepresent them. Since neither the view that there are moral conflicts, nor the view that monistic theories are incapable of accommodating a plausible description of such conflicts is philosophically uncontroversial, one should not expect a uniform reaction among students or try to convince them of any particular view about the monistic treatment of moral conflicts.

Rather, the purpose of discussing the aforementioned cases is to focus on *potential* limits of monistic theories, to engage the students' interest before they are introduced to an alternative view, and to prompt students to reflect on their own moral understanding of moral conflicts. This might lead students to express, in one way or another, the view that monistic theories either deny the possibility of conflicting moral factors or imply that in such cases, an agent acts wrongly no matter what course of action she chooses. (The first option is plausible with regard to the utilitarian approach, whereas both options seem defensible with regard to interpreting the results of applying the Categorical Imperative to potential conflict cases.) However, both of these views already involve a rather sophisticated level of analysis, and it is therefore likely that students will just feel that something potentially significant is missing in the Kantian or utilitarian way of treating moral conflicts, without being able to express clearly what it is that they find missing. What is more, it is also possible that students do not find the monistic treatment of the aforementioned cases to be lacking anything important at all.

Whatever their responses turn out to be, Ross can afterwards be introduced as a philosopher who offers an alternative take on the phenomenon of moral conflict. Depending on which verdicts the students have reached in their own preliminary discussion, they will now either be confronted with a position that *challenges* their views, or they will be offered a theoretical framework that *helps them describe* their own approach more precisely.

In a second step, students read passages from Ross's *The Right and the Good* in which central elements of his view are introduced, among them the concept of a prima facie duty and the two-level model of moral judgement. Ross also expounds his criticism of alternative moral theories

in those passages (Ross 1930/2002: 17-20).¹⁶ In the course of this first encounter with elements of Ross's theory, it is recommendable to explain that the expression "prima facie duty" is best understood in terms of a moral reason for action. It will also be necessary to distinguish the relevant notion of a moral reason from other possible concepts that can be expressed by "reason" (see footnote 4 above), e.g. by reference to everyday practices of conceptualising factors relevant to our decisions as "pros" and "cons", and of balancing such factors in order to reach a decision. Furthermore, Ross's two-level model of moral judgement can be illustrated and contrasted with the classic subsumptive model by means of the two schemas presented above. To deepen their understanding of this contrast, students should then apply the schemas to specific examples. This second step will take up about two lessons.

In a third step, students are asked to apply the newly acquired conceptual framework by coming up with their own lists of prima facie duties or moral reasons. Students should be encouraged to make these lists as long or complex as seems necessary, but at the same time as concise and unified as possible. They could draw up their lists in groups and afterwards present their results for discussion. To help them develop ideas for plausible candidates for moral reasons, students can be advised to use the heuristic of focussing on actual or hypothetical moral conflicts and ask themselves which morally relevant aspects or reasons are at play in those cases. This third step should take up about one lesson.

In a fourth step, for which about two or three lessons should be scheduled, students read further pages from *The Right and the Good*, in which Ross introduces his suggestions for seven prima facie duties and articulates his scepticism about weighing principles and unification (Ross 1930/2002: 20f., 24f. and 41f.). After working with the text, students should compare their own lists with that of Ross and discuss interesting similarities and differences.

The final lessons of the unit are devoted to a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Ross's moral pluralism. In order to prompt a comparison, students are asked to recall central features of the monistic theories that were discussed previously. A specific focus should lie on the theories' different understandings of situations of moral conflict, as outlined above. Here students can be asked to look back at their answers from the first lesson of the unit and consider whether their views have changed, or whether they now have better resources to express certain objections to monistic views more clearly.

If more time is available, it is recommendable to explore the theoretical space between monistic theories such as act utilitarianism and Kantianism on the one hand and Ross's version of pluralism on the other. Although these theories are incompatible with one another, they do not cover the whole range of options open to moral theories. Therefore, there is room for pluralistic theories which are less sceptical about weighing principles than Ross is, or that allow for more unification (i.e. fewer basic contributory principles) than Ross does. Students could hence try to independently develop unifications and weighing principles and thus go beyond Ross's own suggestions, e.g. by addressing questions such as the following:¹⁷ Can we say that

¹⁶ These and the other passages selected here are also available in a German translation: Ross 1930/1976: 253-259 and 268.

¹⁷ Note that the project of *unification* and the project of *specifying weighing principles* are logically independent. A suggestion for deriving all contributory reason principles from one more fundamental principle might not

some reasons always weigh more heavily than others, or find defensible principles which tell us how to weigh different combinations of reasons? (Plausible candidates might not be as hard to come by as Ross thinks. For example, can the fact that an action is necessary to save an innocent person's life really ever be outweighed by the fact that it is an instance of lying?) If we can specify plausible weighing principles, how far do they take us? Can we specify properties shared by all actions *for* which there are moral reasons, or shared by all actions *against* which there are moral reasons? By discussing such questions, students could contemplate possible compromises between Ross and the monistic approaches they are familiar with. This will especially be of interest to students with sympathies for monistic theories, since these students will most likely value the highly systematic character and unity of such approaches.

To conclude the unit, students should be asked to write individual comments on the discussed theoretical spectrum, addressing questions such as the following: What is the most plausible take on the nature of moral conflicts? Is Moral Judgment really necessary for making well-informed and justified decisions about situations of moral conflict? How much unification of morally relevant factors or principles is possible?

When discussing Ross's ethics, students are likely to raise worries about the capacity of Moral Judgment and the possibility of justified moral beliefs which are not deduced from moral principles. Those judgements and beliefs might appear arbitrary or subjective in a problematic way. Such worries are certainly reasonable. However, it is worth noting that similar questions can be asked about the justification of moral *principles* as well, for these principles cannot all be derived from other moral principles. Ross's work can thus be used as a starting point for examining more general epistemological and methodological issues with regard to moral judgments, such as the possible role that *moral intuitions* could play in justifying moral judgements (Bedke 2010; Burkard 2012), the role of analogies and arguments from universalizability or the Rawlsian idea of a reflective equilibrium as an aim of moral inquiry (see Althoff/Franzen 2015: 138-142 for teaching material in German on the latter point; see Daniels 2003/2016 for a comprehensive introduction to the reflective-equilibrium model and Giesinger 2004 for an application of that model to lesson planning).¹⁸

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imply any weighing principles, and specifying weighing principles is consistent with rejecting any attempts to derive the contributory principles from something more basic. On the project of unifying Rossian principles, see McNaughton 1996 and Audi 2004.

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