

W. D. Ross's Ethical Pluralism: A Framework for Library Policy Decisions

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Running a library involves difficult choices. Although many who work in libraries aspire to providing excellent service to all patrons all the time, they will likely find themselves constrained by limitations on time, space, personnel, equipment, and materials. Making a fair allocation of these resources requires sensitivity to the ethical implications of policy decisions in the library. The authors have developed a helpful framework for exploring these implications. Their framework is based on the work of W.D. Ross, a major figure in theoretical ethics in the early twentieth century. The authors draw most heavily from his pluralistic system of obligations most famously described in his 1930 work *The Right and the Good*. Ross's theory holds that there are seven ways in which an ethical obligation may apply in any given situation. He called these forms of obligation *prima facie* duties, and they include *fidelity*, *gratitude*, *reparation*, *justice*, *beneficence*, *self-improvement*, and *non-maleficence*. It is not uncommon for more than one *prima facie* duty to exert their claims simultaneously in a particular situation. In these cases, one discerns one's *actual* duty by considering the relative weight of each *prima facie* duty and responding to its demands as best one can. Given common limitations on time and resources, this frequently involves prioritizing these responsibilities: some need to be addressed immediately, while others can be delayed or, in some cases, ignored.

To illustrate how Ross's system works, consider a case in which a person is morally justified in breaking a promise. Let's say a librarian makes an appointment to meet with a student at the reference desk at 2 pm. On her way to the appointment, at 1:58 pm, she encounters a patron having a heart attack in the lobby. Conditions are such that she can either keep her appointment *or* tend to the gravely ill patron. The two salient *prima facie* duties in this case are *fidelity* (the librarian should follow through on her stated commitments) and *beneficence* (the librarian should give aid to those in trouble). It is clear that, in this scenario, the librarian's duty help the heart-attack victim overrides her duty to keep the appointment. To use Ross's terms, although the *prima facie* duties of beneficence and fidelity each exert a moral claim in this situation, the librarian's *actual* or *final* duty is to help the urgently ill patron. Note that, although the duty to help the sick patron overrides the claims of fidelity in this situation, the librarian's responsibility to the student at the reference desk does not simply disappear. Instead, her failure to keep the appointment creates a duty of *reparation* for the librarian – at the very least, she should apologize to the patron for not meeting her at the appointed time.

The greatest strength of Ross's approach is that the broad set of *prima facie* duties Ross identifies encourages well-rounded assessments of morally complex situations. Although Ross's extensive list of potentially competing demands does not lend itself to the easy resolution of moral difficulties, the set of duties he identifies provides a helpful vocabulary of talking about the salient features of everyday moral experience in all its complexity. In a sense, Ross's list of duties serves as a reminder of *how confusing it*

should be as one attempts to navigate one's way through complicated situations, thus making it easier to resist the temptation of facile, one-sided conclusions.

The authors have developed a method for examining policy issues in libraries based on the framework suggested by Ross's system of *prima facie* duties. This method involves charting the obligations created by the library's relationships with important stakeholders. The examination proceeds in the following way:

1. Identify the stakeholders impacted by the library's policy decisions.
2. For each stakeholder group, consider its relationship to the library and identify relevant *prima facie* duties.
3. Concentrate on (a) areas in which the library might be failing to meet its apparent obligations and (b) aspects of the situation in which the *prima facie* duties seem to be calling for conflicting actions on the library's part. *Any resulting policy must address these areas if it is to be ethically sound.*

The authors (both of whom work in an academic library) have used the above method to examine the issue of computer use by nonaffiliated patrons at their library. They identified the following groups as holding a stake in the library's policy on this matter: nonaffiliated users, the library's "primary" service group (students, faculty, and staff), library personnel, the library's parent institution, the local public library, and librarianship itself as an institution. After using Ross's system to consider the nature of the library's obligations to each of these stakeholders, the authors were able to conduct an "ethical audit" of their library's policy on this question. The authors believe that this same method can be fruitfully applied to various policy issues at other institutions. Possibilities include access to reference services, circulation privileges, access to special collections, use of meeting rooms, and interlibrary loan privileges.