

# The Methods of Ethics

Henry Sidgwick

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—The division of the work into Books, chapters, and numbered sections is Sidgwick's. —Cross-references follow this system:

‘chapter 3’ means ‘chapter 3 of *this* Book’.

‘chapter 4.2’ means ‘chapter 4, section 2, of *this* Book’.

‘II/3’ means ‘Book II, chapter 3’.

‘IV/3.4’ means ‘Book IV, chapter 3, section 4’.

An accompanying page-number refers to the page where the passage in question *starts*.—This version omits most of the 2,000+ cautions that Sidgwick includes, such as ‘I think. . .’, ‘I conceive. . .’, ‘it seems. . .’ and so on. Even with these out of the way, the work doesn't come across as bullishly dogmatic.—In this version, most notably on pages 166 and 196, the author addresses the reader (‘you’), but in the original it is always ‘the reader’ and ‘he’.—This version is based on the sixth edition of the work (1901), the last non-posthumous one. The first edition appeared in 1874, the year after Mill died.

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## Glossary

**affectation:** Sometimes used here in its early-modern sense, covering every sort of pro or con attitude—desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc. Thus, the phrase ‘benevolent affections’ [page 23] isn’t pleonastic and ‘malevolent affections’ [page 154] isn’t self-contradictory.

**appetite:** A strong desire for some immediate end; perhaps a craving. Our narrower sense of the word is captured on page 21 by the phrase ‘appetite of hunger’.

**art:** Sidgwick sometimes uses ‘art’ in an older sense in which an ‘art’ is any human activity that involves techniques or rules of procedure—e.g. medicine, farming, painting.

**categorical:** Opposite of ‘conditional’. ‘If it won’t do anyone any harm, tell the truth’ is a conditional imperative; ‘Tell the truth!’ is a categorical imperative (see page 98; also page 4).

**crucial experiment:** Experiment that *settles* some question one way or the other.

**Dead Sea apple:** A disease-caused bulge on the bark of an oak, vaguely resembling an apple.

**desert:** Deservingness. The stress is on the second syllable, as in ‘dessert’ (the sweet course of a meal).

**disinterested:** This meant for Sidgwick what it still means in the mouths of literate people, namely ‘not *self*-interested’.

**duty:** Most English-language moral philosophers, Sidgwick included, speak a dialect in which ‘I have a duty to do A’ means the same as ‘I morally ought to do A’. That is not what it means in English, where ‘duty’ is tied to jobs, roles, social positions. The duties of a janitor; the duties of a landowner; ‘My Station and its Duties’ [title of a famous paper].

**expedient:** Advantageous, useful, helpful.

**expose:** In some parts of ancient Greece, unwanted babies were ‘exposed’, i.e. left out in the wilds to be killed by nature.

**extra-regarding:** This phrase uses ‘extra’ to mean ‘outside one’s own feelings’, and is contrasted with ‘self-regarding’. When you hang a picture, your immediate aim might be **(i)** the picture’s being on the wall or **(ii)** your enjoying seeing the picture on the wall. Of these, **(i)** is extra-regarding, **(ii)** is not.

**felicific:** happy-making.

**generous:** On page 157 Sidgwick uses this word in a sense that was dying in his day, namely that of ‘noble-minded, magnanimous, rich in positive emotions’ etc. In that passage he uses ‘liberal’ to mean what we mean by ‘generous’. Elsewhere in the work, it’s for you to decide which sense is involved.

**indifference:** Indifferent conduct is neither praiseworthy nor wrong; you are ‘indifferent to’ the pain of others if your thinking that a certain action would cause pain doesn’t affect your behaviour; ‘indifferent’ sensations are neither nice nor nasty.

**infelicific:** Not felicific.

**intuition:** Sidgwick uses this word in one of the two senses that it has traditionally had, in which it names the activity of (or capacity for) seeing or grasping something’s truth through a single mental act, in contrast with ‘demonstration’ which is getting there by following a proof of it. The moral position that he calls ‘intuitionism’ is the thesis that the truth or validity of some moral rules can be seen *immediately* rather than through any kind of demonstration; and thus that those rules are *basic*. See Sidgwick’s own explanation on page 44.

**jural:** Of or pertaining to the law.

**mental:** About half the occurrences of this are replacements for 'psychical'; Sidgwick evidently treats the two words as synonymous.

**mutatis mutandis:** A Latin phrase that is still in current use. It means '(mutatis) with changes made (mutandis) in the things that need to be changed'.

**natural theology:** Theology based on facts about the natural world, e.g. empirical evidence about what the 'purposes' are of parts of organisms etc.

**positive:** This multicoloured word is used by Sidgwick in four of its senses. **(1)** Especially in Book II, in contrast with **negative**. **(2)** In the opening paragraphs and elsewhere, in contrast with '**practical**' (with the latter including 'ethical'): a 'positive' study is one that involves no value-judgments or moral rules. **(3)** On page 71 and elsewhere, the contrast is with '**relative**': You measure a set of weights relatively if you get the facts about which is heavier than which; you measure them positively if you find out how much each weighs. Also:

**positive law:** On pages 8 and 15 and elsewhere this means the law of the land: a plain humanly established system of laws, in contrast with **divine law** and **moral law**. Also:

**positive morality:** This refers to 'the actual moral opinions generally held in a given society at a given time' (page 12). This may be a coinage of Sidgwick's (see page 101).

**principles:** When on page 42 Butler is quoted as speaking of 'the cool principle of self-love' he is using 'principle' in a sense that it had back in his day, in which 'principle' means 'source', 'cause', 'drive', 'energizer', or the like. (Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is an enquiry into the *sources in human nature* of our moral thinking and feeling.)

**psychogenetic:** = 'having to do with the origin and development of mental states and processes'. It replaces Sidgwick's exotic 'psychogonical'.

**realise:** When Sidgwick speaks of 'realising' a virtue he means 'making it real', 'acting on it', 'exhibiting it in one's actions'. He explains 'self-realisation' when he uses it.

**remorse:** In some places these days 'remorse' means simply 'regret over something one has done' ['buyer's remorse']. In the present work it means what it once meant everywhere: '*guilty-feeling* regret over something one has done'—a sense of having acted in a morally wrong way. This is essential to an understanding of the important first paragraph of I/5.4.

**requital:** Pay-back: rewarding a good deed, punishing a bad one, paying a debt, etc.

**sophistication:** Deception by means of bad but plausible argument. So self-sophistication [page 30] is one kind of self-deception.

**sympathy:** From Greek meaning 'feel with': in its early modern sense, and still in Sidgwick's use, you can 'sympathise' with someone's pleasure as well as with her pain. It covers every kind of 'echo' of someone else's feelings.

**tact:** 'A keen faculty of perception or ability to make fine distinctions likened to the sense of touch.' (OED)

**tautology:** A kind of circular truth that doesn't convey any news. On page 166 Sidgwick says that a certain proposition boils down to 'Immoral acts ought not to be performed', which is a tautology because what it *means* to call an act 'immoral' is that it ought not to be performed.

## BOOK I

### Chapter 1: Introduction

**1.** The phrase ‘method of ethics’ here refers to any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’ to do or what it is ‘right’ for them to do, or to try to bring about by voluntary action.<sup>1</sup> This distinguishes the study of ethics from that of politics, which concerns the right public conduct not of •individuals but of •societies. I see both ethics and politics differing from positive [see Glossary] sciences by having as their primary concern what •ought to be, not merely what is or has been or will be.

The student of ethics pursues *systematic and precise* general knowledge of what ought to be, and in this sense his aims and methods can be called ‘scientific’; but I call ethics a ‘study’ rather than a ‘science’ because many people think that a science must be concerned with some part of what actually exists. . . . It’s true that the two kinds of study—the positive and the practical [see Glossary]—are very closely interrelated. On any theory, our view about what ought to be must be largely derived, in its details, from our knowledge of what is: we can’t know how to achieve our ideal except by careful study of actual phenomena; and anyone asking himself ‘What ought I to do?’ should examine the answers that others have given to this question. Still it seems clear that

the general laws or uniformities that explain the varieties of human conduct, and of men’s sentiments and judgments regarding conduct

is an entirely different topic from

the truths about which among these varieties of con-

duct is right and which of these divergent judgments valid.

It’s the systematic study of the latter topic that constitutes the special and distinct aim of ethics and politics.

**2.** . . . Ethics is sometimes seen as directed to •the true moral laws or rational precepts of conduct, and sometimes as an inquiry into •the ultimate end of reasonable human action—the good or ‘true good’ of man—and how to achieve it. Both views are familiar, and will be carefully considered; but the former looms larger in modern ethical thought, and is easier to connect with modern ethical systems generally. For the *good* investigated in ethics is limited to good that is at least partly attainable by human effort; so knowledge of the end is sought in order to discover what actions are right for achieving it. Thus however prominent the notion of an ultimate good may be in an ethical system, and however we interpret this notion, it won’t be any use to us unless we can discover some rules telling us how to behave.

On the other hand, the idea of ethics as an investigation of man’s ‘ultimate good’ and how to achieve it doesn’t easily connect up with what I’ll call the ‘intuitional’ view of morality—the view that conduct is right when it conforms to certain precepts or principles of duty [see Glossary] that are intuitively [see Glossary] known to be unconditionally binding. On this view, the conception of *ultimate good* is not necessarily of fundamental importance in settling what conduct is right. (It would be important, of course, if •man’s ultimate good *was* •acting rightly or •having the sort of

<sup>1</sup> I’ll discuss the exact relation of ‘right’ and ‘what ought to be’ in chapter 3. I here assume that they are equivalent for most purposes.

character that right action produces. But that view of man's good isn't an essential part of the intuitional view of ethics; and I don't think it squares with the moral common sense of modern Christian communities. We commonly think that the complete notion of human good or well-being must include •the attainment of happiness as well as •the performance of duty; even if we hold that men shouldn't make doing their duty conditional on their knowing that it will favour their happiness, because (as Butler put it) 'the happiness of the world is the concern of the lord and proprietor of it'. For those who adopt this position, there may sometimes be no logical connection between •what men ought to take as the practically ultimate end of their action and standard of right conduct and •the conception of ultimate good for man; so that in such cases this latter conception wouldn't help in the methodical discovery of what conduct is right, however indispensable it might be to the completeness of an ethical system.

[Sidgwick now explains why he doesn't define *ethics* as the 'art of conduct'. He is using 'art' in a now somewhat outmoded sense that involves knowledge of the rules or procedures to achieve some result. On the intuitional view of morality, we know basic moral truths 'intuitively'—i.e. straight off, without appealing to rules and procedures. And Sidgwick plans to deal at length with the intuitional view of morality (it will be the topic of Book III), so he doesn't want to exclude it by his preliminary throat-clearing, and stands by his initial definition:] Ethics is the science or study of what is right or what ought to be •the case•, so far as this depends on the voluntary actions of individuals.

**3.** If we accept this view of what ethics is, why is it commonly taken to consist to a large extent of psychological discussion about 'the nature of the moral faculty'? Why, in particular, have I thought it right to include some discussion of this

•psychological• kind in the present work? It isn't immediately obvious why this should belong to ethics, any more than discussion of the mathematical faculty belongs to mathematics or discussion of the faculty of sense-perception belongs to physics. Why don't we simply start with certain premises saying what ought to be done or sought, without considering the faculty by which we see their truth?

One answer is that the moralist has a practical aim: we want knowledge of right conduct in order to act on it. Now, we can't help believing things that we see to be true, but we can help performing actions that we see to be right or wise, and in fact we often do things that we know to be wrong or unwise. This forces us to notice that we contain irrational springs of action, conflicting with our knowledge and preventing its practical realisation [see Glossary]; and just because our practical judgments are connected so imperfectly with our will, we are driven to look for more precise knowledge of what that connection is.

But that's not all. Men never ask 'Why should I believe what I see to be true?' But they often ask 'Why should I do what I see to be right?' It's easy to reply that the question is futile: it could only be answered in terms of some other principle of right conduct, and the question would then arise about that, and so on. But the question is asked, widely and continually, so this demonstration of its futility isn't satisfying; we want also some explanation of its persistence.

Here's one explanation: we are moved to action not by moral judgment alone but also by desires and inclinations that operate independently of moral judgment; so the answer we really want to the question 'Why should I do it?' is one that doesn't merely prove •a certain action to be right but also arouses in us a predominant inclination to perform •it.

This explanation is indeed true for some minds in some moods. But I think that when someone seriously asks why he

should do anything, he commonly assumes that he can act in any way that is shown by argument to be reasonable, even if it's very different from what his non-rational inclinations point to. And most of us agree that any reasonable decision about how to act will involve

(a) moral principles, and

(b) the agent's inclination independently of moral considerations,

and that (b) is only one element among several that have to be considered, and usually not the most important one. But when we ask what (a) these principles are, we get

- a great variety of answers from the systems and basic formulae of moral philosophers, and

- the same variety in the ordinary practical reasoning of men generally.

Between these two groups there's a difference: the philosopher seeks unity of principle and consistency of method, at the risk of paradox; the unphilosophical man is apt to hold different principles at once, and to apply different methods in more or less confused combination. Perhaps this explains the persistence of the 'Why?'-question we have been looking at, and the persistent unsatisfactoriness of answers to it: if implicit in the thought of the ordinary person there are different views about the ultimate reasonableness of conduct, and if the person doesn't bring them into clear relation to each other, no one answer to the 'Why?'-question will completely satisfy him because it will be given from only one of these points of view, always leaving room to ask the question from some other.

I'm convinced that this is the main explanation of the phenomenon; and the present work is structured accordingly. Of course if any reasonings lead to conflicting conclusions we can't regard them as valid; I assume as a basic postulate of ethics when two methods conflict, one of them must be

modified or rejected. But I think it's fundamentally important at the outset of ethical inquiry to recognise that a variety of methods are at work in ordinary practical thought.

4. Then what are these different methods? What are the different practical principles that the common sense of mankind is *prima facie* prepared to accept as ultimate? This has to be answered with care, because it often happens that we •prescribe that this or that 'ought' to be done or aimed at without explicitly mentioning an ulterior end, while we •are tacitly presupposing some such end. It is obvious that such prescriptions are merely 'hypothetical imperatives' (Kant's phrase); they are addressed only to those who have already accepted the end.

[Sidgwick gives examples: you *ought to* do such-and-such if you want

- to produce a good picture,
- to make an elegant table,
- to get your health back,
- to be found socially acceptable,
- to be happy,

and so on. The last of these is connected with] many rules prescribing so-called 'duties to oneself'; it may be said that such rules are given on the assumption that a man regards his own happiness as an ultimate end; that if anyone doesn't have that as an end, he doesn't come within their scope; in short, that the 'ought' in all such formula is implicitly relative to an *optional* end.

But it seems to me that this account doesn't get to the bottom of the matter. We don't all look with mere indifference [see Glossary] on a man who declines to take the right means to achieve his own happiness simply because he doesn't care about happiness. Most men would disapprove of such a refusal, regarding it as irrational; thus implicitly endorsing Butler's statement that 'interest, one's own happiness, is



a manifest obligation'. In other words, they would think that a man *ought* to care for his own happiness, and here 'ought' is no longer relative: happiness now appears as an ultimate end, the pursuit of which—within any limits imposed by other duties—appears to be prescribed by reason 'categorically' [see Glossary] (as Kant would say), i.e. with no tacit assumption of a further end. It has been widely held by even orthodox moralists that all morality ultimately rests on the basis of 'reasonable self-love' (Butler's phrase), i.e. that its rules are binding on any individual only to the extent that it's in his over-all interests to obey them.

Still, common moral opinion certainly regards the duty or virtue of prudence as only a part of duty or virtue in general, and not the most important part. Common moral opinion recognises and teaches other fundamental rules, such as those of justice, good faith, and veracity. In its ordinary judgments on particular cases, common morality is inclined to treat these as binding without qualification, and without regard to consequences. And the intuitional view of ethics, in the ordinary form of it, explicitly and definitely maintains the 'categorical' version of such rules, doing this as a result of philosophical reflection. And it holds that acting virtuously, at least for the virtues I have just mentioned, consists in strict and unswerving conformity to such rules.

On the other hand, many utilitarians hold that all the rules of conduct that men prescribe to one another as moral rules are really, though in part unconsciously, prescribed as means to the general happiness of •mankind or of •the totality of sentient beings; and even more of them hold that such rules, however they may originate, are valid only to the extent that obeying them is conducive to general happiness. Later on I'll examine this contention with due care. Here I'll just say this: if the duty of aiming at the general happiness is thus taken to include all other duties—these being

subordinate applications of it—we seem to have circled back to the notion of happiness as an ultimate end, categorically prescribed, except that now it is general happiness and not the private happiness of any individual. This is the view that I take of the utilitarian principle.

When we are investigating right conduct, considered in relation to the end of private or of general happiness, we don't have to assume that the end itself is determined or prescribed by reason; all we have to assume is that it is adopted as ultimate [i.e. not a means to some further end] and paramount [i.e. not open to challenge from any rival consideration that is equally or more morally weighty]. For if a man accepts any end as ultimate and paramount, he implicitly accepts as his 'method of ethics' whatever process of reasoning enables him to determine what actions are most conducive to this end. (See the last paragraph of chapter 3 [page 18].) In pursuing these matters, we shan't attend to *every* end that someone has in practice adopted as ultimate, subordinating everything else to it under the influence of a 'ruling passion'; every difference in ultimate ends generates some difference in the 'methods' of moral inquiry, so that if we tackled them all our task would be very complex and extensive. But if we confine ourselves to ends that ordinary common sense seems to accept as reasonable ultimate ends, our task will be of a manageable size, because this criterion will exclude much of what men in practice seem to regard as paramount. For example, many men sacrifice health, fortune and happiness to the achievement of *fame*, but I don't know of anyone who has deliberately maintained that it is reasonable for men to seek fame for its own sake. It commends itself to thoughtful people only as

- a source of happiness for the person who gains it,
- a sign of that person's moral or intellectual excellence,
- or

- a testimony to some beneficial achievement by the person and an encouragement to him and to others to achieve more.

And in the last of those, the conception of *beneficial* would lead us again to happiness or excellence of human nature, because it is commonly thought that a man benefits others either by making them happier or by making them wiser and more virtuous.

Are these two the only ends that can be reasonably regarded as ultimate? I'll investigate that in chapter 9 [page 49] and III/14 [page 191]; but I'll say right away that *prima facie* the only ends with a strongly and widely supported claim to be regarded as rational ultimate ends are the two just mentioned, happiness and perfection or excellence of human nature. . . . The adoption of the happiness end leads us to two *prima facie* distinct methods, depending on whether the individual is to aim at happiness •for everyone or •for himself alone. No doubt a man *can* often best promote his own happiness by what he does and refrains from doing for the sake of others; but our ordinary notion of self-sacrifice implies that the actions that do most for general happiness don't—in this world, at least—always produce the greatest happiness of the agent.<sup>1</sup> And among those who hold that 'happiness is our being's end and aim' there's a basic difference of opinion about whose happiness it is ultimately reasonable to aim at. For to some it seems, in Bentham's words, that 'the constantly proper end of action on the part of any individual at the moment of action is his real greatest happiness from that moment to the end of his life', whereas others hold that reason's view is essentially universal, so that

it can't be *reasonable* to take as an ultimate and paramount end the happiness of any one individual rather than that of any other, . . . so that general happiness must be the 'true standard of right and wrong, in the field of morals' no less than of politics (Bentham again). One can of course adopt an intermediate end, aiming at the happiness of some limited group such as one's family or nation or race; but any such limitation seems arbitrary, and probably few would maintain it to be reasonable except as the best route to the general happiness or to one's own.

