

Directed and Undirected Duties to Rescue

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Some duties to rescue seem to be directed, owed to those people whom one could rescue.
 - 1.1.1 Suppose that one can save a drowning child at no cost to oneself. No one else can save the child. It seems that one owes it to the child to rescue them. This explains why one would not merely act wrongly by failing to rescue the child but would *wrong* them.
- 1.2 Other duties to rescue seem to be undirected.
 - 1.2.1 One's duty to rescue others by donating time or money to charity seems to be undirected.
- 1.3 But both species of duties to rescue seem to be grounded in the wellbeing of those people whom one could rescue. And one acts wrongly by violating both duties. **Our Puzzle:** Why does one owe it to the child to rescue them, but does not owe it to all those people in need of rescuing to rescue them?
- 1.4 Possible answer: The duty to the child is perfect, while the general duty is imperfect.
 - 1.4.1 But the directed/undirected and perfect/imperfect distinctions are orthogonal.
- 1.5 Two reasons why this is an important question.
 - 1.5.1 If I infringe a directed duty, I wrong the person to whom I owe the duty. Because of this, there are reactive relational upshots, such as standing to demand and to blame, that are specific to infringing directed duties.
 - 1.5.2 Directed duties are thought to be the flip side of rights. And rights are taken by many to be enforceable (at least on the face of things).

2. Disabling Duties to Rescue

- 2.1 ***Inability to Rescue Everyone.*** When one can rescue an imperilled person from harm but rescuing them will prevent one from rescuing another imperilled person, who will suffer a relevantly similar harm if not rescued, and all else is equal between the rescues, one's duty to rescue them is disabled.
- 2.2 Suppose one can rescue A or B at no cost to oneself, but one is unable to rescue both. I claim one lacks a duty to rescue A and one lacks a duty to rescue B. Rather, one is under a disjunctive duty to rescue A or B.
- 2.3 Compare a duty being *disabled* with a duty being *outweighed*, as would be the case if one was under conflicting duties to rescue A and B.
 - 2.3.1 Suppose a trolley is headed towards ten people, all of whom it will paralyse. The trolley can be diverted onto a side track, on which one person is trapped whom it will paralyse. Even though one may turn the trolley, one wrongs the person towards whom one diverts the trolley.

- 2.3.2 This isn't akin to our case in which one can rescue either A or B. One does not wrong A if one rescues B instead.
- 2.4 Why is Inability to Rescue true? Suppose the costs of saving A or B are c (which in our case is nothing). Is one under a duty to save A? No: c is not the only cost relevant to whether one is under a duty to save A. That one will fail to save B, were one to save A, is also relevant. Is one under a duty to save B? No. Same reason.
- 2.5 But is one under a duty to save A or B? Yes: c is insufficiently weighty to permit one to save no one.
- 2.6 For the same reason, **Costliness of Rescuing Everyone** is also true: When one can rescue an imperilled person from harm but rescuing them will make it overly-demanding to rescue another imperilled person, and all else is equal between the rescues, one's duty to rescue them is disabled.

3. Undirected Duties to Rescue

- 3.1 When it comes to one's duty to rescue others, one is not under a duty to rescue any person in particular, whom one could rescue, because this means either that one will be unable to rescue others or that it will become too costly to rescue others.
- 3.2 **First half of puzzle:** One does not owe particular people duties to rescue them, since one is not under a duty to rescue them. Instead, one is under a disjunctive duty to save as many people as one can rescue, until it becomes supererogatory to rescue more.
- 3.2.1 (Separate question whether one is under a duty to give each an equal chance of being rescued.)
- 3.3 Is this disjunctive duty just an imperfect duty?
- 3.4 Is this disjunctive duty to rescue someone owed to the group of people whom one could rescue?
- 3.4.1 Suppose one can rescue only two of A, B, C & D. One rescues only A. If one owes it to the group to rescue two of A-D, this implies one wrongs A in the same way one wrongs B-D.
- 3.5 "Don't you owe it to other members of the group to rescue them, if you rescue no one else? Doesn't this show that one *is* under conflicting duties owed to each person to rescue them."
- 3.5.1 No: One is under a duty to rescue either A or B. If one is not going to rescue A, one is under a duty to rescue B. If one is not going to rescue B, one is under a duty to rescue A. These claims can be true at the same time.
- 3.6 This suggests another way to understand one's general duty to rescue: We are under *conditional* duties to rescue particular people, if we do not rescue the other people whom we are able to rescue (or if we have not already borne sufficient costs rescuing others to make rescuing more supererogatory).
- 3.6.1 If this conditional duty is directed, this explains why one wrongs A and B by saving neither of them, and why one wrongs B, C, and D when one rescues only A when one could have rescued two of A-D.

4. Directed Duties to Rescue

- 4.1 What of the other half of our puzzle, our seemingly directed unconditional duty to rescue the drowning child?
- 4.2 If we suppose rescuing the child does not prevent one from rescuing anyone else, nor does it make saving anyone else supererogatory, one is under a duty to rescue the child.
 - 4.2.1 **Second half of puzzle** Since one's duty to rescue the child hasn't been disabled, one can owe it to the child to rescue them.
 - 4.2.2 My own view: When X 's duty is grounded in T 's wellbeing, X 's duty is owed to T . But we needn't be committed to that. Seems plausible on first-order grounds that the duty is owed to the child: all the upshots of a duty's directedness seem to follow in this case.
- 4.3 There *might* be other cases in which one can be under a (naturally) directed duty to rescue someone—that is, a duty grounded only in the person's wellbeing—even though performing this rescue *will* prevent one from rescuing other people who face similar threats of harm.
 - 4.3.1 Suppose one is on the way to collect some lottery winnings. Your evidence suggests that your winnings are enough to rescue two statistical lives far away by donating to a certain cost-effective charity, which you plan to do. Yet, on the way to collecting your winnings, you come across a child drowning in a pond. You make eye contact with the child and are the only person around to save them. You know there is no way to save the child without the lottery ticket being destroyed (suppose either it will get wet as you jump into the pond to save the child, or will blow away if you leave it on the bank).
 - 4.3.2 Ordinarily, I take it one would be required to save two lives instead of one when other things are equal. But in this case, my intuition is it would be wrong to fail to save the child. The good of saving the two hasn't disabled one's duty to save the one.
 - 4.3.2.1 *Why?* Because one of the *noisy* features of the case means things are unequal between rescuing the child or the two statistical lives.
 - 4.3.3 Suppose this is wrong. Then, one would not owe it to the child to rescue her. But that's because one isn't under a duty to rescue her, that could be owed to her.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 In section 3, I argued we do not owe it to everyone whom we are able to rescue to rescue them. This is because we can permissibly fail to rescue them, by rescuing others instead.
 - 5.1.1 But I suggested we do owe it to people to rescue them, if we do not rescue those others instead.
- 5.2 And in section 4, I argued we do owe it to the child to rescue them, unconditionally. For, we cannot permissibly fail to rescue her.