Rossian Pluralism: Objections and Replies
Keith Burgess-Jackson
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ROSSIAN PLURALISM (RP): For all acts x, x is right iff x maximizes net prima facie rightness.

COMMENTARY: According to W. D. Ross, “right acts can be distinguished from wrong acts only as being those which, of all those possible for the agent in the circumstances, have the greatest balance of prima facie rightness, in those respects in which they are prima facie right, over their prima facie wrongness, in those respects in which they are prima facie wrong.” W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988 [first published in 1930]), 41.

THE INDETERMINACY OBJECTION:

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it is indeterminate. ¹

¹ Also known as Rossian Ethics, Rossian Deontology, Rossian Formalism, and Rossian Intuitionism, after William David Ross (1877-1971).
² Fred Feldman explains:

According to the normative theory of Sir William David Ross (as presented in The Right and the Good) an action is morally right iff it maximizes net prima facie rightness.

Ross thinks that there are certain features of actions that tend to make those actions morally right. Among these he lists being the keeping of a promise, being a case of justly distributing some good or evil, being a case of showing gratitude, being a case of making reparations for a past misdeed, being a case of conferring a benefit on someone. These are the prima facie rightmaking characteristics. An act can have one or more of these, or it can have none. For each such characteristic, an act can have it to a great extent, or to a smaller extent. We can give each act a score indicating the total extent to which it has each of the prima facie rightmaking characteristics. We can sum these extents. We can call that the act’s ‘pfrightness’.

The same is true with respect to prima facie wrongmaking characteristics. We can call the sum of these in any case the act’s ‘pwrongness’.

If you subtract an act’s pwrongness from its pfrightness, you get its net pfrightness. The right act according to Ross is the one in a set of alternatives that maximizes this value.

³ A theory is indeterminate when it “leaves us with no principle upon which to discern what is our actual duty in particular circumstances.” Ross, The Right and the Good, 23.
2. RP is a normative ethical theory. 
   Therefore,
3. RP is unacceptable if it is indeterminate (from 1 and 2).
4. RP is indeterminate. 
   Therefore,
5. RP is unacceptable (from 3 and 4).

REPLY: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The Rossian pluralist accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The Rossian pluralist also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. “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.”4 In other words, indeterminacy, in and of itself, does not render a normative ethical theory unacceptable. Ross adds that two of RP’s rivals, ideal utilitarianism and hedonistic utilitarianism, are also indeterminate. If indeterminacy is a problem, therefore, it is a problem not just for RP but also for its main rivals.

COMMENTARY: Ross's second argument (the one about utilitarianism) is known as an *argumentum ad hominem*, which is Latin for “argument to the person.” He is saying to the critic, “Your theory is no better than mine.”

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THE LACK-OF-UNITY (OR LACK-OF-SYSTEM) OBJECTION:

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it fails to provide a unified account of rightness.
2. RP is a normative ethical theory. 
   Therefore,
3. RP is unacceptable if it fails to provide a unified account of rightness (from 1 and 2).
4. RP fails to provide a unified account of rightness. 
   Therefore,
5. RP is unacceptable (from 3 and 4).

REPLY: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The Rossian pluralist accepts the validity of

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4 Ibid., 24. A few pages later, Ross says that “we are more likely to do our duty if we reflect to the best of our ability on the *prima facie* rightness or wrongness of various possible acts in virtue of the characteristics we perceive them to have, than if we act without reflection. With this greater likelihood we must be content” (ibid., 32). Still later, Ross writes: “This sense of our particular duty in particular circumstances, preceded and informed by the fullest reflection we can bestow on the act in all its bearings, is highly fallible, but it is the only guide we have to our duty” (ibid., 42).
both arguments that make up the chain. The Rossian pluralist also accepts premise 2, but rejects premises 1 and 4. With regard to premise 1, Ross claims that “it is more important that our theory fit the facts than that it be simple” and “Loyalty to the facts is worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplicity.” In other words, a normative ethical theory can be acceptable even if it fails to provide a unified account of rightness. If rightness is complicated (as Ross thinks it is), then a theory of rightness should be complicated. With regard to premise 4, the Rossian pluralist can say that, though there are several distinct prima facie duties, rightness is defined in a unified way, as the maximization of net prima facie rightness. This is as unified an account of rightness as the accounts provided by utilitarians or Kantians.

COMMENTARY: This is known as arguing in the alternative. The Rossian pluralist is saying that the proposed test is not a correct test of a normative ethical theory, but that, if it is a correct test, RP passes it.

THE CIRCULARITY OBJECTION:

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it is circular.
2. A normative ethical theory is circular if it analyzes rightness in terms of rightness.
   Therefore,
3. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it analyzes rightness in terms of rightness (from 1 and 2).
4. RP is a normative ethical theory.
   Therefore,
5. RP is unacceptable if it analyzes rightness in terms of rightness (from 3 and 4).
6. RP analyzes rightness in terms of rightness.
   Therefore,
7. RP is unacceptable (from 5 and 6).

REPLY: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The Rossian pluralist accepts the validity of all three arguments that make up the chain. The Rossian pluralist also accepts

5 Ibid., 19.
6 Ibid., 23. Ross says that utilitarianism “seems to simplify unduly our relations to our fellows. It says, in effect, that the only morally significant relation in which my neighbours stand to me is that of being possible beneficiaries by my action” (ibid., 19). Note that a theory can be mistaken in either of two ways: (i) by being convoluted (i.e., insufficiently simple) and (ii) by being simplistic (i.e., excessively simple). The critic says that Ross’s theory is convoluted. Ross says that the critic’s theory is simplistic.
premises 1, 2, and 4, but rejects premise 6. RP does not analyze rightness in
terms of rightness; it analyzes rightness in terms of *prima facie* rightness, which
is a distinct (albeit related) concept. Just as duty proper is a function of (but not
identical to) *prima facie* duty, rightness proper is a function of (but not identical
to) *prima facie* rightness.

COMMENTARY: A theory that analyzed rightness in terms of rightness would
be circular, and therefore uninformative.