The case seems to be otherwise with excellence or perfection.<sup>2</sup> It might seem at first sight that the excellence aimed at could be taken either individually or universally; and it's conceivable that a man might think that he could best promote the excellence of others by sacrificing his own. But no moralist who takes excellence as an ultimate end has ever approved of such sacrifice, at least so far as moral excellence is concerned. . . . So when we are attending to the view that right conduct aims at the production of excellence, we don't have to look separately at two versions of it—•one focusing on the excellence of the individual and •the other on the excellence of the human community. Now, virtue is commonly conceived as the most valuable element of human excellence—one with no viable competitors—so any method that takes perfection or excellence of human nature as ultimate end will *prima facie* coincide to a great extent with the method based on what I called •the intuitional view; so I have decided to treat it as a special form of •this latter.<sup>3</sup> The two methods that take happiness to be ultimate will be distinguished here as 'egoistic hedonism' and 'universalistic

<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of this question, see II/5 [page 75] and the concluding chapter of this work [page 241].

<sup>2</sup> In my usage, 'perfection' stands for the ideal complex of mental qualities that we admire and approve in human beings and 'excellence' stands for any approximation to the ideal that we actually find in human experience.

<sup>3</sup> See III/14 [page 191] where I explain why I give only a subordinate place to the conception of perfection as ultimate end.

hedonism'. The latter is what Bentham and his successors taught, now generally called 'utilitarianism', a usage I shall follow. It's hard to find a good one-word label for egoistic hedonism, and I shall often call it simply 'egoism'. . . .

**5.** . . . I shall offer now an explanation not of •the nature and boundaries of ethics but rather of •the plan and purpose of this work.

There are several recognised ways of treating this subject, none of which I have chosen to adopt. **(i)** We can start with existing systems, and either •study them historically, tracing the changes in thought through the centuries, or •compare and classify them according to resemblances, or •criticise their internal coherence. **(ii)** Or we can try to add a new system, and claim after so many failures to have finally achieved the one true theory of the subject. . . . The present work does neither of these things. I shall try to define and unfold not one method of ethics, but several; and I shall look at them not

- historically, as methods that have actually been adopted, but rather
- as alternatives between which we have to choose when trying to construct a complete and consistent system of practical maxims.

. . . Men commonly seem to guide themselves by a mixture of methods, disguised under ambiguities of language. Everyone gives some acceptance to the impulses or principles from which the methods arise, and to various claims about which ends are rational; but we also feel the need to harmonise these different elements because it's a postulate of practical reason that two conflicting rules of action can't both be reasonable. The result is usually either •a confused blending or •a forced and premature reconciliation of the different principles and methods. And these defects have turned up in systems framed by professional moralists. These

writers have usually rushed to •synthesis without adequate •analysis, .i.e. putting a system together without first carefully examining its parts; because they have felt the practical demand for a synthesis more urgently than the theoretical need for analysis. This is one of the places where •practical considerations have hindered the development of the •theory of ethics; and in this area a more complete detachment of theory from practice might be desirable even for the sake of practice. A treatment that is a combination of the scientific and the hortatory [here = 'urging, recommending, scolding'] is apt to spoil both: the mixture is bewildering to the brain and not stimulating to the heart. Here as in other sciences it would be useful to draw as sharp a line as possible between the known and the unknown, because the clear indication of an unsolved problem is a step to its solution. Ethical treatises, however, have tended to keep the difficulties of the subject out of sight, either

- unconsciously, from an unconscious belief that the questions the writer can't answer satisfactorily must be ones that oughtn't to be asked, or
- consciously, so that he won't shake the sway of morality over the minds of his readers.

The latter precaution often defeats itself: the difficulties concealed in exposition are liable to reappear in controversy, where they are. . . .magnified for polemical purposes. And so we get on one hand •vague and hazy reconciliation, and on the other •loose and random exaggeration of discrepancies; and neither process dispels the original vagueness and ambiguity lurking in our basic moral notions. My one immediate purpose in this work is to eliminate or reduce this indefiniteness and confusion. So I shan't aim for a complete and final solution of the chief ethical difficulties that would convert •my exposition of various methods into •the development of a harmonious system. But I hope I'll

be helping the construction of such a system, because it seems easier to judge the mutual relations and conflicting claims of different modes of thought if one has first examined, fairly and rigorously, their logical consequences. Practical principles that we unhesitatingly assent to at first sight, ones involving only notions that are familiar and apparently clear, often look different and somewhat dubious when we look carefully into their consequences. It seems that most of the practical principles that have been seriously put forward are fairly satisfactory to common sense as long as they have the field to themselves; their basic assumptions are all ones that we're inclined to accept, and that to some extent govern our habitual conduct. When I am asked

- Don't you think it is ultimately reasonable to seek pleasure and avoid pain for yourself?
- Don't you have a moral sense?
- Don't you intuitively pronounce some actions to be right and others wrong?
- Don't you agree that general happiness is a paramount end?

I answer 'Yes' to each question. My difficulty begins when I

have to choose between the different principles or inferences drawn from them. We accept that when they conflict we *have to choose*—that it's irrational to let sometimes one principle prevail and sometimes another—but the choice is a painful one, and before making it we should have the completest possible knowledge of each candidate.

My aim here is •to expound as clearly and fully as I can the different methods of ethics that I find implicit in our common moral reasoning, •to point out their inter-relations, and •to clarify what is going on where they seem to conflict. This will lead me to discuss the considerations that I think should be decisive in the choice of ethical first principles; but I shan't try to establish any such principles, or to supply a set of practical directions for conduct. I want to direct your attention to the processes of ethical thought rather than to their results; so I shan't identify any positive practical conclusion as something I accept, unless by way of illustration; and I shan't dogmatically decide any controverted points, except where the controversy seems to arise from lack of precision or clearness in the formulation of principles, or lack of consistency in reasoning.

## Chapter 2: The relation of ethics to politics

1. I have spoken of ethics and politics as practical studies, both concerned with the determination of ends to be sought, or rules to be unconditionally obeyed. Before going on, I should sketch the inter-relations of these two studies, seen from the point of view of ethics.

In my introductory account of them, •ethics aims at determining what ought to be done by individuals, while

•politics aims at determining what the government of a state ought to do and how it ought to be constituted.

This may seem to make politics a branch of ethics. All the actions of government are actions of individuals, and so are the politically significant actions of the governed; and it would seem that such actions ought to be justifiable on ethical principles. . . . But this argument is not decisive,

for by similar reasoning ethics would have to include all the liberal and industrial arts [see Glossary]. . . . It is an important part of every adult's moral duty to take care of his health, . . . but we don't consider ethics to include the art of medicine.

The specially important connection between ethics and politics arises in a different way. It is the business of government to lay down and enforce laws that regulate the outward conduct of the governed—their conduct in *all* their social relations so far as such conduct is a proper subject for coercive rules. Morality comes into this in two ways. **(a)** This regulation ought to be in harmony with morality, for obviously people ought not to be compelled to do what they ought not to do. **(b)** To an important extent the law of a man's state will determine the details of his moral duty, even beyond the sphere of legal enforcement. [Sidgwick doesn't present the ensuing example in first-person terms.] For example: we commonly regard it as an individual's moral duty to 'give to every man his own', and this should govern my behaviour towards you. It may happen that you can't legally enforce your right to 'your own', but when I am thinking about what counts as your own I ought—we generally think—to be guided by the law of the state. If that changed, my moral duty would change with it. Similarly, the mutual moral duties of husbands and wives, and of children and parents, will vary in detail with the variations in their legal relations.

But when we look more closely into these matters, we find a need to distinguish •actual or positive [see Glossary] law from •ideal law, i.e. law as it ought to be. Political theory lays down principles for ideal law; but what primarily determines right conduct for an individual here and now is positive law, actual law. If positive law seems to me to diverge widely from ideal law—e.g. if I'm convinced by political theory that the law of property should be fundamentally changed—this

will influence my view of my moral duty under the existing law; but the extent of this influence is vague and uncertain. Suppose I'm a slave-owner in a society where slavery is established, and I become convinced that private property in human beings should be abolished by law; it doesn't follow that I'll regard it as my moral duty to set my slaves free at once. [At this point Sidgwick switches from •freeing my slaves to •working for the freeing of all slaves. The switch is his, not an artifact of this version.] I may think that there's no hope of immediate general abolition of slavery, and even that it wouldn't work well for the slaves themselves, who require a gradual education for freedom; so that it would be better for the present •to aim at legal changes removing the worst evils of slavery, and •to set an example of humane treatment of bondsmen. Similar reasonings might be applied to the abolition of •private ownership of the instruments of production or of •appointments to positions in the government or the church. How far should political ideals influence moral duty? That seems to depend on

- how far one seems to be from achieving the ideal,
- how pressing the need for it is, and
- how satisfactory the immediate realisation of the ideal would be.

The force attached to these considerations is likely to vary with the political method adopted; so that it's for politics rather than ethics to determine them more precisely.

So we have to distinguish clearly between two questions regarding the determination of right conduct for an individual here and now:

- (a)** How far should it be influenced by positive laws, and by other commands of government as actually established?
- (b)** How far should it to be influenced by political theory concerning the functions and structure of government

as it ought to be?

As regards question (a): it is clearly up to ethics to determine the grounds and limits of obedience to government, and to develop a general conception of political duty that goes beyond mere obedience and duly recognizes the large variations due to the varying political conditions of different states. (A 'good citizen' in the United States will reasonably form a conception of his actual political duty that differs widely from that of a good citizen in Russia.) This will be the primary business of ethics on the political side of life. The discussion of political ideals will come into the picture only in a more indefinite and indirect way, reflecting the fact that such ideals are sure to have *some* influence on the determination of political duty under existing conditions.

2. Some thinkers take a view of ethical theory that gives it a relation to political theory quite different from the one I have presented. They hold that theoretical or 'absolute' ethics ought to investigate not •what ought to be done here and now, but •what ought to be the rules of behaviour in a society of ideally perfect human beings. This makes the subject-matter of our study doubly ideal, prescribing what ought to be done in a society that ought to exist. . . .

Those who take this view<sup>1</sup> adduce the analogy of geometry to show that ethics ought to deal with ideally perfect human relations just as geometry treats of ideally straight lines and perfect circles. But the irregular lines we meet with in experience have spatial relations that geometry doesn't entirely ignore; it ascertains them with enough accuracy for practical purposes. Another example: astronomy would be an easier study if the planets moved in circles, as was once believed; but the fact that they move in ellipses, and

irregular ellipses at that, doesn't take them out of the sphere of scientific investigation; we have learned how to calculate even these more complicated motions. It may be useful for teaching purposes to assume that the planets move in perfect ellipses; but what we as astronomers want to know is the **actual** motion of the planets and its causes; and similarly as moralists we naturally ask what ought to be done in the **actual** world we live in. Our general reasonings—in astronomy or in ethics—can't possibly capture the full complexity of the actual considerations; but we try to approximate to it as closely as we can. That is the only way we can get to grips with the question to which mankind generally require an answer: 'What is a man's duty *in his present condition*'? . . .

The inquiry into the morality of an ideal society might be conducted as a preliminary investigation, to be followed by the step from the ideal to the actual. How desirable is such a preliminary construction? The different methods of ethics answer this differently. Intuitionists generally hold that true morality—as far as determinate duties are concerned—prescribes absolutely what is right in itself and under all social conditions: truth should always be spoken and promises kept, justice should be done 'though the sky should fall', and so on. From this point of view, the general definitions of duties won't require any basic distinction between •the actual state of society and •an ideal state—for example, justice will be the same for both and will be equally stringent in both. Still, even an extreme intuitionist would admit that the *details* of justice and other duties will vary with social institutions; and it's plausible to suggest that getting a clear view of the 'absolute' justice of an ideal community would help us to achieve the merely 'relative'

<sup>1</sup> [Sidgwick has here a long footnote explaining that the present section was primarily aimed at the theory of ethics in Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*; that Spencer replied to the section (which was also in Sidgwick's earlier editions); and that in this reply Spencer quietly moved to a much less extravagantly 'ideal' position.]

justice that is all we can have under existing conditions. How far this plausible suggestion is true is something we'll be better placed to judge when we have examined the definition of justice from an intuitional point of view.

For the method that proposes universal happiness as an ultimate end and supreme standard, the question is simpler: In our efforts to promote human happiness here and now, how much are we likely to be helped by systematically considering the social relations of an ideally happy group of human beings? I shan't deny here that this approach might be useful, but it's easy to show that it is involved in serious difficulties.

Just as in ordinary deliberation, so also when thinking about the ideal society, we have to consider what is best under certain conditions of human mental or physical life. We need to focus our thought less on

- the desired end, namely the most pleasant consciousness conceivable, lasting as long and as continuously as possible, than on
- some method by which human beings might achieve it under conditions not too remote from our own, so that we can at least try to imitate them.

So we have to know how far our actual circumstances are modifiable; a difficult question, as we can see from the ideal societies that have actually been invented! For example, Plato's Republic differs a good deal from reality, and yet he thinks of *war* as a permanent unalterable fact that has to be allowed for in the ideal state; . . . yet any modern Utopia—even one that wasn't at all bold or flashy—would include the suppression of war. Indeed, two thinkers constructing ideal states may head out from the actual in diametrically opposite directions. For example, permanent marriage-unions now cause some unhappiness because conjugal affection isn't always permanent, but they are thought to be necessary,

partly to protect men and women from harmful ups and downs of passion, but chiefly to secure good upbringings for children. There are two ways an 'ideal state' theorist could go from there:

- (a)** In an ideal state of society we could trust more to parental affections, needing less control over the natural play of emotion between the sexes; so that 'free love' is therefore the ideal.
- (b)** Permanence in conjugal affection is natural and normal, and any exceptions to it will disappear as we approach the ideal state.

Another example: in our actual society over-all happiness is lessened by unequal distribution of the means of happiness, and the division between rich and poor. We can think of this as remedied

- (a)** by the rich becoming more willing to redistribute their share, or
- (b)** by enabling the poor to secure more for themselves.

The voluntary and casual almsgiving that now goes on would be increased in **(a)**, extinguished in **(b)** .

When we abandon the firm ground of actual society, then, we enter an illimitable cloudland, in which we can construct •any variety of pattern states but •no definite ideal to which the actual world undeniably approximates, as the straight lines and circles of the physical world approximate to those of scientific geometry.

You may think that we can reduce this variety by studying mankind's past history, as a basis for predicting to some extent their future manner of existence. [Sidgwick says that this won't help us to know what to do *now*. Even supposing we get excellent evidence that mankind has been following definite lines of progress: this may help us to see what is likely to come next, but it tells us nothing about what line of further development would be a move closer to an ideal

state of society. He adds in a footnote:] This question will be further discussed in chapter IV/2.2 [page 227].

\* \* \* \* \*

[If you consult a printed copy of this work you won't find the next four paragraphs in this position. See the note on page 223 for an explanation.]

If we consider the relation of ethics to politics from a utilitarian point of view, the question *What rules of conduct for the governed should be fixed by legislators and applied by judges?* will be answered in the same way as are all questions of private morality, namely by predictions regarding consequences—attempts to estimate and balance against each other the effects of such rules on the general happiness. But if we divide utilitarianism into two parts—•the theory of private conduct and •the theory of legislation—and ask which of these two is prior, we seem to get different answers for different parts of the legal code.

(i) To a large extent the rules laid down in a utilitarian code of law will be ones that anyone sincerely wanting to promote general happiness would generally try to follow, even if they weren't legally binding. Examples of this include:

- the rule of not inflicting any bodily harm or needless annoyance on anyone, except in self-defence or as retribution for wrong;
- the rule of not interfering with anyone else's pursuit of the means of happiness, or with his enjoyment of wealth acquired by his own labour or the free consent of others;
- the rule of fulfilling all engagements freely entered into with any person x unless the fulfilment would be harmful to others or much more harmful to oneself than beneficial to x, or there were good grounds for supposing that x would not perform his share of a bilateral contract; and

- the rule of supporting one's children while they are helpless and one's parents if they are decrepit, and of educating one's children suitably to their future life.

As regards rules like these, utilitarian ethics seems independent of politics, and naturally prior to it; we *first* consider what conduct is right for private individuals, and *then* consider how much of this they can advantageously be compelled to by legal penalties.

(ii) There are other rules that would serve general happiness only if everyone was forced to follow them; for example, •refraining from personal retaliation for injuries, and •a more general and unhesitating fulfilment of contracts than would be expedient [see Glossary] if they were not legally enforced.

(iii) When it comes to settling all the claims that the members of society have against one another,

- the great differences in relevant facts about different situations imply that on many points the utilitarian theory of right private conduct apart from law would lead to different answers in different cases,

while at the same time

- uniformity is either indispensable, to prevent disputes and disappointments, or at least highly desirable so as to maintain rules of conduct that are usually though not always expedient.

Examples of this are •exact fixing of the limits of copyright in literary compositions and patents of technical inventions; and •a large part of the law of inheritance, and of •the law regulating family relations. In such cases. . . utilitarian ethics seems to blend with utilitarian politics in a rather complicated way; because we cannot determine the right conduct for a private individual in any particular case without first considering what rule (if any) it would be on the whole expedient to maintain, in the society of which he is a member, by legal penalties as well as by the weaker and less



definite sanctions of moral opinion. In any particular case this problem is further complicated by the delicate relations between positive law and positive morality (as we may call the actual moral opinions generally held in a given society at a given time). On one hand, it is dangerous for legislation to go beyond positive morality by prohibiting conduct that is generally approved or tolerated; on the other hand, up to the point at which this danger becomes serious, legisla-

tion is an effective instrument for modifying or intensifying public opinion in a desirable direction. Leaving this difficult question of social dynamics, we may say that normally in a well-organised society the most important and indispensable rules of social behaviour will be legally enforced and the less important left to be maintained by positive morality. Law will constitute, as it were, the skeleton of social order, clothed in the flesh and blood of morality.

### Chapter 3: Ethical judgments

1. I have spoken of actions that we judge to be right and that ought to be done as being 'reasonable' or 'rational', and of ultimate ends as 'prescribed by reason'; and I contrasted the corresponding motives with 'non-rational' desires and inclinations. This way of speaking is employed by writers of various schools, and fits with ordinary language and ordinary thought. We do commonly think that wrong conduct can be shown by argument to be essentially irrational. We don't think that men are influenced to act rightly by reason alone, but we hold that appeals to reason are an essential part of all moral persuasion—the part that concerns the moralist or moral philosopher as distinct from the preacher or moral rhetorician. But many people think that, as Hume says, 'Reason, meaning the judgment of truth and falsehood, can never of itself be any motive to the will', and that every motive to action is some non-rational desire, taking 'desires' to include the impulses to action given by present pleasure and pain. Before going further, we should look carefully at the grounds of this contention.

Let us first define the issue as clearly as we can. Most of us have felt •a bodily appetite [see Glossary] prompting us to indulgences that we judge to be imprudent, and •anger prompting us to acts that we disapprove of as unjust or unkind. In such a conflict the desires are said to be irrational because they drive us to volitions that are opposed to our deliberate judgments; and it's when we succeed in resisting such irrational desires that their impulsive force is most definitely felt, because in resisting them we have made a voluntary effort somewhat like that of muscular exertion. Desires of this kind are often at work when we aren't giving any thought to our duty or our interests, as when an ordinary healthy man eats his dinner. It seems best to call these desires 'non-rational' rather than 'irrational'. Despite these labels, the more important of these desires are normally accompanied by intellectual processes. Some impulses to action do indeed seem to operate 'blindly' or 'instinctively', with no definite thought about either •the end the action aims at or •the means by which it is to be

attained; but this happens only with impulses that •don't occupy consciousness for long and •require only very familiar and habitual actions to achieve their immediate ends. In ethical discussion we are chiefly concerned not with those cases but with ones where the intended result and at least some of the means to it are more or less clearly represented in consciousness before the volition that starts the action. So the resultant forces of 'nonrational' desires and the volitions prompted by them are continually modified by intellectual processes in two ways; •by new perceptions or representations of means to the desired ends, and •by new presentations or representations of relevant facts, especially ones about probable consequences of the contemplated action.

