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# Some problems encountered in Sidgwick's utilitarianism.

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SOME PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED  
IN SIDGWICK'S UTILITARIANISM

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SOME PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED  
IN SIDGWICK'S UTILITARIANISM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I	INTRODUCTION
SECTION 1.	Purpose of the thesis; definitions of utilitarianism . . . . . 1
2.	Procedure of the thesis . . . . . 3
3.	Two aspects of any reduction . . . . . 4
4.	Different views about the components of morality . . . . . 5
5.	Different definitions of morality . . . . . 10
6.	The definition of morality appropriate to utilitarianism--its anticipated <u>logical</u> difficulties . . . . . 16
CHAPTER II	HEDONISM PRIOR TO BENTHAM
SECTION 1.	Ancient hedonism--egoistic . . . . . 22
2.	Early modern hedonism--egoistic and rule utilitarianism . . . . . 24
CHAPTER III	SIDGWICK'S UTILITARIAN BACKGROUND
SECTION 1.	Points of inquiry . . . . . 27
2.	Bentham's broad definition of utilitarianism. . . . . 28
3.	Bentham's proof of validity--psychological hedonism . . . . . 30
4.	Bentham's negative proof--disagreements about duties . . . . . 34
5.	Bentham on workability--direct measurement of pleasure. . . . . 36
6.	Mill's definition of utilitarianism . . . . . 37
7.	Mill's proofs of validity--psychological hedonism, ambiguity in "desirable" . . . . . 38
8.	Mill's negative proof--similar to Bentham's . . . . . 42
9.	Mill on workability--generally similar to Bentham. . . . . 45
10.	Spencer's utilitarianism. . . . . 47
11.	Sidgwick's points of departure from his predecessors . . . . . 49
CHAPTER IV	SIDGWICK'S PROOF OF UTILITARIANISM -- NEGATIVE ASPECTS
SECTION 1.	Two purposes of Sidgwick's ethical thought. . . . . 51
2.	The organization of <u>The Methods of Ethics</u> . . . . . 54
3.	Basis for the organization of the <u>Methods</u> . . . . . 57
4.	The refutation of interest ethics . . . . . 62
5.	The refutation of empirical psychological hedonism . . . . . 64
6.	The denial that psychological hedonism, even if true, could prove utilitarianism. . . . . 68
7.	Some criticisms Sidgwick missed . . . . . 70

CHAPTER V THE VALIDITY OF UTILITARIANISM

SECTION 1. The need to distinguish between a wider and narrower intuitionism. . . . . 71

2. The uncertainty of the narrower intuitionism. . . . . 74

3. The certainty of the wider intuitionism . . . . . 79

4. The maxim of Justice . . . . . 80

5. The maxim of Prudence . . . . . 81

6. The maxim of Benevolence . . . . . 82

7. Derivation of the three methods from the maxims, and their reduction to two--egoism and utilitarianism . . . . . 83

8. Sidgwick's concept of the good. . . . . 85

9. Negative proof that the good is pleasure. . . . . 86

10. Positive intuition that the good is pleasure--completion of the proof for egoism and utilitarianism . . . . . 89

11. Two functions of Sidgwick's wider intuitions. . . . . 90

12. The inability to reduce egoism to utilitarianism . . . . . 91

CHAPTER VI THE WORKABILITY OF UTILITARIANISM

SECTION 1. Nature, and location in the Methods, of Sidgwick's arguments . . . . . 93

2. Sidgwick's definition of pleasure . . . . . 95

3. Difficulties in direct measurement of pleasure . . . . . 97

4. Variations of direct measurement--their difficulties . . . . . 103

5. Proof that rules of duty are implicitly, but imperfectly, utilitarian . . . . . 104

6. Difficulties in revising the rules for closer fit. . . . . 109

7. Difficulties in modification of the rules . . . . . 111

8. Difficulties in enforcement of the rules. . . . . 112

9. The tenuous workability of utilitarianism . . . . . 114

CHAPTER VII SOME LOGICAL PROBLEMS OF SIDGWICK'S PROOF

SECTION 1. Purpose of the chapter. . . . . 115

2. Logical problems reflected in those which Sidgwick encounters. . . . . 116

3. The logical problems shown to be altered forms of problems of the agathistic good . . . . . 123

4. The adequacy of Sidgwick's solutions as solutions to the problems of the agathistic good. . . . . 127

5. The significance and cogency of Sidgwick's wider intuitions . . . . . 131

6. Summary and conclusions . . . . . 139

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 140

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . . 142

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

SECTION 1. The purpose of this thesis is to bring to light the problems encountered by Henry Sidgwick in his attempt to base morality<sup>1</sup> on the so-called utilitarian principle. According to utilitarianism, the only moral principle is that one ought to strive for the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.<sup>2</sup> Although happiness can be defined more broadly, the utilitarians define it as pleasure alone.

