

## A CRITICISM OF ROSS'S HYPOTHETICAL 'I CAN'

IN the *Foundations of Ethics*, Sir David Ross gave up the doctrine which he formerly held that our duty is to do the 'objectively right' act. His later and presumably present position is that man is duty-bound only to the 'subjectively right' act, *i.e.* to "The self-exertion which he *thinks* to be morally most suitable in the circumstances as he takes them to be".<sup>1</sup> Kant's principle that 'I ought' implies 'I can' provides Ross with grounds for rejecting the idea that it is our duty to do the 'objectively right' act, since only omniscience could know what that act is. Not being omniscient, we cannot know it; not knowing it, we cannot do it; and since we are not able to do it, it cannot be our duty to do it. According to Ross, one idea is "inseparable from the thought of duty". "This is the thought 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."<sup>2</sup>

This seems to be an eminently reasonable position, and in part we can accept it. (1) First, we accept Ross's final conclusion that the subjectively right act is the one that in fact has a claim upon us. (2) We also accept, in a sense, his concession that this is true because we are in fact able to do the subjectively right act. But we shall point out that some of Ross's contentions are inconsistent with this second point. We shall argue that if they are true even the subjectively right would not be our duty, indeed that we should have no duties at all if we did not want to have them. The basic point of this criticism is that if Ross is correct in stating and defending his position as a determinist, his concern with the meaning of the word 'right' is misplaced. If the conclusions which he draws in his chapter on freedom in the *Foundations of Ethics* are true, then his analysis of the meaning of 'duty' both in *The Right and the Good* and the *Foundations* is false, or that the conclusions on freedom are false and the analysis of duty is true.

A. In discussing the relationship between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' right, Ross appeared to defend the position that we are in fact able to do the subjectively right act categorically. We ought not to do the objectively right act because we cannot, because conditions always forbid the doing of such acts knowingly. However, when Ross begins to discuss the 'I can' in relation to the subjectively right, it turns out that what he offers us is not a categorical but only a hypothetical 'I can'.

The general formula must hold good, that 'I can do this' is really a hypothetical proposition—'if a certain condition is added to conditions already present in me, I shall do so-and-so'. And it is easy to see what the additional condition must be. It consists of my wishing

<sup>1</sup> Sir David Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 163.

to do this. 'I can do this' means 'I have such a nature that if I want to perform the activity of setting myself to do this, I shall perform it'; and 'I can refrain from doing this' means 'I have such a nature that if I want to refrain from doing this, I shall refrain from doing it'. Or, putting it briefly, 'I can do this or that' means 'I shall do this if I want, and I shall do that if I want'—'want' being here a brachylogy for 'want predominantly'.<sup>1</sup>

Now, it appears to be very clear that the hypothetical 'I can' which Ross is here discussing is not the kind of 'I can' under which men ordinarily think themselves to be obligated. They would certainly think it odd to say, 'I can if I must', *i.e.* if psychological conditions make it necessary. In the first place, the statement is redundant. If I must, *i.e.* if conditions make it necessary, of course I can. But the difficulty is that Kant's principle stated as "'I ought' implies 'I must'" makes no sense whatsoever. Yet, this is the only formulation of it which Ross can legitimately make. That 'I can' means only 'I must' in Ross's system is seen in his words: "Now if in the end I do the right act, then, if the defence of Determinism which I have put forward is sound, my doing the right act implies that, just before I did it, conditions which made it necessary for me to do it were present, and similarly my doing the wrong act, if I do *that*, implies that conditions which made it necessary to do that act were present."<sup>2</sup>

The point at which I am driving here comes out very clearly in the following case. Ross seems to admit that it is possible to know what a subjectively right act would be and at the same time fail to do that subjectively right act owing to the predominance of some other motive, *e.g.* the motive to do something which is not my duty. Introspection clearly shows that this is the case. (Ross argues, contrary to Kant, that the desire to do one's duty is a motive among motives.)<sup>3</sup>

If 'I ought' implies a categorical 'I can' as here maintained, it also ought to follow from Ross's position that I am under obligation to do a certain act only when I believe that that act is my duty and at the same time have the 'predominating desire' to do that duty—only then 'can I' do it. Correspondingly, it ought to follow that when I believe that an act is my duty and at the same time I do not have a 'predominating desire' to do my duty I am mistaken in thinking at all that the act is my duty, since I clearly cannot do it. The man who is tied to a tree on the bank while his best friend drowns in a nearby stream is under no obligation, either objectively or subjectively, to save him, since he cannot. Similarly, the man who is tied to his passions while his sense of duty perishes in the deep is under no obligation to act dutifully, since he cannot. If he were omniscient he could perhaps do the objectively right act; if he were free from his passions he could perhaps do the subjectively right act; but he is not, he cannot, he ought not.