Is that an exhaustive account of the influence of the intellect on desire and volition? Is the so-called 'conflict of desire with reason' really just a conflict among desires and aversions, with reason's only role in it being to confront the mind with ideas of actual or possible facts that modify the resultant force of our various impulses?

I say No: the ordinary moral or prudential judgments that have at least some influence on volition in most minds aren't judgments concerning •present or future human feelings or •any facts about the sensible world; •the basic notion of *ought* or *right* which such judgments involve is **essentially different from** any notion representing facts of physical or mental experience. To support this claim I shall have to appeal to you to reflect on your own practical judgments and reasonings; and the best start to this appeal is to criticise all attempts to explain the practical judgments that employ •this basic notion without recognising its unique character as above **negatively** defined. Such explanations have an element of truth: they highlight feelings that undoubtedly *accompany* moral or prudential judgments and ordinarily

have some effect on the person's willingness to do what he judges to be right; but considered as interpretations of what such judgments *mean* they are complete failures.

In this context we have to consider 'moral' judgments separately from 'prudential' ones. As I have pointed out, there's a strongly supported opinion that all valid moral rules ultimately have a prudential basis; but in ordinary thought we sharply distinguish •judgments of duty from •judgments as to what 'is right' or 'ought to be done' in view of the agent's private interests or happiness; and the depth of the distinction won't be lessened by the closer examination of these judgments that we are now to conduct.

[Sidgwick acknowledges that we do sometimes use 'right' to mean 'the best or only way to get x' and similarly with 'ought'. He continues:] But it seems clear **(1)** that certain kinds of actions under the names 'justice', 'veracity', 'good faith' etc. are commonly held to be right •unconditionally and not merely •right-if-you-want-to-achieve-x; and **(2)** that we similarly regard as 'right' the adoption of certain ends such as the common good of society. In either of these cases the above •means-to-an-end• interpretation is clearly wrong.

So we have to find a meaning for 'right' or 'what ought to be' other than the notion of fitness for some end. Here's a proposal that has been made:

The judgments that we commonly call 'moral' in the narrower sense really affirm only that the speaker has a specific emotion. When I say 'Truth ought to be spoken' or 'Truthspeaking is right', I mean only that the idea of truthspeaking arouses in my mind a feeling of approval or satisfaction.

It's probably true that most moral judgments on real cases are *accompanied by* some degree of such emotion, i.e. of so-called 'moral sentiment'; but it's absurd to say that what the proposition 'Truth ought to be spoken' *means* is that the

speaker has a feeling of approval of truthspeaking. If that were what it meant, this could happen:

One man says 'Truth ought to be spoken', another says 'Truth ought not to be spoken', and they are both right!

This is so *obviously* absurd that we must suppose that no-one has really meant to maintain it, and that the thesis we are up against here is not the one I have just exposed but rather this:

The subjective fact of my approval is all that there's any evidence for;

or perhaps this:

The subjective fact of my approval is all that any reasonable person is prepared on reflection to affirm.

There certainly are many statements, objective in their form, that we usually aren't willing to defend as more than subjective if their validity is questioned. If I say 'The air is sweet' or 'The food disagreeable', it's not the case that all I mean is that I like the air or dislike the food; but if my statement is challenged, I'll probably settle for reporting the existence of such feelings in my mind. But this case differs fundamentally from the case of moral feelings. The unique emotion of moral approval is, in my experience, inseparably bound up with the implicit or explicit conviction that the conduct approved is 'really' right, i.e. that anyone who disapproves of it is in error. If for any reason I give up this conviction, I may still have a feeling prompting me to the conduct in question, or (perhaps more often) a feeling of repugnance to the opposite conduct; but this feeling will no longer have the special quality of 'moral sentiment' strictly so-called. . . . Take the case of a man who has been habitually influenced by a moral sentiment in favour of veracity, but becomes convinced that in his present special circumstances speaking the truth is not right but wrong. He will probably still feel a revulsion

against violating the rule of truthspeaking; but this will be different in kind and degree from the feeling that prompted him to veracity as virtuous. We might call the one a 'moral' and the other a 'quasi-moral' sentiment.

That argument holds equally against this:

Approval or disapproval is not the mere •liking or aversion of an individual for certain kinds of conduct, but •this mixed in with a sympathetic [see Glossary] representation of similar likings or aversions felt by others.

No doubt such sympathy normally comes along with moral emotion; and when it doesn't, it is harder to maintain the moral position. But that is partly because our moral beliefs commonly agree with those of others in our society, and our confidence in the truth of these beliefs depends greatly on this agreement. But suppose that we are led by argument to a new moral belief, opposed to our own habitual moral sentiment and to that of the society we live in; this is a crucial experiment [see Glossary] that proves the existence in us of 'moral sentiments' as I have defined them, colliding with the sympathies of our fellow-men as much as with our own mere likings and aversions. And even if we imagine that the whole human race has sympathies opposed to our newly-acquired convictions, so that we see ourselves as standing against the world, still, so long as our conviction of duty is firm, our moral emotion stands out as quite distinct from the complex sympathy opposed to it, however much we extend, complicate and intensify the latter.

**2.** . . . There's another account of 'ought' in which the likings and aversions that people generally have for certain kinds of conduct enter the picture in a different way: on this account, when x says that y 'ought to' do A he is thinking of the general aversion to A as a basis for holding that if y does A he will *suffer* directly or indirectly from the dislike of his

fellow-creatures.

This interpretation expresses a part of what ‘ought’ and ‘duty’ mean in ordinary thought and discourse. When we are talking about someone’s *duty* or what he *ought* to do, we often express this by saying that he has a ‘moral obligation’ to do it, which suggests an analogy between this notion and that of *legal* obligation; and in the case of positive [see Glossary] law there’s an essential connection between ‘obligation’ and punishment: a law isn’t established in a society if those who break it are never punished. But further thought shows that •the use of ‘ought’ that fits this account, though it really does occur, must be distinguished from •the special ethical use of the term. In common thought the conceptual distinction between legal rules and merely moral ones lies in just this connection of punishment with legal rules and *not* with moral ones. We think there are some things that a man ought to be compelled to do or refrain from, and others that he ought to do or refrain from without compulsion, and that only the former lie within the sphere of •positive• law. No doubt we also think that in many cases where the compulsion of law is undesirable, the fear of moral censure and its consequences supplies a normally useful constraint on the will of any individual. But when we say that a man is ‘morally though not legally bound’ to do A, we don’t mean merely that he’ll be punished by public opinion if he doesn’t do A; for we often say things of the form ‘He ought to do A *and* he’ll be punished by public opinion if he doesn’t’, meaning this as two statements, not one. Also, public opinion is fallible and we often judge that men ‘ought’ to do A while we’re perfectly aware that they won’t pay much of a social price if they don’t. . . .

Admittedly we quite often make judgments that sound like moral judgments in form, and aren’t distinguished from them in ordinary thought, though on reflection we

realise that they really depend on the existence of current public attitudes. Modern civilised societies have codes of public opinion, enforced by social penalties, which no thoughtful person •thinks are moral codes or •regards as unconditionally binding. Any such code varies through time, and at a single time is different for different classes, professions, social circles. Such a code always supports to a considerable extent the commonly received code of morality; and most thoughtful people think it generally reasonable, for prudential or moral reasons, to conform to the dictates of public opinion—that is

- to the ‘code of honour’, as it may be called in serious matters, or
- to ‘the rules of politeness or good breeding’ in lighter matters

—whenever these don’t positively conflict with morality. But less thoughtful people don’t distinguish the duties imposed by social opinion from moral duties; and the common meaning of many terms captures this failure-to-distinguish. If we say that a man has been ‘dishonoured’ by a cowardly act, it’s not quite clear whether we mean that he has *incurred* contempt or that he has *deserved* it, or both; and this becomes evident when the code of honour conflicts with morality. Take the case of a man who refuses a duel on religious grounds: some would say that he was ‘dishonoured’ but had acted rightly; others would say that there couldn’t be real dishonour in a virtuous act. . . .

Another way of interpreting ‘ought’ as involving penalties is less easy to meet by a crucial psychological experiment. The moral imperative may be taken to be a law of God, who will punish breaches of it. . . . But this belief is not shared by everyone whose conduct is influenced by independent moral convictions that may not be supported by •the law of the land or •the public opinion of their community. And even for

those who *do* fully believe in the moral government of the world, the judgment **(i)** 'I ought to do A' can't be identified with the judgment **(ii)** 'God will punish me if I don't do A', because believing **(i)** is clearly seen to be an important part of the grounds for believing **(ii)**. Also, when Christians say that God's 'justice' (or any other moral attribute) is shown in punishing sinners and rewarding the righteous, they obviously mean not merely that God *will* thus punish and reward but that it is 'right' for him to do so; and of course they can't mean that he will be punished if he doesn't!

**3.** So the notion of *ought* or *moral obligation* as used in our common moral judgments doesn't merely mean something about emotions, the speaker's and/or those of others; and doesn't mean something about penalties, whether social or divine. Then what does it mean? What definition can we give of 'ought', 'right', and other terms expressing the same basic notion? My answer is that the notion in question is too elementary, too simple, to be capable of any formal definition. I'm not implying that it belongs to the mind's original constitution, i.e. that its presence in consciousness is not the result of a process of development. I'm sure that the whole structure of human thought, including the most simple and elementary conceptions, has grown through a gradual mental process out of some lower life in which thought, properly so-called, had no place. But it doesn't follow that no notion is really simple though some appear to be so. Water results from hydrogen and oxygen in such a way that it has these elements *in* it, which means that it isn't simple; but I don't know any reason for transferring this pattern from chemistry to psychology, maintaining that mental items contain *as parts* the mental items out of which

they grew.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of such reasons, a psychologist must accept as simple or elementary anything that careful introspection declares to be so. . . . The *ought* notion that we are dealing with here can be made clearer in only one way, namely by determining its relation to other notions with which it is connected in ordinary thought, especially to other notions with which it is liable to be confused.

We need to distinguish two senses that the word 'ought' can have: **(i)** When we judge that A 'ought to be' done, in the narrowest ethical sense, we're thinking of A as something that can be brought about by the volition of anyone who 'ought' to do it. I can't conceive that I 'ought' to do something that I don't think I *can* do. But there's also a useful place for a wider sense that is at work when, for example, I judge that I 'ought' to know what a wiser man would know, or to feel as a better man would feel in my place, while knowing that I couldn't directly acquire any such knowledge or feeling by any effort of will. In this use, the word merely implies an ideal or pattern which I 'ought' (now in the stricter sense) to imitate as far as possible. And the word is normally being used in this wider sense. . . .in political judgments, as when I judge that the laws of my country 'ought to be' other than they are. I don't of course mean that anyone's individual volition can directly bring about the change, or even that any group of individuals could produce *all* the changes that I think ought to occur; but my judgment points to a pattern to which my country could approximate. In each sense I imply that other things that ought to be are other things that can be known, i.e. that what I judge ought to be must—unless I am in error—be similarly judged by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter. In the present work 'ought' will always be used in the stricter sense except where the context clearly points to

<sup>1</sup> In Chemistry the compound weighs exactly as much as the elements making it up, and usually we can dismantle the compound and get the separate elements back. There's no analogue to any of this in the relation between a mental item and the 'elements' it has grown from.

the wider sense—that of the political ‘ought’.

In referring such judgments to ‘reason’, I’m not prejudging the question of whether valid moral judgments are normally reached by •a process of reasoning from universal principles or axioms, or by •direct intuition of the particular duties of individuals. Many people hold that our moral faculty deals primarily with individual cases as they arise, applying the general notion of *duty* to each case and deciding intuitively what this person ought to do in these circumstances. On this view, the grasping of moral truth resembles sense-perception more than it does rational intuition as this is commonly understood,<sup>1</sup> so that the label ‘moral *sense*’ might seem more appropriate. But ‘sense’ suggests a capacity for feelings that may vary from one person to another without either being in error, rather than a faculty of cognition;<sup>2</sup> and I think it’s very important to avoid this suggestion. So I think it is better to use the term ‘reason’, with the explanation given above, to name the faculty of moral cognition; adding, as a further justification of this use, that even when a moral judgment relates primarily to some particular action we commonly regard it as applicable to any other action belonging to a certain definable class; so that the moral truth apprehended is implicitly conceived to be intrinsically universal, though particular in our first apprehension of it. (A further justification for this extended use of the term ‘reason’ will be suggested in chapter 8.3 [page 46].)

Also, when I speak of the cognition or judgment that ‘A ought to be done’ (in the stricter ethical sense of ‘ought’) as a ‘dictate’ or ‘precept’ of reason to the persons to whom it relates, I imply that in any rational being this cognition

would give an impulse or motive to action; though for human beings this is only one motive—often not a predominant one—among others that may conflict with it. In fact, this possibility of conflict is conveyed by the words ‘dictate’ and ‘imperative’, which likens

- how reason relates to non-rational impulses etc.

to

- how the will of a superior relates to the wills of his subordinates.

This conflict seems also to be conveyed by the terms ‘ought’, ‘duty’ and ‘moral obligation’, as used in ordinary moral discourse; so that these aren’t applicable to the actions of rational beings who don’t have impulses conflicting with reason. But we can say of such beings that their actions are ‘reasonable’ or (in an absolute sense) ‘right’.

**4.** Some people will want to answer the whole of my line of thought by denying that they can find in their consciousness any such unconditional or categorical imperative as I have been trying to exhibit. If this really is the final result of self-examination for any person, there’s no more to be said. I, at least, don’t know how to convey the notion of moral obligation to someone who is entirely devoid of it. But I think that many of those who give this denial really mean only to deny that they have any consciousness of *moral obligation to actions without reference to their consequences*, and wouldn’t deny that they recognise some universal end—e.g. universal happiness or well-being—as being what it’s ultimately reasonable to aim at, giving this aim preference over any personal desires that conflict with it. But this view (as I said before) clearly involves the unconditional

<sup>1</sup> We don’t say that particular physical facts are grasped by reason; we consider •discursively used reason as dealing with relations among judgments or propositions, and •intuitive reason as restricted to the seeing of universal truths such as the axioms of logic and mathematics.

<sup>2</sup> By ‘cognition’ I always mean what some would call ‘apparent cognition’; i.e. I don’t mean to affirm the validity of the cognition, but only its existence as a mental fact and its *claim* to be valid.

imperative regarding the end, and recognises an obligation to perform the acts that most conduce to it. The obligation isn't 'unconditional', but it's not conditional on any non-rational desires or aversions. And nothing I've been saying is meant as an argument for intuitionism against utilitarianism or any other method that treats moral rules as relative to general good or well-being. For instance, nothing I've said is inconsistent with the view that truthspeaking is valuable only as a means to the preservation of society; but then the preservation of society (or some further end to which it is a means) must be intrinsically valuable and therefore something that a rational being ought to aim at. . . .

And even those who hold that moral rules are obligatory only because it is in the individual's interest to conform to them. . . .don't get rid of the 'dictate of reason' if they think that private self-interest or happiness is an end that it's ultimately reasonable to aim at. . . . Kant and others maintain that it can't be a man's duty to promote his own happiness, because 'what everyone inevitably wills cannot be brought under the notion of duty'. But even if we grant (and I'll show in chapter 4 that I don't) that it's in some sense true that a man's volition always aims at attaining his own happiness, it doesn't follow that a man always does what he thinks will lead to his own *greatest* happiness. As Butler emphasized, we are all familiar with cases where someone gives way to some appetite or passion while knowing that this is clearly opposed to what they conceive to be their interests. So the notion *ought*—as expressing how rational judgment relates to non-rational impulses—will find a place in the practical rules of any egoistic system just as it does in the rules of ordinary morality where it prescribes duty without reference to the agent's interests.

This may be maintained:

Egoism doesn't regard the agent's greatest happiness as what he *ought* to aim at, but only as what he predominantly *wants*. This desire may be temporarily overcome by passions and appetites, but ordinarily it regains the upper hand when these passing impulses have spent their force.

I know that many people take this view of egoistic action, and I'll consider it in chapter 9. But even if we hold that *no* end of action is unconditionally or 'categorically' prescribed by reason, this won't remove the *ought* notion from our practical reasonings; it still remains in the 'hypothetical imperative' prescribing the best means to any end selected end. When a physician says **(i)** 'If you wish to be healthy you ought to rise early', this is *not* the same thing as saying **(ii)** 'Early rising is essential for the attainment of health'. What **(ii)** does is to express the fact on which **(i)** is based, but the word 'ought' doesn't merely indicate this fact; it also implies that it's unreasonable to adopting a certain end while refusing to adopt the means needed for its attainment. Possible objection:

It's not just unreasonable—it's impossible! Adopting an end means having a preponderant desire for it, and if aversion to the essential means causes them not to be followed although recognised as indispensable, the desire is no longer preponderant and stops being adopted.

This objection arises from a defective psychological analysis. What I find when I look into my own consciousness is that •adopting an end is a quite different mental phenomenon from •having a desire; it's a **(a)** kind of volition, though not of the **(c)** kind that initiates a particular immediate action. Intermediate between **(a)** and **(c)** is **(b)** a resolution to act in a certain way at some future time. Sometimes when the

time comes to act on such a resolution we act otherwise, under the influence of passion or habit, without consciously cancelling our previous resolve. Our practical reason condemns this inconsistency of will as irrational, quite apart from any judgment of approval or disapproval on either volition considered by itself. There is a similar inconsistency between the adoption of an end and a general refusal to take

the means we see to be indispensable to achieving it; and if when the time comes we •don't follow those means yet also •don't consciously retract our adoption of the end, it can hardly be denied that we *ought* in consistency to act otherwise than we do. And we are all familiar with such contradictions between a general resolution and a particular volition.

### Chapter 4: Pleasure and desire

1. I haven't described •the emotional characteristics of the impulse that prompts us to obey the dictates of reason. That is because •these seem to be different in different minds, and even in one mind at different times, without any change in the volitional direction of the impulse. The ruling impulse in the mind of a rational egoist is generally what Butler and Hutcheson call a '**calm**' or '**cool**' **self-love**; whereas in someone who takes universal happiness as the end and standard of right conduct, the desire to do what he judges to be reasonable is usually combined with some degree of **sympathy and philanthropic enthusiasm**. Someone who thinks of the dictating reason (whatever its dictates may be) as external to himself, the thought of rightness is accompanied by a sentiment of **reverence for authority**; which some may think of as impersonal but more regard as the authority of a supreme Person, so that the sentiment... becomes religious. This conception of reason as an external authority against which the self-will rebels is often irresistibly forced on the reflective mind; but at other times the identity of •reason and •self presents itself as an immediate conviction, and then reverence for authority

passes over into **self-respect**; if we see the rational self as liable to be enslaved by the force of sensual impulses, the opposite and even stronger sentiment of **freedom** is called in. Quite different again are the emotions of **aspiration or admiration** aroused by the conception of virtue as an ideal of moral beauty (I'll return to this in chapter 9). . . . There are important differences in the moral value and efficacy of these different emotions; but their primary practical effect seems to remain the same as long as the cognition of *rightness* remains unchanged. The chief concern of ethics, in my view, is with these cognitions; it aims to free them from doubt and error, and to systematise them as far as possible.

But one view of the feelings that prompt us to voluntary action is sometimes thought to cut short all controversy over the principles that ought to govern such action. I mean the view that volition is always determined by pleasures or pains, actual or prospective. I call this doctrine 'psychological hedonism'; it is often connected with—and quite often confused with—the method of ethics that I have called 'egoistic hedonism'; and it does at first sight seem natural to think that if the psychological doctrine is true then the ethical one



must be also—if one end of action. . . .is definitely determined for me by unvarying psychological laws, a different end can't be prescribed for me by reason.

When you think about it, though, you'll see that this inference assumes that a man's pleasure and pain are determined independently of his moral judgments; whereas it's plainly possible that our expectation of pleasure from doing A may largely depend on whether we think that A is the right thing to do. And in fact psychological hedonism requires us to suppose that this is the case with people who habitually act in accordance with their moral convictions. . . .

