Ross’s *Prima Facie* Duties  
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28 April 2015

The following text is from W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988 [first published in 1930]), 20-1 (boldface added; footnotes omitted):

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 [*sic*; should be “knowledge”; see p. 24], 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 [*sic*; should be “knowledge”; see p. 24]. 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.

Here are my pithy\(^1\) formulations:


\(^2\) The word “fidelity” derives from the Latin word “fides” (faith).
pledges, (v) your oaths, (vi) your agreements, and (vii) your contracts.

2. **Reparation.** Rectify your wrongs.

3. **Gratitude.** Repay kindnesses.

4. **Justice.** Give others their due, i.e., what they deserve—(i) by not acting unjustly toward them, (ii) by preventing injustice to them, (iii) by removing injustice from them, and (iv) by reducing injustice to them.

5. **Beneficence.** Do good to others—(i) by preventing harm to them, (ii) by removing harm from them, (iii) by reducing harm to them, and (iv) by benefiting them.

6. **Self-improvement.** Make something of yourself—(i) by promoting your own virtue and (ii) by promoting your own intelligence (i.e., knowledge).

7. **Non-maleficence.** Don’t do bad to others—(i) by harming them, (ii) by injuring them, or (iii) by doing evil to them.

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3 As Ross points out, justice is the condition in which each person’s pleasure or happiness (or the means thereto) is in accordance with (i.e., proportional to) his or her merit (desert).

4 The word “beneficence” derives from two Latin words: “bene” (well) and “facere” (do), so it means, literally, do well. Don’t confuse “beneficence” with “benevolence,” the latter of which derives from “bene” (well) and “volens” (willing). “Benevolent” means (literally) willing well, or, as The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide (1999) puts it, “wishing to do good.” Beneficence is an act; benevolence is a motive.

5 As Ross points out, one can benefit a person by (i) increasing or promoting his or her virtue, (ii) increasing or promoting his or her intelligence (i.e., knowledge), and (iii) increasing or promoting his or her pleasure.

6 The word “maleficence” derives from two Latin words: “male” (ill) and “facere” (do), so it means, literally, do ill. Don’t confuse “maleficence” with “malevolence,” the latter of which derives from “male” (ill) and “volens” (willing). “Malevolent” means (literally) willing ill, or, as The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide (1999) puts it, “wishing evil to others.” Maleficence is an act; malevolence is a motive.