Ross, *op. cit.* pp. 240, 241.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 228.

Ross then is faced with the following dilemma: either the only conditions under which I am under obligation are those under which I most want to be under subjective obligation; or the notion of subjective obligation must be rejected *in toto*, and it must be admitted that the conditions under which we are in fact obligated never occur at all. It is hardly to be expected that Ross will take the second alternative, since the situation does arise in which a man both thinks that he has a duty and also has a 'predominating desire' that will effect the doing of that duty. For this reason Ross has some escape from the following criticism of H. D. Lewis: "Ross's argument thus proves too much for his theory. For if he is to argue that 'ought' has no application to motives because 'we cannot desire a certain end at will' it seems to follow also that ought has no application to conduct in any regard."<sup>1</sup> Still, there seems to be no escape for Ross from the position that we are under obligation only when we most want to be under obligation. If this is true, then the man who can successfully resist the temptation to act from a sense of duty or from a motive that will effect a dutiful act throughout his whole lifetime may be said never to have had an obligation to do anything whatsoever. This is certainly a paradoxical conclusion to say the least. In my opinion it is completely unacceptable. Ross can avoid it only by abandoning his determinism and solving the problem of freedom.

B. Ross maintains that the hypothetical 'I can' is justified on its own merits (but we have argued that this is not true). Believing that it is justified on its own merits, he goes on to argue that it is also justified for its "practical utility". We must conclude, since Ross has failed to justify the hypothetical 'I can' on other grounds, that to the person who is aware of this theoretical failure even its practical utility is nullified. Ross writes as follows:

Consider the effect of holding the opposite belief. Suppose I believed that I could not do my duty; then I should be thinking, in effect, this: 'Though the act is the right one in the circumstances, and one which a better man ought to do, yet since I can't do it there is no use in my trying to do it.' I should resign the struggle, and do the act which most appealed to me on other grounds. But if I keep before me the thought 'that is the right thing to do, and I don't know of anything that makes it impossible for me to do it, and do know of something, *viz.* the sense of duty in me, which makes it appreciably probable that I shall do it', the wish to do my duty is kept alive and allowed to have its full weight in determining my action.<sup>2</sup>

About this argument, two things are to be noted. First, it assumes that I do in fact want to keep my sense of duty alive. If this were true, however, to the degree sufficient on Ross's theory to produce that result, I would not have to resort to these roundabout techniques to do so; and if this were not true, I would never take the trouble to follow out his suggestion anyway. Next, the argument

<sup>1</sup> Hospers and Sellers, *Readings in Ethical Theory*, p. 584.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, *op. cit.* p. 238.

assumes that even though I know (according to the analysis of the preceding paragraph) that I have no duties which I do not already most strongly want to have, I shall nonetheless be able to close my eyes on this fact and assume that I do in fact have duties, regardless of the strength of my wants. That is, the argument assumes that the suggested technique could be effective. This situation is analogous to the case of the man who postulates the existence of God merely on the grounds that it would give him comfort if it were so. As Broad points out in his *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, "You would not get much comfort from postulating the existence of God so long as you remember that you were postulating it only in order to give yourself comfort".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the man who postulates duty will hardly feel bound by it when he remembers that it is a mere hypothesis that may be contrary to fact. To the man who knows, duty will have no place in his personal ethic unless he so desires, if Ross is correct. To be sure, it might still be maintained that "duty" may be an effective means of social control as long as men can be kept in ignorance of the fact that they have no duties unless they want to have them. But in that case, those who know should not tell!

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<sup>1</sup> C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, p. 255.