So •the psychological thesis that pleasure or absence of pain to myself is always the actual ultimate end of my action has no necessary connection with •the ethical thesis that my own greatest happiness or pleasure is for me the *right* ultimate end. [Sidgwick turns to the version of the psychological thesis which says that each of us is psychologically determined to seek his own *greatest possible* pleasure (or least pain), and agrees with Bentham that anyone who believes this will have no room in his scheme of things for the ethical doctrine that Sidgwick calls 'egoistic hedonism', because:] a psychological law that my conduct invariably conforms to can't be conceived as 'dictate of reason'; this latter must be a rule from which I am conscious that I could deviate. [But, Sidgwick continues, 'writers who now maintain psychological hedonism' wouldn't accept Bentham's super-strong version of it. He quotes Mill as saying that people often fail to act towards their greatest happiness, this failure being due to 'infirmity of character'. So Sidgwick will now take psychological hedonism not in the strong Bentham form of it but in the weaker form in which 'greatest' doesn't occur.]

So egoistic hedonism becomes a possible ethical ideal to which psychological hedonism seems to point. If the ultimate aim of each of us in acting is always solely some pleasure (or absence of pain) to himself, there's a strong suggestion that each of us *ought* to seek his own *greatest* pleasure (or, strictly, greatest surplus of pleasure over pain). . . .—the mind has a natural tendency to pass from the one position to the other. . . . This psychological doctrine seems to conflict with an ethical view widely held by morally developed people, namely that for an act to be in the highest sense virtuous it mustn't be done solely for the sake of the pleasure it brings, even if it's the pleasure of the moral sense; that is, a truly virtuous act won't be done solely so as to get a glow of moral self-approval. [Sidgwick puzzlingly introduces that last sentence with 'Further. . .', as though he were continuing or reinforcing an immediately preceding argument.]

So it seems important to subject psychological hedonism, even in its more indefinite ·non-Bentham· form, to a careful examination.

**2.** Let us start by defining the question at issue more precisely.

**pleasure:** a kind of feeling that stimulates the will to actions tending to sustain it if it's actually present, and to produce it if it's only being thought about.

**pain:** a kind of feeling that stimulates the will to actions tending to remove or avert it.<sup>1</sup>

It's convenient to call the felt volitional stimulus 'desire' in one case and 'aversion' in the other; though 'desire' is usually restricted to the impulse felt when pleasure is only thought about and not actually present.<sup>2</sup> So the question at issue is. . . .this:

<sup>1</sup> [A footnote here indicates that this account of pain isn't right as it stands, and will be returned to in II/22.2 .]

<sup>2</sup> [A footnote refers to the use of 'desire' in cases where the person knows that the desired state of affairs can't possibly be achieved. Sidgwick will set this aside, he says, and mentions it only because the psychologist Alexander Bain so defines 'desire' that *only* the forlorn-hope cases are desires.]

Are there desires and aversions that *don't* have pleasures and pains for their objects, i.e. conscious impulses to produce or avert results other than the agent's own feelings?

Mill explains that 'desiring a thing and finding it pleasant are two ways of naming the same psychological fact'. If that were right, the question we are asking can be answered without resorting to the 'practised self-consciousness and self-observation' that Mill invokes in his *Utilitarianism*, because the answer Yes would involve a contradiction in terms. The discussion of this question has been confused by an ambiguity in 'pleasure'. When we speak of a man doing something 'at his pleasure' or 'as he pleases', we usually mean only that this was a voluntary choice, not that he was aiming at some feeling for himself. Now, if by 'pleasant' we mean merely what influences choice, exercises an attractive force on the will, then the statement *We desire what is pleasant* or even *We desire a thing in proportion as it appears pleasant* is perfectly safe because it is tautological [see Glossary]. But if we take 'pleasure' to denote the kind of feeling defined above, then there's a real *question* as to whether the end to which our desires are always consciously directed is our coming to have such feelings. And *this* is what we must understand Mill to regard as 'so obvious that it will hardly be disputed'.

It is rather curious to find one of the best-known English moralists supporting the exact opposite of what Mill thinks to be so obvious, supporting it not merely as a universal fact of our conscious experience but even as a necessary truth! Butler distinguishes self-love, i.e. the impulse towards our own pleasure, from 'particular movements towards particular external objects—honour, power, the harm or good of another'—which lead to actions that 'aren't self-interested except in the debased sense in which every action

of every creature *must* be self-interested because no-one can act except from a desire or choice or preference of his own'. Such particular passions or appetites are, he goes on to say, '*necessarily presupposed by the very idea* of a self-interested pursuit; because the very idea of interest or happiness consists in the success of some appetite or affection [see Glossary] in getting what it aims at'. We couldn't pursue pleasure at all unless we had desires for something other than pleasure, because pleasure consists precisely in the satisfaction of these 'disinterested' impulses.

Butler has certainly over-stated his case, so far as my own experience goes; for many pleasures—especially those of sight, hearing and smell, together with many emotional pleasures—occur to me without any relation to previous desires, and it seems quite *conceivable* that our primary desires might all be directed towards pleasures like these. But as a matter of fact it appears to me that throughout the whole scale of my impulses—sensual, emotional, and intellectual—I can pick out desires for things other than my own pleasure.

Let's start with an illustration from the impulses commonly placed lowest in the scale. The appetite [see Glossary] of hunger strikes me as a direct impulse to eat food. Such eating will usually be accompanied by an agreeable feeling, whether weak or strong; but it can't be strictly said that this agreeable feeling is the object of hunger, or that the thought of this pleasure is what stimulates the will of the hungry man. Careful introspection seems to show that although hunger is frequently and naturally accompanied by anticipation of the pleasure of eating, the two aren't inseparable. And even when they do occur together, the pleasure seems to be the object not of the primary appetite but of a secondary desire that can be distinguished from the other. Someone who gets tremendous pleasure from eating may be led by this to

stimulate his hunger and delay its satisfaction in order to prolong and vary the process of satisfying it.

Indeed it's so obvious that hunger is different from the desire for anticipated pleasure that some writers have regarded its volitional stimulus (and that of desire generally) as a case of *aversion from present pain*. But this is a definite mistake in psychological classification. It's true that in desire as in pain we feel a stimulus prompting us to pass from the present state into a different one. But aversion from pain is an impulse to get out of the present state and pass into some *other* state, the only requirement being the •negative one that it be *other, not this!*; whereas in desire the primary impulse is towards the achievement of some •positive future result. When a strong desire is somehow blocked from causing action, that is usually somewhat painful; that generates a secondary aversion to the state of desire; this blends with the desire itself and may easily be confused with it. To see how different these two are, consider the fact that there are two different ways of acting on one's aversion to the pain of ungratified desire: work harder to get the desire gratified, or get rid of the pain by suppressing the desire.

Does desire have in some degree the quality of pain? The question is of psychological rather than ethical interest. . . .but I don't mind answering it. Speaking for my own case I have no hesitation in answering No. Consider hunger again: I certainly don't find hunger painful in normal circumstances—only when I am ill or half-starved. Generally speaking, indeed, if D is some desire that isn't blocked from generating relevant actions, then

D is not itself a painful feeling, even when one is a long way from satisfying it,  
and indeed it's often the case that

D is an element of a state of consciousness that is over-all highly pleasurable.

Indeed, the pleasures provided by the consciousness of eager activity, in which desire is an essential element, are a large component in the total enjoyment of life. It is almost a cliché to say that such 'pleasures of pursuit' (as we may call them) are more important than the pleasures of attainment; and very often what motivates us to engage in the pursuit is precisely the pleasures of pursuit. [Sidgwick illustrates this at some length. Then:]

An interesting contrast now comes to light. In the case of hunger, the appetite of hunger is distinct from the desire for the pleasure of eating, but there's no difficulty about their both being present in full strength in one person. But with the pleasures of pursuit there does seem to be a certain incompatibility: it seems that a certain subordination of self-regard is needed if the person is to have full enjoyment. Take the case of a man engaged in pursuing some goal who keeps his main conscious aim perpetually fixed on the pleasure he expects to get from succeeding. He won't catch the full spirit of the chase; his eagerness will never get just the sharpness of edge that gives the pleasure of pursuit its highest zest. This brings us to what we may call the fundamental paradox of hedonism, that if the impulse towards pleasure is too predominant it will defeat its own aim. This effect is scarcely visible in the case of passive sensual pleasures. But it's certainly true of our active enjoyments generally—whether associated with bodily or intellectual activities—as well as of many emotional pleasures, that we can't attain them in their highest degree as long as we keep our main conscious aim concentrated on them. It's not just that •the exercise of our faculties isn't sufficiently stimulated by a mere desire for the pleasure of •it, and can't be fully developed without other more objective 'extra-regarding' [see Glossary] impulses; it's also, further, the case that these other impulses must be temporarily predominant and absorbing

if the exercise and the pleasure of it are to attain their full scope. Many middle-aged Englishmen would say business is more agreeable than amusement; but they wouldn't find it so if they transacted their business with a perpetual conscious aim at the pleasure of doing so. The pleasures of thought and study, also, can be enjoyed in the highest degree only by those who have an eagerness of curiosity that temporarily carries the mind away from self and its sensations. . . .

The important case of the benevolent affections is at first sight more doubtful. When those whom we love are pleased or pained, we ourselves feel sympathetic [see Glossary] pleasure and pain, and the flow of love or kindly feeling ·involved in any benevolent action· is itself highly pleasurable. So that it's at least plausible to think that benevolent actions aim ultimately at getting one or both of these two pleasures—·the flow-of-love pleasure and the sympathetic pleasure·—or at ·getting the flow-of-love pleasure and· averting sympathetic pain. But ·there are three reasons not to accept this as a full account of benevolent motives·. **(a)** The impulse to beneficent action produced in us by sympathy is often vastly stronger than any consciousness of sympathetic pleasure and pain in ourselves, so that it would be paradoxical to regard this latter—·i.e. getting the sympathetic pleasure or averting the sympathetic pain·—as its object. Often, indeed, a tale of actual suffering excites us in a way that is more pleasurable than painful. . . .and yet it also stirs in us an impulse to relieve the suffering, even when this relief is painful and laborious and involves various sacrifices of our own pleasures. **(b)** We can often free ourselves from sympathetic pain most easily by turning our thoughts away from the other person's suffering; and we sometimes feel an egoistic impulse to do this, which we can then clearly distinguish from the sympathetic impulse prompting us to relieve the suffering. **(c)** It seems that the much-commended

pleasures of benevolence don't amount to much unless we already had a desire to do good to others for *their* sake. As Hutcheson explains, we can *cultivate* benevolent affection for the sake of the pleasures that come with it (just as the glutton cultivates appetite), but we can't produce it at will, however strongly we desire these pleasures; and when a benevolent affection exists, even if it arose from a purely egoistic impulse, it is still essentially a desire to do good to others for their sake and not for ours.

The self-abandonment and self-forgetfulness that seemed essential for the full development of the other elevated impulses don't normally and permanently characterise benevolent affection, because strong love seems naturally to involve a desire for reciprocated love. . . ., and thus the consciousness of self and of one's own pleasures and pains seems often to be strengthened by the intensity of the affection that binds one to others. Still, this self-suppression—this filling of one's consciousness with the thought of other people and their happiness—is a common feature of all strong affections; and it is said that those who love intensely sometimes feel •a conflict between the egoistic and altruistic elements of their desire, and •an impulse to suppress the egoistic side, which can show itself in acts of fantastic and extravagant self-sacrifice.

So if reflection on our moral consciousness seems to show that (as William Lecky put it) 'the pleasure of virtue can be obtained only on the express condition of its not being the object sought', we need not distrust this result of observation on grounds that it is abnormal. It is in fact merely another instance of a psychological law that we have seen at work across the whole range of our desires. In the promptings of the senses, no less than in those of intellect or reason, we find the phenomenon of *strictly disinterested impulse*; it's not only sublime and ideal ends that excite desires of

this kind—low and trivial ones can do it too. It is true of some pleasures of the merely animal life, as well as of the satisfactions of a good conscience, that they can be obtained only if they are not directly sought.

**3.** I have stressed the felt incompatibility of ‘self-regarding’ and ‘extra-regarding’ impulses because I wanted to show their essential distinctness. I don’t wish to overstate this incompatibility; I believe that it is usually very transient and often only momentary, and that our greatest happiness (if that is what we are after) is generally achieved through a sort of alternating rhythm of the two kinds of impulse in consciousness. Our conscious desires are, more often than not, chiefly extra-regarding, but where there’s a strong desire in any direction there is commonly a keen openness to the corresponding pleasures; and the most devoted enthusiast is sustained in his work by the recurrent consciousness of such pleasures. But the familiar and obvious instances of conflict between self-love and some extra-regarding impulse are not paradoxes and illusions that we have to explain away; rather, they are . . . just what one might expect. If we’re continually acting from impulses whose immediate objects are something other than our own happiness, it is quite natural that we should occasionally yield to such impulses when that involves losing some pleasure. Thus a man with weak self-control who has fasted for too long may easily indulge his appetite for food to an extent that he knows is unhealthy; not because the pleasure of eating appears to him at all worthy of consideration in comparison with the harm to his health; but merely because he feels an impulse *to eat food*, which prevails over his prudential judgment. Another example: men have sacrificed all life’s enjoyments and even life itself to obtain posthumous fame, not from •any illusory belief that they could derive pleasure from it, but from •a direct desire for the future admiration of

others and a preference for that over their own pleasure. And yet another: when someone makes a sacrifice for some ideal end—e.g. truth, freedom, religion—it may be a real sacrifice of the person’s happiness and not the preference for one highly refined pleasure (or of the absence of one special pain) over all the other elements of happiness. . . .

To sum up: •we are conscious of having ever so many extra-regarding impulses, i.e. ones that are directed towards something other than pleasure and relief from pain; •much of our pleasure depends on the existence of such impulses; •in many cases there isn’t room in the person’s mind for the extra-regarding impulse *and* the desire for his own pleasure; and less often (though not *rarely*) the two come into irreconcilable conflict, prompting the person to opposite courses of action; •and this incompatibility is specially prominent when. . . .the extra-regarding impulse is the love of virtue for its own sake, i.e. the desire to do what is right just because it is right.

**4.** . . . The conclusion I have reached has been subject to two attacks, not trying to falsify it outright but to weaken its force. **(a)** It has been maintained that pleasure, though not the only conscious aim of human action, is always the result that it is *unconsciously* directed to. It would be hard to disprove this: no-one denies that some pleasure normally accompanies the achievement of a desired end; and there seems to be no clear method of determining whether the pleasure is aimed at if it’s acknowledged not to be *consciously* aimed at. That also makes the proposition hard prove, but I have more to say against it than that. If we try to take seriously the notion of the unconscious aspect of human action, we can only conceive it as a combination of movements of material organism’s parts; and the ‘end’ of any such movements (it’s reasonable to think) must be some physical state of the organism, a state that favours the survival either of the

individual organism or of its species. In fact, the doctrine that pleasure (or the absence of pain) is the end of all human action can't be supported by •introspection or by •external observation and inference; it seems to come from an arbitrary and illegitimate combination of the two.

(b) It is sometimes said that our original impulses—the ones we had when very young—were all directed towards pleasure or from pain, and that any extra-regarding impulses are derived from these by 'association of ideas'. [Sidgwick replies •that it seems to be false, because children have many extra-regarding inferences, and •that in any case it

is irrelevant to his thesis] that men do not *now* normally desire pleasure alone. . . . To say in answer to this that all men *once* desired pleasure is, from an ethical point of view, irrelevant; except on the assumption that there is an original type of man's appetitive nature to which, just because it is original, he ought to conform. But probably no hedonist would explicitly claim this, though writers of the intuitional school often make such an assumption.

[The chapter ends with a long 'Note' on the thesis that 'desire is essentially painful'. Sidgwick argues against this, focussing especially on Alexander Bain's defence of it.]

## Chapter 5: Free-will

1. I have treated rational action and then disinterested action, without raising the vexed question of the freedom of the will. The long history of debates about this question reveals that it is full of difficulties, and I want to keep these within tight limits so as to reduce their disturbing influence on my topic. Now, I can't see any psychological basis for identifying •disinterested action with either •'free' action or •'rational' action; and identifying rational action with free action is at least misleading, and tends to obscure the real issue raised in the free-will controversy. In chapter 4 I tried to show that strictly disinterested action—i.e. action that isn't motivated by any foreseen balance of pleasure to the

agent—is found in the most •instinctive as well as in the most •deliberate and self-conscious region of our volitional experience. And when individual's conduct is made rational by causes external to his own volition, it is still rational; so the conception of acting rationally, as explained in chapter 3, is *not* tied to the notion of acting 'freely', as libertarians generally maintain against determinists. I don't say 'all libertarians', because what Kant's disciples say about how freedom is connected to rationality seems to me to involve a confusion between two meanings of 'free', meanings that ought to be carefully distinguished in any discussion of free-will. When a Kantian<sup>1</sup> says that a man 'is a free agent

<sup>1</sup> I choose to exclude the Kantian conception of free-will from this chapter: •because of the confusion mentioned in the text, and •because it depends on the notion of a causality that isn't subject to time-conditions—a notion that I think is entirely untenable though a discussion of it doesn't fit anywhere into the plan for this work. Still, Kantian theory is having a large influence on current ethical thought, so I'll briefly discuss his conception of 'free-will' in an Appendix [not included in this version].

in so far as he acts under the guidance of reason', it's easy to agree because, as William Whewell says:

'We ordinarily identify ourselves with our reason rather than with our desires and affections. We speak of desire, love, anger, as •mastering us or of ourselves as •controlling them. If we decide to prefer some remote and abstract good to immediate pleasures, or to conform to a rule that brings us present pain (a decision requiring the exercise of reason), we regard those acts as more particularly our own acts.'

So I don't have any ordinary-language objection to this use of the term 'free' to label voluntary actions in which the pull of appetite or passion is successfully resisted; and I'm aware of what a help it is to moral persuasion if the powerful sentiment of liberty is enlisted in this way on the side of reason and morality.<sup>1</sup> But if we say that a man is a 'free' agent to the extent that he acts rationally, we can't also say—in the same sense of 'free'—that when he acts irrationally he is doing this by his own 'free' choice; yet that is just what the libertarians have usually wanted to say. They have thought it important to show that any moral agent is 'free', because of the connection they think exists between freedom and moral responsibility; but obviously a freedom connected in that way with responsibility isn't the 'freedom' that shows up in rational action; it's the freedom to *choose between* right and wrong, which shows up in either choice. The Christian notion of 'willful sin' implies that men do deliberately and knowingly choose to act irrationally. It's

not merely that they prefer self-interest to duty, for that's a conflict of claims to rationality than clear irrationality; but rather that they prefer sensual indulgence to health, revenge to reputation etc., though they know that this is opposed to their true interests as well as to their duty.<sup>2</sup> So our experience as a whole doesn't present the conflict between •reason and •passion as a conflict between •'ourselves' and •a force of nature. We may speak of being 'the slaves of our desires and appetites', but we must admit that we *chose* our slavery. Well, can we say this ↓ about the willful wrongdoer?

His choice was 'free' in this sense: he could have chosen rightly even if all the antecedents of his choice had been what they actually were.

I take this to be the substantial issue raised in the free-will controversy; and I'll now briefly discuss it, since it is widely believed to be of great ethical importance.

**2.** The predicates 'right' and 'what ought to be done'—when taken in the strictest ethical sense—are applicable to voluntary actions and to nothing else; all methods of ethics agree about this. Let us start, then, by defining this notion of *voluntary action* more exactly. In the first place, voluntary action is *conscious*, which marks it off from unconscious or mechanical actions or movements of the human organism. The person whose organism [Sidgwick's phrase] makes such movements doesn't become aware of them until after they have been made; so they are not imputed to him as a person, or judged to be morally wrong or imprudent; though they

<sup>1</sup> But it's also true, as I'll show later, that we sometimes identify ourselves with passion or appetite in conscious conflict with reason; and in those cases the rule of reason is apt to seem like an external constraint, and obedience to it a servitude if not a slavery.