Henry Sidgwick (1838 - 1900) is generally recognized as the last of a line of English thinkers to develop primarily this utilitarian position. A study of Sidgwick's thought is especially useful for gaining an understanding of the problems of utilitarianism. It is so not only because of his chronological position

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1. I shall use the terms "morality" and "ethics" as synonyms throughout this thesis.

2. There is an ethical theory which is somewhat similar to this but which substitutes the word "good" for the word "happiness". This theory is called ideal utilitarianism and its most prominent exponent was G. E. Moore. According to this theory many other things as well as happiness should be maximized.

but also because part of the reason for his occupying this position is that he so clearly recognized these problems. Indeed, at least one critic states that Sidgwick's attempt to solve its problems almost carried him beyond utilitarianism altogether.<sup>3</sup>

Utilitarianism, and Sidgwick as its last exponent, are often understood as representing part of a more general form of ethical philosophy known as hedonism. According to hedonism, the only moral principle is that one ought to strive for:

- a. the greatest pleasure of the agent, or
- b. the greatest pleasure of the greatest number of people.

When the principle is stated in terms of the first alternative it is called egoistic, or sometimes individualistic, hedonism. Members of the ancient Greek schools of Epicureanism and Cyrenaicism, as well as modern thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, maintained a hedonism of this sort. The second alternative, which I have referred to as utilitarianism, is sometimes called universalistic hedonism by Sidgwick. The principle exponents of utilitarianism, prior to Sidgwick, were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Hedonistic utilitarianism occurs in two forms. The difference between the two regards not the goal of utilitarianism but the way in which this goal is achieved. According to the form maintained by Bentham and Mill, which was in general an historically later form, the greatest happiness (i.e. pleasure) of the greatest number

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3. Albee, A History of English Utilitarianism, p. 368.

is achieved directly. By making a comparative measurement of the pleasure resulting from different possible courses of action, one chooses that action which will maximize the general pleasure. This form is more commonly associated with the name "utilitarianism".

The position of the earlier utilitarianism was that one should obey unconditional rules of duty which, however, were such that unquestioned obedience to them would itself achieve the utilitarian end. Although Sidgwick is, chronologically, the last of the hedonistic utilitarians, he seems to favor the earlier over the later form.

SECTION 2. I begin my study with two chapters on Sidgwick's hedonistic background. In Chapter II, I point out some of the problems of egoistic hedonism which, as it happens, developed earlier than either form of utilitarianism. This survey also functions as a brief historical review of all hedonistic theories prior to Bentham. I only note here the earlier form of utilitarianism. Since Sidgwick carefully discusses the problems of this form, these problems will be more thoroughly considered in Chapter VI. Chapter II also reveals, especially in the arguments of Butler and Hume, reasons for developing utilitarianism as an alternative to egoistic hedonism.

In Chapter III, I present the later form of utilitarianism, propounded by Bentham and Mill, indicating what they understood morality to be and how they reduced it to utilitarianism. My



reason for considering this later form more thoroughly than the earlier one is twofold. Firstly, the proponents of the later form were Sidgwick's immediate predecessors and his criticism of their positions was the point of departure for his own theory. Secondly, Sidgwick himself presents a rather thorough defense of the earlier form.

I proceed, in Chapter IV, to expose the problems which Sidgwick found in the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, particularly with regard to what they accepted as proof of their theories. Then, in Chapter V and Chapter VI, I present Sidgwick's own attempt to reestablish utilitarianism on a firmer foundation. The problems which he encountered, in so doing, were only partially recognized by him. In Chapter VI are indicated the problems he encountered, and generally recognized in trying to make utilitarianism work. In Chapter VII, I discuss problems of his utilitarianism which he failed to recognize and which lay hidden until exposed by his critics.

SECTION 3. One may attempt to reduce morality to a single principle either by discrediting all other principles or by positively establishing one's own. Sidgwick and his predecessors use both techniques and both, indeed, are necessary unless one assumes that there must be one and only one valid moral principle. It is plausible however that there may be none at all or that there may be several. If there are none at all, it is not sufficient to discredit other principles. If there are several, it is not

sufficient to positively establish one's own.

The two techniques are designated in this thesis as positive and negative aspects of the "proof" of utilitarianism. By proof I merely mean whatever arguments a thinker advances in order to reduce morality to this principle. The positive aspect of proof may conveniently be divided into proof of the validity and proof of the workability of utilitarianism.

The distinction between positive and negative aspects of proof is one distinction by which the content of the thesis is organized. For the discussion of Bentham and Mill, these different aspects of proof are considered in different sections of Chapter III. Chapter IV presents the negative aspect of Sidgwick's proof. Chapter V concerns his positive proof for the validity of utilitarianism and Chapter VI, his positive proof for the workability of it.