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty that Socrates and the Socratic had in conceiving a man to choose deliberately what he knows to be bad for him—a difficulty that drives Aristotle into real determinism in his account of purposive action, at the same time explicitly maintaining the 'voluntariness' and 'responsibility' of vice—seems to be much reduced for the modern mind by the distinction between •moral and •prudential judgments, and the *prima facie* conflict between 'interest' and 'duty'. Because we are thus familiar with the conception of deliberate choice consciously opposed *either* to interest *or* to duty, we can quite easily conceive of such choice in conscious opposition to both. See chapter 9.3.

may sometimes be judged to have good or bad consequences, implying that they ought to be encouraged or checked as far as this can be done indirectly by conscious effort.

Someone who performs a conscious action isn't regarded as morally culpable, except in an indirect way, for entirely unforeseen effects of his action. When a man's action causes unforeseen harm, he is often blamed for carelessness; but thoughtful people would generally agree that if in such a case the agent is morally to blame for anything it must be that his carelessness resulted from some willful neglect of duty. So it seems that the proper immediate objects of moral approval or disapproval are always the results of a man's volitions that he *intended*, i.e. that he thought of as certain or probable upshots of his volitions. Or, more strictly, (dis)approval attaches to the volitions themselves in which such results were thus intended: if external causes prevent the agent's volition from producing its intended result, we don't excuse him on that account.

This seems to differ from the common opinion that the morality of acts depends on their 'motives', if by 'motives' we mean the desires that we feel for some of the foreseen consequences of our acts. But I don't think that those who have this opinion would deny that we are blameworthy for any bad result that we *foresaw* in willing, whether or not we *wanted* it. No doubt it is commonly held that acts, similar as regards their foreseen results, may be 'better' or 'worse' through the presence of certain desires or aversions. (More about this in chapter 9.) Still so far as these feelings are not altogether under the control of the will, the judgment of 'right' and 'wrong' doesn't strictly apply to the feelings themselves but rather to the exertion or omission of voluntary effort to check bad motives and encourage good ones. . . .

So judgments of right and wrong relate to volitions accompanied by intention, whether the intended effects are

•external or •something involving the agent's own feelings or character. This excludes conscious actions that aren't strictly intentional, as when sudden strong feelings of pleasure or pain cause movements that we are aware of making but aren't preceded by any thought of those movements or of their effects. . . .

Our common moral judgments distinguish •impulsive wrongdoing from •deliberate wrongdoing, condemning the latter more strongly. The line between them isn't sharp; but we can define 'impulsive' actions as ones where a feeling prompts the action so simply and immediately that there's almost no sense of choosing the intended result. In a deliberate volition there's a conscious *selection* of the result.

With volitions that are objects of moral condemnation or approval, the concept *volition* seems to include

- intention, or thought of the results of the action, and
- awareness of oneself as choosing, deciding, determining these results.

What I take to be at issue in the free-will controversy is the question: Which of these two is true?

- (1) The self which I credit with making my deliberate volitions has strictly determinate moral qualities, a definite character—partly inherited, partly formed by my past actions and feelings, and by physical influences—so that my voluntary action at any moment is completely caused by the qualities of this character together with the external influences acting on me at that moment (including the present state of my body).
- (2) There is always a possibility of my choosing to act in the way that I now judge to be reasonable and right, whatever my previous actions and experiences may have been.

In (1) a materialist would substitute 'brain and nervous



system' for 'character', and thereby obtain a clearer notion; but I have left •materialism out of this because •determinism doesn't require it. For my present purposes, the substantial dispute relates to the whether every volition depends causally on the state of things at the preceding instant—and it makes no difference whether that state of things consists in character and circumstances or brain and environing forces.<sup>1</sup>

On the determinist side there is a cumulative argument of great force. All competent thinkers believe that events are determined by the state of things immediately preceding them—all kinds of events except human volitions. This belief has steadily grown •in clarity and certainty and •in the scope of its application, as the human mind has developed and human experience has been systematised and enlarged. Lines of thought conflicting with this have, step by step in successive branches of science, receded and faded, until at length they have vanished everywhere, except from this mysterious citadel of *will*. Everywhere else the belief is so firmly established that some declare its opposite to be •inconceivable, and others even maintain that it always was •so. Every scientific procedure assumes it; each success of science confirms it. We are finding more and more proof not only •that events are determined in discoverable ways but also •that the different sorts of determination of different kinds of events are all inter-connected and are basically the same. So we are increasingly convinced of the essential unity of the knowable universe, which increases our

unwillingness to credit human action with the exceptional character claimed for it by libertarians.

Again, we see that the portion of human action that is originated unconsciously is admittedly determined by physical causes; and we find that no clear line can be drawn between acts of this kind and ones that are conscious and voluntary. [Sidgwick develops this point with examples of kinds of situation where the unconscious/conscious line is especially hard to draw.]

Further, we always explain the voluntary action of everyone but ourselves on the principle of causation by character and circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Indeed social life would be impossible if we didn't; for the life of man in society involves daily a mass of tiny forecasts of the actions of other men, based on experience of •mankind generally or of •particular classes of men or of •individuals; so that individuals are necessarily regarded as things having determinate properties, causes whose effects are calculable. With people we know, we usually infer their future actions from their past actions; and when our forecast turns out to be wrong, we explain this in terms not •of the disturbing influence of free-will but •of gaps in our knowledge of their character and motives. And passing to whole communities: whether or not we believe in a 'social science', we all take part in discussions of social phenomena in which the same principle is assumed; and however we may differ as to particular theories, we never doubt the validity of the assumption; and if we find anything inexplicable in history, past or present, it never occurs to

<sup>1</sup> Some determinists conceive of each volition as connected by uniform laws with our past state of consciousness. But any uniformities we might trace among a man's past states, even if we knew them all, would still give us very incomplete guidance to his future actions, because there would be left out of account •all inborn tendencies that hadn't yet completely shown themselves, and •all past physical influences whose effects hadn't been perfectly represented in consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> I don't mean that this is the only view that we take of the conduct of others; in judging their conduct morally, we ordinarily apply the conception of free-will. But we don't ordinarily regard this as one kind of causation that limits and counteracts the other kind. More about this later.

us to attribute it to an extensive exercise of free-will in a particular direction. Indeed, even as regards our own actions: however 'free' we feel ourselves to be at any moment T—however intensely our *choice* seems to be unconstrained by present motives and circumstances, and unfettered by our previous actions and feelings—when we later look back on •our choice at T and put it in the series of our actions, its causal relations and similarities to other parts of our life appear, and we naturally explain •it as an effect of our nature, education, and circumstances. Indeed we even think in that way about our future actions, and the more developed our moral sentiments are the more inclined we are to do this. [Sidgwick explains why: with increasing moral seriousness we acquire a growing sense of the role any choice might have in affecting our future thoughts and actions. But, he adds,] we habitually adopt at the same time the opposite, libertarian, view about our future •choices•; we believe, for example, that we are perfectly able from now on to resist temptations that we have continually succumbed to in the past. But moralists of all schools admit and even insist that this belief is largely illusory. Though •libertarians contend that we *can* at any moment act in a manner opposed to our past customs and present tendencies, •they join the determinists in teaching that breaking away from the subtle unfelt drag of habit is much harder than it is usually thought to be.

**3.** Against •the formidable case for determinism there is •what consciousness tells us at the moment of deliberate action. When I'm sharply aware of having a choice between two ways of behaving, one of which I think to be right or reasonable, I can't help thinking that I can now choose to do the right thing if there's no external obstacle to my doing it—that I *can* do this, however strongly I want to do the wrong thing and however often I have yielded to

such wants in the past. I realize that each concession to vicious desire increases the difficulty of resisting it next time around, but the •difficulty always seems to be entirely different from •impossibility. I admit that in some cases a certain impulse—e.g. aversion to death or extreme pain, or a craving for alcohol or opium—becomes so intense that it is felt as irresistibly dominating voluntary choice. We usually hold that a person is not morally responsible for what he does under such a dominating impulse; but the moral problem *that* raises is very exceptional; in ordinary cases of giving in to temptation there's no sense of an irresistible impulse. Ordinarily, however strong the rush of appetite or anger that comes over me, it doesn't present itself as irresistible; and if I deliberate at such a moment I can't regard the mere force of the impulse as a reason for doing what I judge to be unreasonable. I can suppose that •my conviction of free choice *may* be illusory; that •if I knew my own nature I *might* see it to be already settled that on this occasion I am going to act against my rational judgment. But when I think of myself as seeing this, I have to think of myself as having a fundamentally altered conception of what I now call 'my' action; I can't conceive that if I saw the actions of my organism in this •determinist• light I would attribute them to my 'self'—i.e. to the mind so contemplating—in the way in which I now attribute them. It's not surprising that the theoretical question about the freedom of the will is still answered differently by reputable thinkers; and I don't want to answer it now. But it may be useful for me to show that the ethical importance of answering it is liable to be exaggerated, and that anyone who considers the matter carefully will find this importance to be very limited.

Libertarians are most likely to exaggerate the ethical importance of the free-will question. Some libertarian writers maintain that the conception of the freedom of the will, alien

as it may be to positive [see Glossary] science, is indispensable to ethics and legal theory, because in judging that I 'ought' to do something I imply that I 'can' do it, and similarly in praising or blaming an action of yours I imply that you 'could' have acted otherwise. So some people say this:

If a man's actions are mere links in a chain of causation that ultimately goes back to events that occurred before he was born, he can't really have either merit or demerit; and if he has neither, it's against the common moral sense of mankind to reward or punish—or even to praise or blame—him.

Let us clear the ground by assuming that for present purposes we are confident and agreed about what it is right to do, except for rights or wrongs that arise from the present question. And let us tackle the question of the importance of free-will in relation to moral action *generally*, setting aside the *special* question of its importance in relation to punishing and rewarding; because in punishing and rewarding the focus is not on the present freedom of the agent but the past freedom of the person now being acted on.

As regards action generally, the determinist accepts that a man is morally bound to do x only if doing x is 'in his power', which he explains as meaning that x will be done if the man chooses to do it. I think this is the sense in which the proposition *What I ought to do I can do* is commonly taken; it means 'can do if I choose', not 'can choose to do'. Still the question remains 'Can I *choose to do* x, which in ordinary thought I judge to be right to do?' I hold that within the limits I have explained I inevitably conceive that I can

choose to do x; but I can envisage •regarding this conception as illusory and •judging on the basis of my past record that I certainly won't choose x and therefore that such a choice is not really possible for me. If I do get into that frame of mind, this judgment will cancel or weaken the operation of the moral motive in the case of x, because one or other of these two must happen:

- (i) I don't judge it be reasonable to choose to do x, or
- (ii) I do make that judgment, but I also judge that the conception of duty it involves is just as illusory as the conception of freedom.

I go that far in conceding the libertarian view about the demoralising effect of a really firm belief in determinism. But there are very few cases where, even on determinist principles, I can legitimately conclude that it is certain—not just highly likely—that I will deliberately choose to do something that I judge to be unwise.<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily the legitimate inference from •a man's past experience and •from his general knowledge of human nature would not take him further than a very strong probability that he will choose to do wrong; and a mere strong probability that I shan't will to do right can't be regarded by me in deliberation as a reason for not willing. What it *does* provide a good reason for is willing strongly. . . . [Sidgwick remarks that the question *What is the moral effect of thinking it highly probable that one will not choose to act rightly?* is one that both libertarian and determinist might usefully think about. He concludes:] In all ordinary cases, therefore, it's not relevant to ethical deliberation to find the answer to

<sup>1</sup> When a man yields to temptation, judging that it's 'no use trying to resist', I think he is probably engaging in semi-conscious self-sophistication [see Glossary], due to the influence of appetite or passion on his reasoning. This self-sophistication will probably take a determinist form in the mind of a determinist, but a libertarian is in equal danger of self-sophistication, though in his case it will take a different form. Where a determinist would reason 'I certainly shall take my usual glass of brandy to-night, so there is no use resolving not to take it', the libertarian would reason 'I mean to stop taking brandy, but it will be just as easy to stop tomorrow as today; I will therefore have one more glass, and stop tomorrow.'

'Regarding my sense of being free to choose whatever I may conclude is reasonable—is it metaphysically valid?'

unless the answer, one way or the other, changes my view of *what* it would be reasonable to choose to do if I could so choose.

There shouldn't be any change of view concerning the ultimate **ends** of rational action—the ones that I took (in chapter 1) to be commonly accepted. If •private or general happiness is taken to be the ultimate end of action on a libertarian view, the adoption of determinism provides no reason to reject it; and if •excellence is in itself admirable and desirable, it remains so whether or not any individual's approximation to it is entirely determined by inherited nature and external influences—unless the notion of excellence includes that of free-will, which it doesn't! Free-will is obviously not included in our common ideal of physical and intellectual perfection; and I can't see that it is included, either, in the common notions of the excellences of character that we call 'virtues'. The instances of courage, temperance, and justice don't become less admirable because we can trace their antecedents in a happy balance of inherited dispositions developed by a careful upbringing.<sup>1</sup>

Well, then, can affirming or denying free-will affect our view of the best **means** for attaining either end? That may depend on what our grounds are for that view. **(a)** They may involve a belief that the world has a moral government: according to the usual form of *that*, doing one's duty is the best means to happiness because the world has a moral government through which God will reward virtue and punish vice in an after-life. If •free-will is essential

to the moral government of the world and an after-life for men, that obviously gives it basic ethical importance—not in determining our duty but in reconciling it with our interests. This is the main element of truth in the view that denying free-will is removing motives to doing our duty; and I admit that this is right, to the extent that

**(1)** if we set aside theological considerations, the course of action conducive to our interest diverges from our duty, and

**(2)** free-will is an essential part of the theological reasoning that removes this divergence.

I'll examine **(1)** in II/5. But **(2)** really lies outside the scope of this work.<sup>2</sup>

**(b)** If our belief about the best means to happiness is based on empirical grounds, it seems not to let the issue over free-will into the picture. A man is deliberating on whether to do A; if he does, what will the consequences be? It's not plausible to say that that depends on whether his doing A was pre-determined! But you may say:

In considering how to act, we should take into account the probable future conduct of ourselves and others; and for this we need an answer to the question of free-will, so that we can know whether the future *can* be predicted from the past.

But I can't see that this has any definite practical upshots. However far we go in admitting free-will as a cause that might kick in and falsify the most scientific forecasts of human action, it would be an absolutely unknown cause, so that our recognition of it couldn't lead us to change *what* we predict, though it might reduce our confidence in our predictions.

<sup>1</sup> The ordinary notion of merit *does* become inapplicable. But I can't see that perfection becomes less an end to be aimed at because we stop regarding the attainment of it as meritorious. God's actions aren't thought of as having 'merit', but no-one infers from this that he isn't perfect.

<sup>2</sup> Though an important section of theologians who have had the most intense belief in the moral government of the world have been determinists.

Suppose we were convinced that all the planets have free-will, and are kept in their courses only by the continual exercise of free choice in resistance to strong centrifugal or centripetal forces. Our general confidence in the future of the solar system might reasonably be impaired, though it's hard to say how much; but the details of our astronomical •calculations wouldn't be affected because we couldn't re-do •them so as to take free-will into account. And the situation will be like that in the forecast of human conduct if psychology and sociology ever become exact sciences. At present, however, they are so far from exactness that this additional element of uncertainty—coming from crediting humans with free-will—can hardly have even any emotional effect.

•When we reason to any definite conclusions about how we or others will act, we have to consider such actions as determined by strict laws. If they aren't perfectly strict, our reasoning is to that extent liable to error, but it's not as if we could choose to reason in some other way. •When we are trying to decide (on some basis or other) how it would be reasonable to act right now, determinist conceptions are irrelevant—whereas in the preceding case they were inevitable. Thus, deciding the metaphysical issue about free-will has no practical importance in the general regulation of conduct, unless—moving across from ethics to theology—we base the reconciliation of duty and •self-interest on a theological argument that requires free-will as a premise.

**4.** I have argued that a man's adopting determinism shouldn't affect •his view of what it's right for him to do or •his reasons for doing it (except in certain exceptional circumstances or on certain theological assumptions). But this may be said:

Granting that the reasons for right action aren't altered •by believing in determinism, the motives that prompt to it will be weakened, because a man

won't feel remorse [see Glossary] for his actions if he regards them as necessary results of causes that existed before he did.

The sentiment of remorse implies self-*blame*, so I admit that it must tend to vanish from the mind of a convinced determinist. Still I don't see why a determinist's imagination shouldn't be as vivid as a libertarian's, his sympathy as keen, and his love of goodness as strong; so I don't see why his •dislike for the damaging qualities of his character that have caused him to act badly shouldn't be as effective a source of moral improvement as •remorse would be. Men generally seem to take no more trouble to cure •moral defects than they do to cure equally damaging •defects in their circumstances, their bodies and their intellects that don't cause them remorse.

This brings up the issue of the effect of determinism on the assignment of punishment and reward. For it must be admitted that the common retributive view of punishment—and the ordinary notions of merit, demerit, and responsibility—involve the assumption of free-will. If the wrong act and the bad character shown by it are seen as inevitable effects of causes right outside the agent, he can't be morally responsible (using the ordinary notion of this) for the harm caused by them. But the determinist can give to 'He deserves punishment' and 'He is responsible' etc. meanings that are •clear and definite and from a utilitarian point of view •the only suitable meanings. When they are in play, a determinist can say that someone 'is responsible for' a harmful act •and deserves to be punished for it, meaning that it is right to punish him for it—primarily so that the fear of punishment may prevent him and others from acting like that in future. This view of punishment is in theory very different from the common view; but when in I come in III/5 to examine in detail the current conception of justice

I'll argue that the difference can have hardly any practical effect, because in rewarding services or punishing bad acts it's practically impossible to be guided by any considerations except those embodied in the determinist interpretation of desert [see Glossary]. For instance, the treatment of legal punishment as deterrent and reformatory, rather than retributive, seems to be forced on us by the practical demands of the order and well-being of society, quite apart from any determinist philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as I shall show in III/5.5, if the retributive view of punishment is taken strictly—with no input from the preventive view—it puts our conception of justice into conflict with benevolence because it presents punishment as a purely useless evil. In the sentiments expressed in moral praise and blame there is a difference between the determinist and the libertarian. Where the libertarian seeks to express something about what the person *deserves*, the convinced determinist wants only to encourage good conduct and prevent bad; but I don't see why the determinist's moral sentiments shouldn't promote virtue and social well-being as effectively as the libertarian's.

**5.** *How far does the power of the will actually extend?* The answer to this defines the range within which ethical judgments have a proper place, so it's obviously important for us to know what it is. The question is independent of the free-will question; we can state it in determinist terms thus: *What effects can be caused by human volition if adequate motives are in place?* These effects are mainly of three kinds: **(i)** changes in the external world consequent on muscular contractions; **(ii)** changes in the series of ideas and feelings that constitutes our conscious life; and **(iii)** changes in the tendencies to act in certain ways under

certain circumstances.

**(i)** The most conspicuous work done by volitional causation consists in events that can be produced by muscular contractions. It is sometimes said that what we really will is •the muscular contraction and not •its effects. That is because •the latter involve a contribution from other causes, so that we can never know for sure that •they will follow. But strictly speaking it's not certain that the muscular contraction will follow, because our limb may be paralysed, etc. The *immediate* upshot of the volition is some molecular change in the motor nerves; but when we will to do something we aren't aware of changes in our motor nerves or indeed (usually) of the muscular contractions that follow them; so it seems wrong to speak of either of those as what our mind is aiming at in willing; what we consciously will and intend is almost always some effect that is further along the causal chain than those. Still, some contraction of our muscles is required for almost all effects of our will on the external world; and when that contraction is over, our part in the causation is completed.

**(ii)** We can to some extent control our thoughts and feelings. A good deal of what we commonly call 'control of feeling' belongs in **(i)**: by controlling our muscles we can keep down the expression of a feeling and resist its promptings to action; and—because freely expressing a feeling usually sustains and prolongs it—this muscular control amounts to a power over the emotion. There's no such connection between our muscular system and our thoughts; but experience shows that most men can, to a greater or lesser extent, *voluntarily* direct their thoughts and pursue *at will* a given line of meditation. It seems that in these cases the effort of will produces a concentration of our consciousness on a

<sup>1</sup> Thus we find it necessary to punish •negligence when its effects were very serious, even when we can't trace •it to willful disregard of duty; and to punish rebellion and assassination even if we know that they were prompted by a sincere desire to serve God or to benefit mankind.

part of its content, so that this part grows more vivid and clear while the rest tends to recede into the shadows and eventually to vanish. (This voluntary exertion is often needed only to start a series of ideas which then continues without effort. . . .) By concentrating our minds in this way we can free ourselves of many thoughts and feelings that we don't want to dwell on; but our power to do this is limited, and if a feeling is strong and its cause is persistent we need a very unusual effort of will to banish it in this way.

(iii) Another effect of volition, which deserves special attention, is the alteration in men's tendencies to future action. This is presumably an effect of general resolutions about future conduct, insofar as these have any effects. Even a resolution to do a particular act. . . . must be supposed to produce a change of this kind; it must somehow modify the person's present tendencies to act in a certain way on a foreseen future occasion. But the practical importance of knowing what is within the power of the will mainly concerns *general* resolutions for future conduct. [Sidgwick now devotes a page to refuting this:

The thesis that we have free-will implies that any effort of will we make to amend our future behaviour will be completely effective

—which he says is 'sometimes vaguely thought'. He remarks, among other points, that the free-will thesis should make one less, not more, confident that one's present volition will succeed. The target thesis seems so implausible that we can safely excuse ourselves from following Sidgwick's detailed destruction of it. He goes on to explain why he cares about this:]

I hope that this discussion will dispel any lingering doubts you have concerning my thesis that the free-will controversy has little or no practical importance. You may have had such doubts because you vaguely thought this:

On the determinist theory it is sometimes wrong to perform a single act of virtue because we have no reason to believe we will follow through with it; but on the assumption of freedom we should always boldly do what would be best if it were consistently followed through with, because we are conscious that such consistency is *always* in our power.

But this supposed difference vanishes when we recall that any effort of resolution *now* can produce only a certain limited effect on future actions, and that immediate consciousness can't tell us that this effect will be adequate to the occasion—or indeed how great it will really prove to be. For the most extreme libertarian must then allow that before pledging ourselves to any future course of action we ought to estimate carefully—from our experience of ourselves and of people in general—how likely we are to keep our present resolutions in the circumstances we are likely to be in. Of course we shouldn't peacefully accept any weakness or lack of self-control; but the fact remains that such weakness can't be cured by a single volition; and whatever we can do towards curing it, by any effort of will at any moment, is as clearly enjoined by reason on the determinist theory as it is on the libertarian. Neither theory makes it reasonable for us to •deceive ourselves about the extent of our weakness, or •ignore it in forecasting our own conduct, or •suppose it to be more easily remediable than it really is.

## Chapter 6: Ethical principles and methods

1. The results of the three preceding chapters can be briefly stated as follows. Ethics aims to systematise and free from error the apparent cognitions that most men have of the rightness or reasonableness of conduct, whether the conduct be considered as right •in itself or •as a means to some end commonly regarded as ultimately reasonable.<sup>1</sup> These cognitions are normally accompanied by emotions known as ‘moral sentiments’; but an ethical judgment doesn’t merely affirm the existence of such a sentiment; indeed it’s an *essential* characteristic of a moral feeling that it is bound up with an apparent cognition of something more than mere feeling. I call such cognitions ‘dictates’ or ‘imperatives’ because when they are brought into practical deliberation they are accompanied by a certain impulse to do the acts recognised as right. . . . As long as this impulse is effective in producing right volition, it is not of primary importance for ethical purposes to know exactly what emotional states precede such volitions. And this remains true even if the force actually operating on the person’s will is mere desire for the pleasures that he thinks the right conduct will bring or aversion to the pains that he thinks it will prevent; though in that case his action doesn’t fit our common notion of strictly virtuous conduct, and though there’s no evidence that such desires and aversions are the sole—or even the normal—motives for human volitions. Something else that it’s not generally important to know: whether we are always metaphysically speaking ‘free’ to do what we clearly see to be right. What I ‘ought’ to do, in the strictest use of the

word ‘ought’ is always ‘in my power’, in the sense that there is no obstacle to my doing it except absence of adequate motive; and when I am deliberating what to do, it is usually impossible for me to regard such an absence of motive as a reason for not doing what I otherwise judge to be reasonable.

What do we commonly regard as valid ultimate reasons for acting or abstaining? This, as I said, is the starting-point for the discussions of the present work, which is not primarily concerned with

proving or disproving the validity of any such reasons, but rather with

expounding the different ‘methods’ or rational procedures for determining right conduct in cases where this is logically connected with various widely accepted ultimate reasons.

I showed in chapter 1 that such reasons were supplied by the notions of

- (i) happiness and
- (ii) excellence or perfection (prominently including virtue or moral perfection), and
- (iii) duty,

with (i) and (ii) regarded as ultimate ends, and (iii) prescribed by unconditional rules. This three-part conception of the ultimate reason for conduct corresponds to a three-part way of looking at human existence. We distinguish (ii) the conscious being from the stream of conscious experience, and we distinguish this stream into (iii) acting and (i) feeling. . . . Other reasons have also been widely accepted as ultimate

<sup>1</sup> As I have already said, we could determine right conduct relative to an ultimate end—whether happiness or perfection—without regarding the end as prescribed by reason; all that’s needed is for it to be adopted as ultimate and paramount. But in the present work I confine my attention to ends that are widely accepted as reasonable; and in III/12 I shall try to exhibit the self-evident practical axioms that I think are implied in this acceptance.



grounds of action:

- (a) many religious people think that the highest reason for doing anything is that it's God's will;
- (b) for others 'self-realisation' is the really ultimate end,
- (c) and for others again it's 'life according to nature'.

And it's not hard to see why conceptions like these are thought to provide deeper and more completely satisfying answers to the basic question of ethics than the three I have focused on. It's because they represent what *ought to be* in an apparently simple relation to what *actually is*. The fundamental facts of existence are (a) God, (c) Nature and (b) Self. The knowledge of (a) what will accomplish God's will, (c) what is according to Nature, (b) what will realise the true Self in each of us—these seem to solve the deepest problems of metaphysics as well as of ethics. But just because these notions do combine the ideal with the actual, they properly belong not in ethics as I define it, but in philosophy, the central and supreme study of the relations among all objects of knowledge. Introducing these notions into ethics is liable to create a deep confusion between 'what is' and 'what ought to be', destructive of all clearness in ethical reasoning; and if that confusion is avoided and the strictly ethical import of (a)–(c) is made explicit, they appear always to lead us to one or other of (i)–(iii) .

There's the least danger of confusion over 'God's will', because here the connection between 'what is' and 'what ought to be' is perfectly clear and explicit. We think of the content of God's will as existing now, •as an idea; the end to be aimed at is making it •actual. A question arises: how could God's will fail to be realised [see Glossary]? If it can't fail to be realised, whether we act rightly or wrongly, how can realisation provide the ultimate motive for acting rightly? But this difficulty is for theology to solve, not ethics. The practical question—the one that can't be shunted off to

theology—is this:

Assuming that God's will somehow creates the facts about what we ought to do, how are we to discover *what* he wills in any particular case?

This must be either by (1) revelation or by (2) reason or by (3) both combined. (1) If an external revelation is proposed as the standard, we are obviously carried beyond the range of our present study ·which concerns ethics·. (2) If we try to discover the divine will by reason,. . . the situation is this: we select as being in accordance with the divine will whatever *we* know to be dictated by reason. [To make sure that this is clear: we answer 'Does reason tell us that God wants us to do A?' by answering 'Does reason tell us to do A?'] So it is usually assumed (i) that God desires the happiness of men,. . . or (ii) that he desires their perfection,. . . or (iii) that whatever his *end* may be (into which perhaps we have no right to inquire) his laws are immediately knowable, being in fact the first principles of intuitional morality. Or perhaps it is explained that God's will is to be learned by examining our own constitution or that of the world we are in; so that (a) conformity to God's will seems to come down to (b) self-realisation or (c) life according to nature. In any case, this conception ·of God's will·, however important it may be in supplying new motives for doing what we believe to be right, doesn't suggest any special criterion of rightness unless revelation is brought in.

2. Let us now consider the notions *nature*, *natural* and *conformity to nature*. To get a principle distinct from *self-realisation* (which I'll deal with in chapter 7), we should take it that the *nature* to which we are to conform is not each person's individual nature but human nature generally. . . ., and that we are to find the standard of right conduct in a certain type of human existence that we can somehow abstract from observation of actual human life. Every rational man must of course 'conform to nature' in the

sense of adapting his efforts (whatever goal he is aiming at) to the particular physical and mental conditions of his existence. But if he is to go beyond this and look to 'Nature' for guidance in choosing an ultimate end or paramount standard of right conduct, that must be on the basis either of •strictly theological assumptions or at least •a more or less definite recognition of *design* in the empirically known world. If we find no design in nature, and think of the world's processes as an orderly but aimless drift of change, knowing these processes and their laws may •limit the aims of rational beings but I can't see how it could •determine the ends of their action or be a source of unconditional rules of duty. And those who use *natural* as an ethical notion do commonly suppose that by attending to the actual play of human impulses or the physical constitution or social relations of man we can find principles that completely settle the kind of life man was designed to live. But every such attempt to derive *what ought to be* from *what is* obviously collapses as soon as it is freed from fundamental confusions of thought. If for example we want to get practical guidance from the conception of *human nature* regarded as a system of impulses and dispositions, we must obviously give a special precision to the meaning of 'natural'. Why? Because every impulse is 'natural' in a sense (Butler's point), and there's no guidance for us in this: the question of duty is never raised except when we want to know which of two conflicting impulses we ought to follow. 'The supremacy of reason is natural'—it's no use saying *that*, because we have started by assuming that reason tells us to follow nature, so that our line of thought would become circular—*Nature points to Reason, which points to Nature*. The Nature that we are to follow must be distinguished from our practical reason, if it's to become a guide to it. Then how *can* we distinguish the 'natural impulses' that are to guide rational choice from the

unnatural ones? The friends of *the natural* seem usually to have interpreted 'natural' to mean either

- common* as opposed to the rare and exceptional, or
- original* as opposed to what develops later, or
- not an effect of human volition* as opposed to the artificial.

But I have never seen any basis for the view that nature abhors the exceptional, or prefers the earlier in time to the later; and looking back over human history we find that some admired impulses—e.g. the love of knowledge, enthusiastic philanthropy—are both rarer and later in their appearance than others that all judge to be lower. [Sidgwick goes on to argue that if we take 'natural' to mean 'not produced by the institutions of society', the injunction to follow nature will produce some morally absurd results. And tying 'natural' to the natural processes of our bodies the prescription 'follow nature' will give us very little guidance, because:] almost always the practical question is not •*whether* we are to use our organs or leave them unused but •*how* we are to use them. . . .

A last try: consider man in his social relations as father, son, neighbour, citizen, and try to determine the 'natural rights and obligations attaching to such relations. In this context the concept *natural* presents a problem and not a solution. To an unreflective mind what is customary in social relations usually appears natural; but no reflective person would present 'conformity to custom' as a basic moral principle; so we have to look for guidance in *selecting* the customary obligations that have moral force [and this, Sidgwick says, throws us back onto one of the other guides to basic morality.]

The more modern view of nature regards the organic world as exhibiting. . . .a continuous and gradual process of changing life; and this 'evolution', as the name implies, goes

no merely •from old to new but •from fewer to more of certain definite characteristics. But it would surely be absurd to *infer* that these characteristics are ultimately good and that our whole moral project should be to accelerate the arrival of an inevitable future! . . .

Summing up: I don't think that any definition of *natural* shows this notion to be capable of providing an independent ethical first principle. (•For some concepts, the lack of such a definition is not a defect or drawback; for example• the notion of *beautiful* is indefinable yet clear, because it is derived from a simple unanalysable impression; but no-one maintains that the notion of *natural* is like that.) So I don't see how it could provide a definite practical criterion of the rightness of actions.

**3.** What emerges from that discussion is that the different views about the ultimate reason for doing what is concluded to be right don't all generate different methods of arriving at this conclusion; indeed, almost any method can be linked with almost any ultimate reason through some assumption. That's why it is hard to classify and compare ethical systems: the comparisons go differently depending on whether we go by •method or by •ultimate reason. I am taking difference of •method as the main consideration; and that's why I have treated the view that is the ultimate end as a variety of the intuitionism that fixes right conduct in terms of intuitively known axioms of duty, and have sharply separated •Epicureanism or egoistic hedonism from the •universalistic or Benthamite hedonism to which I propose to restrict the term 'utilitarianism'.

These two methods are commonly treated as closely connected, and it's easy to see why. •They both prescribe actions as means to an end that is distinct from the actions; so that they both lay down rules that are valid only if they conduce to the end. •The ultimate ends in both are the

same in quality, namely pleasure—or strictly the greatest possible surplus of pleasure over pain. •And the conduct recommended by one principle largely coincides with that taught by the other. In a tolerably well-ordered community, intelligent self-interest nearly always leads to the fulfilment of most of one's social duties. And conversely, a universalistic hedonist can reasonably think that his own happiness is the part of the universal happiness that he is best placed to promote, and thus is especially entrusted to his charge. And the practical blending of the two systems is sure to go beyond their theoretical coincidence. It is easier for a man to zigzag between egoistic and universalistic hedonism than to be in practice a consistent follower of either. Few men are so completely selfish that they won't sometimes have a sympathetic impulse to promote the happiness of others, without basing this on any Epicurean calculation. And probably even fewer are so resolutely unselfish that they are never guilty of deciding rather too easily that something that *they* want is for 'the good of everybody'!

Bentham's psychological doctrine that everyone always *does* aim at his own greatest apparent happiness seems to imply that it is useless to show a man the conduct that would conduce to •the general happiness unless you convince him that it would also conduce to •his own. Hence on this view egoistic and universalistic considerations must be combined in any practical treatment of morality; so it was expectable that Bentham or his disciples would try to base the universalistic hedonism that they approve and teach on the egoism that they accept as inevitable. And so we find that Mill does try to connect the psychological and ethical principles that he shares with Bentham, and to convince his readers that because each man naturally seeks his own happiness, *therefore* he ought to seek other people's. I'll discuss this argument in III/13.

But I'm sure that the practical affinity between utilitarianism and intuitionism is really much greater than that between the two forms of hedonism. I'll defend this at length in subsequent chapters. Here I will just say this: many moralists who have •maintained as practically valid the rules that common-sense morality seems intuitively to come up with have nevertheless •regarded general happiness as an end to which those rules are the best means, and have •held that a knowledge of these rules was implanted by nature or revealed by God for the attainment of this end. On this view, though I'm obliged to act in conformity to a rule that is (for me) absolute, the natural or divine *reason for* the rule is utilitarian. This certainly rejects the *method of utilitarianism*, and it doesn't link right action and happiness through any process of reasoning. Without outright rejecting the *utilitarian principle*, it holds that the limitations of the human reason prevent it from properly grasping the real connection between the true principle and the right rules of conduct. But there has always been a considerable recognition by thoughtful people that obedience to the commonly accepted moral rules tends to make human life tranquil and happy. Even moralists, like Whewell, who are most strongly opposed to utilitarianism have been led to stress utilitarian considerations when trying to exhibit the 'necessity' of moral rules. [When a few lines back Sidgwick writes of 'the real connection between the true principle and the right rules of conduct', one would expect him to mean '... the true principle (whatever it is)...', but the rest of the paragraph shows that he expects

to be understood to be referring to the utilitarian principle. It is puzzling that at this stage in the work he should label it as 'true'.]

During the first period of ethical controversy in modern England, after Hobbes's bold assertion of egoism had kicked off an earnest search for a philosophical basis for morality, utilitarianism appears in friendly alliance with intuitionism. When Cumberland declared that 'the common good<sup>1</sup> of all rational beings' is the end to which moral rules are the means, he wasn't trying to supersede the morality of common sense but rather to support it against the dangerous innovations of Hobbes. We find him quoted with approval by Clarke, who is commonly taken to represent an extreme form of intuitionism. And Shaftesbury in introducing the theory of a 'moral sense' never dreamed that it could ever lead us to act in ways that weren't clearly conducive to the good of the whole; and his disciple Hutcheson explicitly identified the promptings of the moral sense with those of benevolence. Butler seems to have been our first influential writer who dwelt on the discrepancies between •virtue as commonly understood and 'conduct most likely to produce a surplus of happiness over pain'.<sup>2</sup> When Hume presented utilitarianism as a way of explaining current morality, it was suspected to have a partly destructive tendency. But it wasn't until the time of Paley and Bentham that utilitarianism was presented as a method for determining conduct—a method that was to overrule all traditional precepts and supersede all existing moral sentiments. And even this final antagonism concerns theory and method rather than

<sup>1</sup> Neither Cumberland nor Shaftesbury uses the noun 'good' in an exclusively hedonistic sense. But Shaftesbury uses it mainly in this sense, and Cumberland's 'good' includes happiness along with perfection.

<sup>2</sup> See the second appendix, 'The Nature of Virtue', to his *Analogy of Religion*. There was a gradual change in Butler's view on this important point. In the first of his *Fifteen Sermons on Human Nature*, published a few years before the *Analogy*, he doesn't notice—any more than Shaftesbury and Hutcheson did—any possible lack of harmony between conscience and benevolence. But a note to the twelfth sermon seems to indicate a stage of transition between the view of the first sermon and the view of the appendix to the *Analogy*. [Each of the Butler passages referred to on this page can be found on the website from which the present text was taken.]

practical results; in the minds of ordinary folk that practical conflict is mainly between •self-interest and •social duty, however that is determined. From a practical point of view, indeed, the principle of aiming at the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’ seems to be more definitely opposed to egoism than the morality of common sense is. The latter seems to leave a man free to pursue his own happiness under certain definite limits and conditions, whereas utilitarianism seems to require that self-interest be *always* subordinate to the common good. And thus, as Mill remarks, utilitarianism is sometimes attacked from diametrically opposite directions: from a confusion with egoistic hedonism it is called base and groveling; while it is also, more plausibly, accused of setting a standard of unselfishness that makes exaggerated demands on human nature.

There’s much more still to be said to clarify the principle and method of utilitarianism, but it seems best to defer that until I come to investigate its details. It will be convenient to take that as the final stage—Book IV—of my examination of

methods. It will simplify things if egoistic hedonism (Book II) is discussed before universalistic hedonism; and we should have the pronouncements of intuitive morality (Book III) in as exact a form as possible before we compare them with the results of the more doubtful and difficult calculations of utilitarian consequences.

I’ll try in the remaining chapters of Book I to remove certain unclarities concerning the general nature and relations of egoism and intuitionism, before examining them more fully in Books II and III.

[The chapter ends with a page-long note defending the attribution to Bentham of the doctrine Sidgwick is calling ‘utilitarianism’. Writings of Bentham’s that weren’t published in his lifetime seem to show him favouring utilitarianism for public morality and egoistic hedonism for private morality, with the two being harmonized by an argument for the thesis—which Sidgwick thinks is wrong—that the best route to private happiness is through working for the happiness of everyone.]