SECTION 4. The problems of Sidgwick's utilitarianism, which it is my purpose to expose, are not in every case unique to utilitarianism. Many of them are related to more general moral issues as well. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to defining these issues and certain associated concepts, since an early definition of them is needed for clarity and perspective.

One great issue concerns whether there is a distinction between the definition of morality and the actual principles which are moral. At first glance it appears that there must be such a distinction. Take, for example, the proposition with which

Sidgwick is concerned, that "only utilitarianism is moral". If this proposition is to have any meaning, there must be a definition of morality which is distinct from utilitarianism. For if one defines morality as utilitarianism, then Sidgwick's proposition would be simply that "only utilitarianism is utilitarianism" and this is a mere tautology.

Actually, the issue concerning whether the definition of morality is distinct from moral principles is not so easily answered, but relates to another issue concerning what the definition would be if it was considered distinct.

If the definition is considered distinct from the principles then a further distinction within the definition may be made. For though all ethical philosophers would probably agree that morality is, roughly, a sort of standard, they would strongly disagree on:

- a. the source of the standard and
- b. that to which the standard applies.

Thus it appears that there is a distinction, within the definition of morality, between the source and the object of the moral standard. I shall here examine these different views as to the source and object of morality.

The source of the moral standard may be inside or outside of the moral agent. Some philosophers claim that the source is outside--that it is a value independent of the one who holds it. According to these thinkers whether or not one wants to, say, tell the truth is completely irrelevant to its morality. Truth telling

remains something which you ought to do in either case. It is a "duty".

Now, if a man's morality is to be judged by standards independent of what he wants, it can be so judged only if he is free to choose or not choose these standards. Yet it is precisely this free will that an external standard of morality seems to deny. Duty is defined as something a person does, not because he wants to but because it is his duty. But why does this person do the duty which is to do his duty? Is that also his duty? This sort of answer would apparently lead to an infinite regress in which a person would never freely choose to do his duty. Duty would simply be an external force which determined his choices.<sup>4</sup>

A second group of philosophers hold that the source of the moral standard is inside the agent. It is merely whatever he wants to do--his interest.<sup>5</sup> This view, however, seems to reduce moral propositions to tautologies. If morality is defined as whatever one wants to do, then the only way to know what principles are moral is to determine what one wants to do. Thus what one wants to do is moral (i.e. what one wants to do). According

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4. David Hume presented an argument similar to this one but since he held that all actions were predetermined anyway, he was not concerned with the possibility that duty could propel one regardless of his wishes. He was satisfied to note the infinite regress, as a ground for holding that the source of the moral standard was interest. (He used the term utility.) See Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book III, Part II, Section I; also Jones, A History of Western Philosophy, Vol. II, p.854.

5. The terms "interest" and "desire" are used throughout this thesis as virtual synonyms except for their different grammatical status.

to this view there is no need for a distinction between definitions and principles of morality in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

So much then for two opposing positions on the source of the moral standards, and some problems of these positions. There are also opposing positions regarding the object. The object may be an act, the intention of an act, or the consequences of an act. For the purpose of this thesis, I shall not discuss the distinction between an act and its intention. I shall merely consider what seems to me the broader distinction between both an act and its intention on the one hand and the consequences of an act on the other.

According to the view that the object of the moral standard is consequences, a lie, for example, is not wrong in itself but only when it does not produce the results that:

- a. the agent ought to strive for or
- b. the agent wants.

An objection to the object as consequences is that the consequences are impossible to measure because they are infinite.<sup>7</sup> One never knows whether or not, on balance, an act will produce the proper or

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6. This criticism also applies to those who define morality as whatever a person does in fact do. G. E. Moore, criticizes both the definition of morality as what a person wants to do, and the definition as what he does do. His criticism embodies substantially the argument presented here. See Principia Ethica, Chapter I, Section 13, (2). Sidgwick uses a related argument in his Methods of Ethics. See Chapter IV, Section 4 of this thesis.

7. Although Sidgwick believes in the importance of considering consequences, he himself recognizes this difficulty.

desired result.

When an act or the intention of an act is considered to be the object of morality then that aforementioned lie or the intention to lie would be considered wrong or right in itself. In discussing this viewpoint, I shall use the term act in reference to either the act or the intention.

An act cannot be the object of the moral standard until the act is defined. For it is not obvious at what point the act ends and the consequences begin.<sup>8</sup> There are two alternative procedures for defining the act. One alternative is to define it in accord with one's own or someone else's interest. The second alternative is to define it independently of anyone's interest.