## Chapter 7: Egoism and self-love

1. I have been using the term •‘egoism’ in the usual way, as denoting a system that tells each person to act in pursuit of his own happiness or pleasure. The ruling motive here is usually called •‘self-love’. But each of those terms can be taken in other ways, which we should identify and set aside before going on.

For example, the term ‘egoistic’ is ordinarily and not improperly applied to the basis on which Hobbes tried to

construct morality, and which he regarded as the only firm grounding for the social order, enabling it to escape the storms and convulsions that the vagaries of the unenlightened conscience seemed to threaten it with. But the first of the precepts of rational egoism that Hobbes calls ‘laws of nature’, namely *Seek peace and follow it*, doesn’t focus on the end of egoism as I have defined it—the greatest attainable pleasure for the individual—but rather on ‘**self**-preservation’,

or perhaps on a compromise between the two,<sup>1</sup> as the ultimate end and standard of right conduct.

In Spinoza's view the (egoistic) principle of rational action is, as Hobbes thought, the impulse of **self**-preservation. He holds that everything, including the individual mind, does its best to stay in existence; indeed, this effort is a thing's very essence. It's true that the object of this impulse can't be separated from pleasure or joy, because pleasure or joy is 'a passion in which the soul passes to higher perfection'. But what the impulse primarily aims at is not •pleasure but •the mind's perfection or reality. These days we would call it **self**-realisation, and I now explain why. The highest form of it, according to Spinoza, consists in a clear comprehension of all things in their necessary order as states of the one divine being—which Spinoza calls 'God, i.e. Nature'—and the willing *acceptance of everything* that comes from this comprehension; in this state the mind is purely active, with no trace of passivity; and thus in achieving this state the thing realises its essential nature to the greatest possible degree.

This is the notion of **self**-realisation as defined not only *by* but *for* a philosopher! It would mean something quite different in the case of a man of action whom the reflective German dramatist Schiller (in his play *Wallenstein*) introduces thus:

I cannot,  
Like some hero of big words, like one who babbles  
of virtue,  
Get warmed by my will and my thoughts. . .  
If I no longer *work* I shall be nothing.

Many an artist sees his production of beautiful art as a

realisation of **self**; and moralists of a certain kind down through the centuries have similarly seen the sacrifice of inclination to duty as the highest form of **self**-development, and held that true self-love prompts us always to obey the commands issued by the governing principle—reason or conscience within us—because in such obedience, however painful it is, we'll be realising our truest **self**.

So the term 'egoism', taken as implying only that first principles of conduct refer to **self**, doesn't imply anything about the content of such principles. Except when we're aware of a conflict between two or more of them, *all* our impulses—high and low, sensual and moral—are related to self in such a way that we tend to identify ourselves with each as it arises. So **self** can come to the fore when we are letting *any* impulse have its way; and egoism, considered as merely implying this fact, is common to all principles of action.

Someone might object:

'Properly understood, to "develop" or "realise" one-self is not merely to let one's currently predominant impulse have its way, but to exercise all the different faculties, capacities, and propensities of which our nature is made up, each in its due place and proper degree.'

But what is meant here by 'due proportion and proper degree'? [The switch from 'place' to 'proportion' is Sidgwick's.] **(a)** These terms may imply an ideal that the individual mind has to be trained up to by restraining some of its natural impulses and strengthening others, and developing its higher faculties rather than its lower. **(b)** Or they may merely refer to the combination and proportion of tendencies that the person is born with, the thesis being that he should do

<sup>1</sup> Thus the end for which an individual is supposed to renounce the unlimited rights of the state of nature is said to be 'nothing else but the security of a man's person in this life, and the means of preserving life so as not to be weary of it' (*Leviathan*, chapter 14).

his best to manage the situations he gets into and the functions he chooses to exercise in ways that enable him to 'be himself', 'live his own life', and so on. According to **(a)** rational self-development is just the pursuit of perfection for oneself: while **(b)** seems to present self-development not as an absolute end but rather as a means to happiness. If a man has inherited propensities that clearly tend to his own unhappiness, no-one would recommend him to develop these rather than modifying or subduing them in some way. Is it true that giving free play to one's nature is the best way to seek happiness? I'll address that question when I come to examine hedonism.

The upshot seems to be that the notion of self-realisation is too indefinite for use in a treatise on ethical method. And similarly we must discard a common account of egoism which describes its ultimate end as the 'good' of the individual, because the term 'good' can cover all possible views of the ultimate end of rational conduct. Indeed it may be said that egoism in this sense was assumed in the whole ethical controversy of ancient Greece: it was assumed by everyone that a rational individual<sup>1</sup> would make the pursuit of his own good his supreme aim, and the controversy all concerned the question of whether this good was rightly conceived as pleasure or virtue or some combination of those. [Sidgwick develops this theme at some length, remarking that even Aristotle's view that the desirable end is *Eudaimonia* is open to different interpretations, as is 'happiness', the English word by which *Eudaimonia* usually translated. On this word he remarks:] It seems to be commonly used in Bentham's way, as equivalent to 'pleasure' or rather as

denoting something whose constituents are all pleasures; and that's the sense in which I think it is most convenient to use it. Sometimes in ordinary talk 'happiness' is used to denote a special kind of agreeable consciousness, which is calmer and more indefinite than specific pleasures such as the gratifications of sensual appetite or other sharp and urgent desires. We could call it the feeling that accompanies the normal activity of a 'healthy mind in a healthy body'; specific pleasures seem to be stimulants of it rather than parts of it. Sometimes, though with a more obvious departure from ordinary language, 'happiness' or 'true happiness' is understood in a definitely non-hedonistic sense as referring to something other than any kind of agreeable feeling.<sup>2</sup>

**2.** To be clear, then, I specify that the object of self-love and the goal of egoistic hedonism is

pleasure, in the widest sense of the word—including *every kind* of delight, enjoyment, or satisfaction, except for kinds that are incompatible with some greater pleasures or productive of pain.

That's how self-love seems to be understood by Butler and other English moralists after him—as a desire for one's own pleasure •generally, and for as much of it as possible, whatever its source is. (Butler in the eleventh of his *Fifteen Sermons* writes of 'the cool principle [see Glossary] of self-love or •general desire for our own happiness'.) In fact, the 'authority' and 'reasonableness' attributed to self-love in Butler's system are based on this •generality and comprehensiveness. . . . When conflicting impulses compete for control of the will, our desire for pleasure in general leads us to compare the impulses in terms of the pleasures we think

<sup>1</sup> I'll try later on to explain how it comes about that in modern thought the proposition 'My own good is my only reasonable ultimate end' is not a mere tautology even if we define 'good' as 'what it is ultimately reasonable to aim at'. See chapter 9 and III/13–14.

<sup>2</sup> [Sidgwick adds a note to this, criticising T. H. Green for such a departure, and also Mill, though in Mill's case he thinks it is merely 'looseness of terminology, excusable in a treatise aiming at a popular style'.]

each offers, and to go with the one that offers most—which happens because that impulse is reinforced by our self-love, i.e. our desire for pleasure in general. So self-love is called into play whenever impulses conflict, and this—as Butler argues—involves it in regulating and directing our other springs of action. On this view, self-love makes us merely consider the *amount* of pleasure or satisfaction—as Bentham put it: ‘Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.’

But many people find this offensively paradoxical; and Mill in developing Bentham’s doctrine in *Utilitarianism* chapter 2, thought it desirable to abandon it by bringing in *quality* of pleasure as well as *quantity*—i.e. to allow for better/worse pleasures as well as for greater/lesser ones. Two points to note here: **(i)** It is quite consistent with Bentham’s view to describe some kinds of pleasure as better than others, if by ‘a pleasure’ we mean (as is often meant) a whole state of consciousness that is only partly pleasurable; and still more if we take account of subsequent states. For many pleasures are accompanied by pain and many more have painful consequences. In valuing such an ‘impure pleasure’ (Bentham’s word) we must give a negative value to the pain; so this is a strictly •quantitative basis for saying that such a pleasure is inferior in •kind. **(ii)** We mustn’t confuse intensity of *pleasure* with intensity of *sensation*: a pleasant feeling may be strong and absorbing and yet not as pleasant as another that is more subtle and delicate. Given these two points, I think that to work out consistently the method that takes pleasure as the sole ultimate end of rational conduct we must accept Bentham’s proposition, and regard all •qualitative comparisons of pleasures as really being •quantitative. For all the items called ‘pleasures’ are sup-

posed to have a common property, *pleasantness*, and may be compared in respect of this common property. So if what we are seeking is pleasure as such, and nothing else, it’s obvious that we must always prefer a more pleasant pleasure to a less pleasant one. No other choice seems reasonable unless we are aiming at something besides pleasure. And when we say that one kind of pleasure is better than another—e.g. that the pleasures of mutual love are superior in quality to the pleasures of gratified appetite—we mean that they are more pleasant. We could of course mean something else; we could for instance mean that they are nobler and more elevated, although less pleasant. But then we are clearly introducing a non-hedonistic ground of preference, and that involves a method that is a puzzling mixture of intuitionism and hedonism.

To sum up: If by ‘egoism’ we merely understand a method that aims at self-realisation, it seems to be a form that almost any ethical system can have without changing its essential nature. And even when further defined as egoistic *hedonism*, it is still not clearly distinct from intuitionism if it allows •quality of pleasures to over-rule •quantity. What is left is pure or quantitative egoistic hedonism: this method •is essentially distinct from all the others and •is widely held to be rational; so it seems to deserve a detailed examination. According to it, the only thing a rational agent regards as important in deciding what to do is quantity of consequent pleasure and pain to himself; and he always seeks the greatest attainable surplus of pleasure over pain—which we can appropriately call his ‘greatest happiness’. This view and attitude of mind seems to be what is most commonly meant by the vaguer terms ‘egoism’ and ‘egoistic’; so I shall allow myself to use these terms with this more precise meaning.



## Chapter 8: Intuitionism

1. I have used the term 'intuitional' [see Glossary] to denote the view that the practically ultimate end of moral actions is *conformity to certain rules or dictates*<sup>1</sup> of duty that are *unconditionally prescribed*. But current ethical discussion reveals a considerable ambiguity in the terms 'intuition', 'intuitive' and their cognates, and we must now try to clear it up. Writers who maintain that we have 'intuitive knowledge' of the rightness of actions usually mean that an action is found to be right simply by 'looking at' the action itself without considering its consequences. This can't be meant for the whole range of duty, because there has never been a morality that didn't pay some attention to consequences. Prudence or forethought has commonly been regarded as a virtue; and all modern lists of virtues have included *rational benevolence*, which aims at the happiness of other human beings generally, and therefore has to consider even remote effects of actions. Also, it's hard to draw the line between an act and its consequences, because the effects resulting from each of our volitions form a continuous indefinitely long series, and we seem to be conscious of causing any of these effects that we foresee as probable at the moment of volition. However, in the common notions of different kinds of actions a line is actually drawn between the results included in the notion and regarded as forming part of the act and the results considered as its consequences. Take for example the action-kind *speaking truth*. In speaking truth to a jury I may foresee that in the given situation my words are sure to lead them to a wrong conclusion about the guilt or innocence of the accused, but also sure to give them the right conclusion about the particular matter of fact

that I am testifying about; and we would commonly consider the latter foresight or intention to fix the nature of my act as an act of truth-telling, while the former merely relates to a consequence. So we have to take it that the disregard of consequences that the intuitional view is here taken to imply relates only to certain specific kinds of action (such as truth-speaking) for which common usage settles which events are included in the general notions of the acts and which are merely consequences.

Men can and do judge remote as well as immediate results to be good, and such as we should try to bring about, without bringing in the feelings of sentient beings. I have taken this to be the view of those whose ultimate end is the general perfection—as distinct from the happiness—of human society; and it seems to be the view of many who concentrate their efforts on results such as the promotion of art or of knowledge. Such a view, if explicitly distinguished from hedonism, might properly be labelled as 'intuitional', but in a sense broader than the one defined at the start of this chapter. The point of calling such a view 'intuitional' is that according to it

the results in question—perfection, art, knowledge, whatever—are judged to be good immediately and not by inference from experience of the pleasures that they produce.

So we have to admit a broader use of 'intuition', as meaning 'immediate judgment about to what ought to be done or aimed at'. But these days when writers contrast 'intuitive' or *a priori* with 'inductive' or *a posteriori* morality, there is often a confusion at work:

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'dictates' to include the view that the ultimately valid moral imperatives are conceived as relating to particular acts.

- What the ‘inductive’ moralist claims to know by induction is usually the conduciveness to pleasure of certain kinds of action.
- What the ‘intuitive’ moralist claims to know by intuition is usually their rightness.

So there is no proper opposition. If hedonism claims to give authoritative guidance, it must be through the principle that pleasure is the only reasonable ultimate end of human action; and *this* can't be known by induction from experience. Experience could only tell us is that all men always do, not that they ought to, seek pleasure as their ultimate end (I have already tried to show that in fact it doesn't even show that they *do*). If this latter proposition—that men ought to seek pleasure as their ultimate end—is right as applied to private or general happiness, it must either be immediately known to be true—which makes it a moral intuition—or be inferred from premises including at least one such moral intuition; so either species of hedonism . . . can legitimately be said to be *in a certain sense* ‘intuitional’. But the prevailing opinion of ordinary moral persons, and of most writers who have maintained the existence of moral intuitions, is that certain kinds of actions are unconditionally prescribed without regard to their consequences; so I shall treat that doctrine as what marks off the intuitional method during the main part of my detailed examination of that method in Book III.

**2.** The common antithesis between ‘intuitive’ and ‘inductive’ morality is misleading in another way, because a moralist may •hold that an action can be known to be right without bringing in the pleasure produced by it, while •using a method that can properly called ‘inductive’. For he may hold that, just as the generalisations of physical science rest on particular observations, so in ethics general truths can be reached only by induction from judgments or perceptions

of the rightness or wrongness of particular acts.

That's what Aristotle was talking about when he said that Socrates applied inductive reasoning to ethical questions. Having discovered that men (including himself) used general terms confidently, without being able to explain their meanings, Socrates worked towards the true definition of each term by examining and comparing different instances of its application. Thus the definition of ‘justice’ would be sought by looking for a general proposition that fits all the different actions commonly judged to be just.

In the plain man's view of *conscience* it seems to be often implied that particular judgments are the most trustworthy. ‘Conscience’ is the man-in-the-street's label for the faculty of moral judgment as applied to one's own acts and motives; and we usually think of the dictates of conscience as relating to particular actions. When someone is told in a particular case to ‘trust to his conscience’, what usually seems to be meant is that he should form a moral judgment on this case without relying on general rules, and even in opposition to what follows by deduction from such rules. It's this view of conscience that most easily justifies the contempt often expressed for ‘casuistry’; for if the particular case can be settled by conscience without bringing in general rules, then casuistry (i.e. the application of general rules to particular cases) is at best superfluous. But then on this view we'll have no •practical need for any such general rules. . . . We could of course form general propositions by induction from particular judgments of conscience, and arrange them systematically; but this would have •theoretical interest only. This may explain why some conscientious people are indifferent or hostile to systematic morality: they feel that they at least can do without it; and they fear that the cultivation of it may have an outright bad effect on the proper development of the practically important faculty that

is at work in particular moral judgments.

This view may be called, in a sense, 'ultra-intuitional', because in its most extreme form it recognises nothing but •simple immediate intuitions and sees no need for any kind of •reasoning to moral conclusions. We can see in it **one phase or variety of the intuitional method**, if the term 'method' can be stretch to cover a procedure that is completed in a single judgment.

**3.** Three reasons for not relying only on conscience: •  
**(i)** Probably all moral agents have experience of such particular intuitions, which are a large part of the moral phenomena of most minds; but relatively few people are so thoroughly satisfied with them that they don't feel a practical need for some further moral knowledge. For thoughtful people don't experience these particular intuitions as being beyond question; and when they have sincerely put an ethical question to themselves, they don't always find that their conscience gives them a clear immediate insight into the answer. **(ii)** When a man compares the utterances of his conscience at different times, he often finds it hard to reconcile them; the same conduct will have a different moral look at one time from what it had earlier, although the person's knowledge of its circumstances and conditions hasn't relevantly changed. **(iii)** We find that the moral perceptions—the deliverances of conscience—of different minds frequently conflict, though the minds seem equally competent to judge. These three factors create serious doubts about the validity of each man's •particular moral judgments; and we try to set these doubts at rest by appealing to general rules that are more firmly established on a basis of •common consent.

The view of conscience that I have been discussing is suggested by much untutored talk, but it's not the one that Christian and other moralists have usually given. They have likened the process of conscience to jurat [see Glossary]

reasoning such as what goes on in a court of law. Here we start with a system of universal rules, and a particular action has to be brought under one of them before it can be judged to be lawful or unlawful. Now an individual person can't learn the rules of positive law [see Glossary] by using his reason; this may teach him that law ought to be obeyed, but he has to learn what the law is from some external authority. And this is quite often what happens with the consciences of ordinary folk when some dispute or difficulty forces them to reason: they want to obey the right rules of conduct, but they can't see for themselves what these are, and have to consult their priest, or their sacred books, or perhaps the common opinion of the society they belong to. When that's what happens we can't strictly call their method 'intuitional': they haven't intuitively apprehended the rules they are following. Other people (perhaps *all* to some extent) do seem to see for themselves the truth and bindingness of such current rules. They may use 'common consent' as an argument for the rules' validity, but only as supporting the individual's intuition, not replacing it.

So this is a **second intuitional method**, which assumes that we can discern certain general rules with really clear and finally valid intuition. It involves the following theses:

- General moral rules are implicit in the moral reasoning of ordinary men, who grasp them adequately for most practical purposes and can state them roughly.
- To state them with proper precision requires a special habit of contemplating abstract moral notions clearly and steadily.
- The moralist's job then is to do this abstract contemplation, to arrange the results as systematically as possible, and by proper definitions and explanations to remove vagueness and prevent conflict.

That's the kind of system that seems to be generally intended

when ‘intuitive’ or *a priori* morality is mentioned. It will be my main topic in Book III. [Strictly speaking, III/3–10 will be mainly concerned with trying to establish what common-sense morality is; the attempt to systematise it will come in III/11.]

**4.** Philosophic minds, however, often find the morality of common sense, even when made as precise and orderly as possible, to be unsatisfactory as a system, although they aren’t disposed to question its general authority. They can’t accept as scientific first principles the moral generalities that we reach by reflecting on the ordinary thought of mankind (ourselves included). Even if these rules can be formulated so that they cover the whole field of human conduct, answering every practical question without coming into conflict, still the resulting code looks like a jumble that stands in need of some rational synthesis. Without denying that conduct commonly judged to be right *is* right, we may want some deeper explanation of *why* it is so. This demand gives rise to **a third species or phase of intuitionism**. This accepts the morality of common sense as mainly sound, but tries to give it a philosophic basis that it doesn’t itself offer—to get one or more absolutely and undeniably true principles from which the current rules might be deduced, either just as common sense has them or with slight modifications and rectifications.<sup>1</sup>

Those three phases of intuitionism can be seen as three stages in the formal development of intuitive morality, which we could call

- perceptual,
- dogmatic, and
- philosophical

respectively. I have defined the third of them only in the

vaguest way; in fact, I have presented it only as a problem and we can’t foresee how many solutions of it may be attempted; but before investigating it further—as I shall do in III/13.—I want to examine in detail the morality of common sense.

It must not be thought that these three phases are sharply distinguished in the moral reasoning of ordinary men; but then no more is intuitionism of any sort sharply distinguished from either species of hedonism. The commonest type of moral reasoning is a loose combination or confusion of methods. Probably most moral men believe •that their moral sense or instinct will guide them fairly rightly in any particular case, but also •that there are general rules for determining right action in different kinds of conduct; and •that these in turn can be given a philosophical explanation that deduces them from a smaller number of basic principles. Still for systematic direction of conduct, we require to know on what judgments we are to rely as ultimately valid. [That last sentence is as Sidgwick wrote it.]

I have been focusing on differences in intuitional method due to difference of generality in the intuitive beliefs recognised as ultimately valid. There’s another class of differences arising from different views about the precise quality that is immediately apprehended in the moral intuition; but these are especially subtle and hard to pin down clearly and precisely, so I’ll give them a chapter of their own.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### NOTE

Intuitional moralists haven’t always been careful to make clear whether they regard as ultimately valid •moral judgments on single acts, or •general rules prescribing particular

<sup>1</sup> It may be that such principles are not ‘intuitional’ in the narrower sense that excludes consequences but only in the broader sense as being self-evident principles relating to ‘what ought to be’.

kinds of acts, or •more universal and fundamental principles. For example, Dugald Stewart [1753–1828] calls the immediate operation of the moral faculty ‘perception’; but when he describes what is thus ‘perceived’ he always seems to have in mind general rules.

Still we can pretty well sort out English ethical writers into •those who have confined themselves mainly to defining and organising the morality of common sense and •those who have aimed at a more philosophical treatment of the content of moral intuition. We find that the distinction mainly corresponds to a difference of periods and—perhaps surprisingly—that the more philosophical school is the earlier. We can partly explain this by attending to the doctrines that the intuitional method was opposing in the various periods. In the first period all orthodox moralists were occupied in refuting Hobbism •as presented in *Leviathan* [1651]•. But this system, though based on materialism and egoism, was intended as ethically constructive. Accepting the commonly received rules of social morality, it explained them as the conditions of peaceful existence that enlightened self-interest told each individual to obey, provided that the social order to which he belonged was an *actual* one with a strong government. This certainly makes the theoretical basis of duty seriously unstable; still, assuming a decently good government, Hobbism can claim to explain and establish the morality of common sense, not to undermine it. And therefore, though some of Hobbes’s antagonists (such as Cudworth [1617–88]) settled for simply reaffirming the absoluteness of morality, the more thoughtful ones felt that system must be met by system and explanation by explanation, and that they must penetrate beyond the

dogmas of common sense to some more solid certainty. And so, while Cumberland [1631–1718] found this deeper basis in the notion of ‘the common good of all rational beings’ as an ultimate end, Clarke [1675–1729] tried to exhibit the more basic of the commonly accepted rules as perfectly self-evident axioms that are *forced* on the mind when it contemplates human beings and their relations. But Clarke’s results were not found satisfactory; and the attempt to exhibit morality as a body of scientific truth gradually fell into discredit, and the stress moved over into the **emotional** side of the moral consciousness. But when ethical discussion thus passed over into psychological analysis and classification, the idea of duty as objective, on which the authority of moral sentiment depends, gradually slipped out of sight. For example, we find Hutcheson [1694–1746] asking why the moral sense shouldn’t vary in different human beings, as the palate does; he didn’t dream that there’s any peril to morality in such a view. But when the new doctrine was endorsed by the dreaded name of Hume [1711–76], its dangerous nature was clearly seen, as was the need to bring the **cognitive** element of moral consciousness back into prominence; and this work was undertaken as a part of the general philosophical protest of the Scottish school against the empiricism that had culminated in Hume. But this school claimed as its characteristic merit that it met empiricism on its own ground, and revealed assumptions that the empiricist repudiated among the facts of psychological experience that he claimed to observe. And thus in ethics the Scottish school was led to expound and reaffirm the morality of common sense, rather than offering any deeper principles that couldn’t be so easily supported by an appeal to common experience.

## Chapter 9: Good

1. Up to here I have spoken of the quality of conduct discerned by our moral faculty as ‘rightness’, which is the term commonly used by English moralists. I have regarded this term, and its everyday equivalents, as implying the existence of a dictate or imperative of reason that *prescribes* certain actions—either unconditionally or with reference to some end.

But there’s a possible view of virtuous action in which, though the validity of moral intuitions isn’t disputed, this notion of rule or dictate is at most only latent or implicit, the moral ideal being presented as *attractive* rather than *imperative*. That view seems to be at work when an action or quality of character is judged to be ‘good’ in itself (and not merely as a means to some further good). This was the basic ethical conception in the Greek schools of moral philosophy generally; and that includes even the Stoics, though the prominence their system gives to the conception of *natural law* makes the system a transitional link between ancient and modern ethics. And this historical illustration brings out an important result of substituting *goodness* for *rightness*—which might at first sight seem to be a merely verbal change. What mainly marks off ancient ethical controversy from modern comes from their use of a •generic notion instead of a •specific one in expressing the common moral judgments on actions. Virtue, or right action, was commonly regarded among the Greeks as only a species of the good; and so, on this view of what the basic moral input is, the first question that offered itself when they were trying to systematise conduct, was: What is the relation of this species of good to the rest of the genus? This was the question that the Greek thinkers argued about, from first

to last. To understand their speculations we have to make the effort to throw aside the quasi-jural notions of modern ethics, and ask (as they did) not ‘What is duty and what is its ground?’ but ‘Which of the objects that men think good is truly good or the highest good?’ or, in the more specialised form of the question that the moral intuition introduces, ‘How does the kind of good we call “virtue”—the qualities of conduct and character that men commend and admire—relate to other good things?’

That’s one difference between the two forms of intuitive judgment. The recognition of conduct as *right* involves an authoritative prescription to do it; but when we have judged conduct to be *good* it’s not yet clear that we ought to prefer it to all other good things; we have to find some standard for estimating the relative values of different goods.

So I’m going to examine the notion *good* across the whole range of its application. Because what we want is a standard for comparing the constituents of *ultimate* good, we aren’t directly concerned with anything that is good only as a means to some end. Indeed, if we were considering *only* good-as-a-means, we could plausibly interpret ‘good’ without reference to human desire or choice, as meaning merely ‘fit’ for the production of certain effects—a good horse for riding, a good gun for shooting, etc. But because we apply the notion of *good* also to ultimate ends, we must look for a meaning for it that will cover both applications.

2. Many people maintain that whenever we judge something to be ‘good’ we are implicitly thinking of it as a means to pleasure, even when we don’t explicitly refer to this or any other end. On this view, comparing things in respect of their ‘goodness’ is really comparing them as sources of pleasure;

so that any attempt to systematise our intuitions of goodness, whether in conduct and character or in other things, must reasonably lead us straight to hedonism. And indeed in using 'good' outside the sphere of character and conduct, and not in application to things that are definitely regarded as means to some specific end—'good knife', 'good candle' or the like—our recognition of things as in themselves 'good' is closely correlated with our expectation of pleasure from them. The good things of life are things that give sensual or emotional pleasure—good dinners, wines, poems, pictures, music—and this gives *prima facie* support to the interpretation of 'good' as meaning 'pleasant'. But this isn't clearly supported by common sense. To see this, think about the application of 'good' to the cases most analogous to that of conduct, namely to what we may call 'objects of taste'. Granted that the judgment that something is good of its kind is closely connected with the expectation of pleasure derived from it, but it is usually to a specific *kind* of pleasure; and if the object happens to give us pleasure of a different kind, that doesn't lead us to call it 'good', or anyway not without some qualification. We wouldn't call a wine 'good' solely because it was very wholesome; or call a poem 'good' on account of its moral lessons! So when we consider the meaning of 'good' as applied to conduct, we've been given no reason to suppose that it refers to or corresponds with *all* the pleasures that may result from the conduct. Rather, the perception of goodness or virtue in actions seems to be

like the perception of beauty<sup>1</sup> in material things; which is normally accompanied by a specific pleasure that we call 'aesthetic', but often has no discoverable relation to the general usefulness or agreeableness of the thing discerned to be beautiful; indeed, we often recognise this kind of excellence in things that are hurtful and dangerous.

Another point about aesthetic pleasures and aesthetic goodness: it is generally accepted that some people have more 'good taste' than others, and it's only the judgment of people with good taste that we recognise as valid regarding the real goodness of the things we enjoy. Each person is the final judge of what gives him pleasure; but for something to qualify as *good* it must satisfy some universally valid standard, and we get an approximation to this, we believe, from the judgment of those to whom we attribute good taste. And in this context 'good' clearly doesn't mean 'pleasant'; it conveys an aesthetic *judgment* that •is answerable to some standard and •is just *wrong* if it deviates from that standard. And the person with the best taste isn't always the one who gets the most enjoyment from good and pleasant things. Connoisseurs of wines, pictures, etc. often retain their intellectual ability to appraise and rank-order the objects that they criticise, even when their capacity for getting pleasure from these objects is blunted and exhausted. Indeed, someone whose feelings are full and fresh may get more pleasure from inferior objects than a connoisseur gets from the best.

<sup>1</sup> But we must distinguish the idea of moral goodness from that of beauty as applied to human actions; although they have much in common and have often been identified, especially by the Greek thinkers. In some cases the ideas are indistinguishable, and so are the corresponding pleasurable emotions; a noble action affects us like a scene, a picture, or a strain of music; and the depiction of human virtue is an important part of the artist's means for producing his special effects. But look closer: much good conduct isn't beautiful, or anyway doesn't sensibly impress us as such; and certain kinds of wickedness have a splendour and sublimity of their own. For example, a career such as Cesare Borgia's, as Renan says, is *beau comme une tempête, comme un abîme*—beautiful like a tempest, like the Grand Canyon. It's true that in all such cases the beauty comes from the conduct's exhibiting striking gifts and excellences mingled with the wickedness; but we can't sift out the wickedness without spoiling the aesthetic effect. So I think we have to distinguish the sense of beauty in conduct from the sense of moral goodness.

To sum up: the general admission that things called ‘good’ are productive of pleasure, and that goodness is inseparable in thought from pleasure, doesn’t imply that ordinary estimates of the goodness of conduct are really estimates of the amount of pleasure resulting from it; and there are two reasons for thinking that they aren’t. **(i)** Analogy would lead us to conclude that attributing goodness to conduct, as to objects of taste generally, doesn’t correspond to *all* the pleasure that is caused by the conduct but to some kind of pleasure—specifically the satisfaction a disinterested spectator would get from contemplating the conduct. [This is Sidgwick’s first mention of the ‘disinterested spectator’ (a central figure in Adam Smith’s *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*), and it’s the last except for some sympathetic remarks on page 225. He apparently thinks of the disinterested spectator as relating to the moral evaluation of conduct in the way a connoisseur relates to the aesthetic valuation of music or painting or wine.] **(ii)** And it may not arouse even this specific pleasure in proportion to its goodness, but only (at most) in people who have good moral taste; and even with them we can distinguish •the intellectual apprehension of goodness from •the pleasurable emotion that often accompanies it.

When we pass from the *adjective* to the *noun* ‘good’, we see straight away that the noun can’t be regarded as synonymous with ‘pleasure’ or ‘happiness’ by anyone—e.g. a hedonist—who •maintains that the pleasure or happiness of human beings is their ultimate good persons and who •takes this to be a significant proposition and not a mere tautology. This obviously requires that the two terms have different meanings; and the same presumably holds for the corresponding adjectives.

**3.** Then what *are* we to say about the general meaning of ‘good’? Shall we say with Hobbes and his followers that ‘whatever is the object of any man’s desire is what he calls “good”, and the object of his aversion is what he calls “evil”’? To simplify the discussion I’ll consider only what a man desires

- for itself, and not as a means to some end, and
- for himself, and not benevolently for others.

—i.e. his own good<sup>1</sup> and ultimate good. First, there’s the obvious objection: a man often desires what he knows is bad for him; the pleasure of drinking champagne that is sure to disagree with him, the gratification of revenge when he knows that his true interest lies in reconciliation. The answer is this:

In such cases the desired result is accompanied or followed by other effects which, when they occur, arouse aversion stronger than the original desire. But although these bad effects are *foreseen* they are not *forefelt*; the thought of them doesn’t adequately modify the predominant direction of present desire.

But now focus solely on the desired result, setting aside things that accompany it or follow from it; it *still* seems that what is desired at any time is merely an apparent good that may not be found good when the time comes to enjoy it. It may turn out to be a ‘Dead Sea apple’ [see Glossary], mere dust and ashes in the eating; more often, having it will partly correspond to expectation but fall significantly short of it. And sometimes—even while yielding to the desire—we’re aware of the illusoriness of this expectation of ‘good’ that the desire carries with it. Thus, if we are to conceive of

<sup>1</sup> The common view of *good* seems to imply that sometimes an individual’s sacrifice of his own over-all good would bring about greater good for others. Whether such a sacrifice is ever required, and whether (if it is) it’s truly reasonable for the individual to sacrifice his own over-all good, are among the deepest questions of ethics; and I shall carefully consider them later on (especially in III/14 [page 191]). At present I want only to avoid any prejudgment of these questions in my definition of ‘my own good’.



the elements of ultimate good as capable of quantitative comparison—as we do when we speak of preferring a ‘greater’ good to a ‘lesser’—we can’t identify the object of desire with ‘good’ but only with ‘apparent good’.

Also, a prudent man will do his best to suppress desires for things that he thinks he can’t achieve through his own efforts—fine weather, perfect health, great wealth or fame, etc.—but any reduction in the intensity of such desires has no effect in leading him to judge the desired objects as less ‘good.’

If we are to interpret *good* in terms of *desire*, therefore, we must identify it not with what is *desired* but with what is *desirable*. And in this context ‘x is desirable for person y’ doesn’t mean ‘y ought to desire x’ but rather

‘y *would* desire x if he thought he could achieve it by his own efforts and if he had perfect foresight and forefeeling into what it would be like to achieve it’.

But that is still not right as an account of ‘x is over-all good, or good on the whole, for y’; because even if what is chosen turns out to be just how it was imagined when it was desired, it may be over-all bad because of what accompanies or results from it. So we have to vary the formula displayed above by somehow limiting our view to desires that affect conduct by leading to volitions; because I might regard something as desirable while judging it to be on the whole imprudent to aim at it. But even with this limitation, the relation of my ‘good on the whole’ to my desire is very complicated. It isn’t right to say that my good on the whole is

what I would actually desire and seek if at that time I knew in advance and adequately imagined in advance what it would be like to have it.

If we are rational, our concern for a moment of our conscious experience won’t be affected by the moment’s position in time;

·so when a man is wondering whether to do x, thoughts and feelings that he expects to have later on should be given their due weight, and not discounted because they are off in the future·. But the mere fact that a man doesn’t afterwards feel for the consequences of an action a strong enough aversion to make him regret it doesn’t prove for sure that he has acted for his ‘good on the whole’. Indeed, we often count it among the worst consequences of some kinds of conduct that they alter men’s desires, making them prefer their lesser good to their greater; and we think it all the *worse* for a man. . . .if he is never roused out of such a condition and lives the life of a contented pig, when he could have been something better. So we have to say that a man’s future *good on the whole* is **what he would now desire and seek on the whole, if all the consequences of all the different lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately forefelt, i.e. realised in imagination at the present point of time.**

This is such an elaborate and complex conception that it’s hardly believable that this is what we commonly *mean* when we talk of what is ‘good on the whole’ for someone. Still, this **hypothetical object of a resultant desire** provides an intelligible and admissible interpretation of the terms ‘good’ (noun) and ‘desirable’, as giving philosophical precision to the vaguer meaning they have in ordinary discourse; and it would seem that a calm comprehensive desire for ‘good’ conceived somewhat in this way, though more vaguely, is normally produced by intellectual comparison and experience in a thoughtful mind. This notion of *good* has an ideal element; it’s something that isn’t always actually desired and aimed at by human beings; but the ideal element is entirely interpretable in terms of actual or hypothetical *fact*, and doesn’t introduce any value-judgment, let alone any ‘dictate of reason’.

But it seems to me more in accordance with common sense to recognise as Butler does that the calm desire for my 'good on the whole' is *authoritative*, carrying with it implicitly a rational dictate or instruction to aim at this end if a conflicting desire is urging the will in an opposite direction. Still we can keep the notion of 'dictate' or 'imperative' merely implicit and latent (as it seems to be in ordinary thoughts about 'my good' and its opposite) by interpreting '**ultimate good on the whole for me**' to mean

what I would practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason, assuming my own existence alone to be considered.

On this view, '**ultimate good on the whole**' with no reference to any particular subject ('me') must be taken to mean

what as a rational being I would desire and try to bring about, assuming myself to have an equal concern for all existence.

When conduct is judged to be 'good' or 'desirable' in itself, independently of its consequences, I think that this latter point of view is being taken. Such a judgment differs from the judgment that conduct is 'right' because it doesn't involve a definite order to perform it, since it leaves open the question of whether this particular kind of good is the greatest good we can obtain under the circumstances. And there's another difference: calling an action 'good' or 'excellent' doesn't imply that it is in one's power. . . .in the same strict sense as calling it 'right' does; and in fact there are many excellences of behaviour that we can't achieve by any effort of will, at

least directly and at the moment. That's why we often feel that recognising goodness in someone else's conduct doesn't involve a clear precept to do likewise, but rather 'the vague desire that stirs an imitative will' [quoted from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*]; and why goodness of conduct becomes a distant end that is beyond the reach of immediate volition.

**4.** A final question: When conduct or character is intuitively judged to be good in itself,<sup>1</sup> how are we to compare this value with the value of other good things? I shan't now try to establish a standard for such comparisons; but we can limit considerably the range of comparison for which it is required. That's because when we judge something x to be good, where x isn't a quality of human beings, it always turns out that x's goodness has some relation to •human existence or at least to •some consciousness or feeling.<sup>2</sup>

For example, we often judge some inanimate objects—river-banks, hillsides, etc.—to be good because beautiful, and others bad because ugly; but no-one would think it made sense to aim at the production of beauty in external nature apart from any possible human experience of it. When beauty is said to be 'objective', what is meant is not that it exists as beauty out of relation to any mind, but only that there's some standard of beauty that is valid for all minds.

[Sidgwick remarks that a man might try to make beautiful things without having any thought of who if anyone might enjoy them, or pursue knowledge without caring about who is to possess it. He continues:] Still, I think it will be generally

<sup>1</sup> Character is only known to us through its manifestation in conduct; and I don't think that in our common recognition of virtue as having value in itself we distinguish character from conduct. Is character to be valued for the sake of the conduct that expresses it, or is conduct to be valued for the sake of the character that it exhibits? We don't ordinarily give any thought to this question. In III/2.2 and III/14.1 I'll consider how it should be answered.

<sup>2</sup> There's a point of view. . . .from which the whole universe and not merely a certain condition of sentient beings is seen as 'very good'. . . . But such a view can scarcely be developed into a method of ethics. For practical purposes we need to see some parts of the universe as less good than they might be; and we have no basis for saying this of any portion of the non-sentient universe considered in itself and not in relation to sentient beings.

held that beauty, knowledge, and other ideal goods—as well as all external material things—are reasonably to be sought by men only if they conduce either **(1)** to happiness or **(2)** to the perfection or excellence of human existence. I say ‘human’ because although most utilitarians consider the pleasure (and freedom from pain) of the lower animals to be included in the happiness that they take to be the proper end of conduct, no-one seems to contend that we ought to aim at perfecting brutes, except as a means to our ends or at least as objects of scientific or aesthetic contemplation for us. Nor can we include as a practical end the existence of beings above the human. We certainly apply the idea of *good* to God, just as we do to His work; and when it is said that ‘we should do all things to the glory of God’, this may seem to imply that God’s existence is made better by our glorifying Him. But this inference appears somewhat

impious, and theologians generally recoil from it, and don’t base any human duty on the notion of a possible addition to the goodness of the Divine Existence. As for the influence of our actions on other extra-human intelligences, this can’t at present be a topic of scientific discussion.

So I am confident in saying that if there is any good other than happiness to be sought by man as an ultimate practical end, it can only be the goodness, perfection, or excellence of human existence.

- What does this notion include in addition to virtue?
- What is its precise relation to pleasure?
- If we accept it as fundamental, what method of ethics will that logically lead us to?

It will be more convenient to discuss these questions after our detailed examination of these two other notions, pleasure (Book II) and virtue (Book III).