For example, murder is commonly defined in such a way as to include, primarily, commissions and not omissions. Thus to fatally shoot someone is murder but to choose, in a world of limited resources, to preserve yourself by letting others starve to death is not. Some would say this definition was divinely given and independent of all personal interest. Others would insist that it was based on nothing but the self interest of the ascendent person.

Regardless of what the source of morality is presumed to be,

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8. Sidgwick notes that "... it is difficult to draw the line between an act and its consequences..." A person may, by telling truth to a jury, knowingly lead them to a false conclusion concerning the accused. Disregard of consequences is only possible "... where common usage of terms adequately defines what events are to be included in the general notions of the acts, and what regarded as their consequences." See The Methods of Ethics, pp. 96-97.

if the moral standard is applied to acts defined according to interest then morality as a whole is obviously reduced to interest. Furthermore, where the act is defined independent of interest but the source of morality is interest then again morality as a whole is mere interest. Only where both the act and the source are independent of interest is an interest ethics avoided.

The problems of making an act the object of morality will be, because of their peculiar character, more easily discussed in the following section.

SECTION 5. The discussion of general moral issues has now been completed. It is already evident that there are objections to both views of the source of the moral standard and to one of the views of the object of it. Nevertheless, it is necessary in formulating a definition of morality to accept one of the views of each of these elements.

There are three different definitions of morality that are frequently recognized--the "right", the "good", and "interest".<sup>9</sup> Each of these comprises one of the two views of the source of morality and one regarding the object of it.

Morality defined as the right comprises the source as duty and the object as that sort of act which is defined without reference to interest. A lie, according to this definition, is wrong regardless of whether or not one wants to lie, and regardless of consequences.

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9. Interest ethics is also sometimes referred to as "naturalism".

Morality defined as interest comprises, in effect, the source as interest and the object as an act defined in any way at all.

(Actually this definition would also include that circumstance in which the source is duty but the object is an act defined by interest.) According to interest a lie is wrong only if:

- a. it isn't what you want to do or
- b. it isn't defined as you would like or
- c. both.

A principal difficulty with both of these definitions is, oddly enough, that they are too consistent internally. Morality as the right denies interest altogether and morality as interest, in effect, denies the right altogether.

Now suppose that you should succeed in showing that the definition of morality which is really valid is not interest but the right. It would appear that your success was at the same time its own defeat since a morality based entirely on duty seems to deny the free will which such a morality presupposes. (See pg. 7)

The same paradoxical success seems to occur if you prove that the really valid definition is not the right but interest. For a definition of morality based entirely on interest ceases to be a definition at all and becomes a mere tautology. (See pg. 7)

This internal consistency, which rigorously holds these two definitions to their particular problems, may be called the distinctive problem which arises from defining the object of morality as an act. In each case the proposition is its own contradiction and thus the more firmly it is asserted, the more firmly it seems



to be denied.

In contrast to these two internally consistent definitions is the definition of morality as the good. This definition is not internally consistent.

There are two ways in which morality can be defined as the good--the hedonistic and the agathistic. According to the good generally, a lie is neither moral nor immoral in itself. Whether or not it becomes so depends upon the results it produces--its consequences. The specifically hedonistic form of the good is that an act (here the lie) is moral if it results in pleasure but otherwise it is not. The agathistic form of the good is that a lie is moral if it has some other specified result such as wisdom or beauty.

Both forms of the good are based on belief that the object of morality is consequences. There is, however, a difference between them in terms of the source. For the agathistic good, the source of morality is an independent value--a duty. Thus if wisdom is what you ought to get (independent of your desire for it) then a lie which helps you to get it is moral.

The agathistic good is, in terms of its source, similar to the right. But while the right avoids interest altogether, the agathistic good does not. What is ultimately good is, it is true, determined independently of interest. On the other hand, the fact that it is pursued means that there must be a sort of interest in it. Writers who hold this view maintain that the value makes itself

interesting. Plato and Aristotle, for example, both thought that mere recognition of the good would lead you to pursue it.

There is, however, a serious difficulty with the agathistic good. If the value is interesting, it is so because the moral agent already has the required interest. For example, one could not inculcate the principle of fairness in a child by associating it with, say, self respect unless the child wanted self respect. But this interest which makes an individual receptive to the appeal of the value must itself be created by an independent value. Otherwise, one will have not an agathistic good but an interest ethics. Now if this interest is created by a value, then there must be a further interest. It seems apparent that the definition of morality as the agathistic good leads to infinite regress or else results in interest ethics.

One can attempt to resolve this problem of the agathistic good in another way by claiming (as in fact Sidgwick does) that the duty itself gives an "impulse" to action without any need for interest per se. This argument, however, seems to transform the agathistic good back into its analogue--the right. In that case it faces the usual criticism of the right that there seems to be no free will.

For the hedonistic good the source of morality is interest. If wisdom is what you want to get, for example, then a lie which helps you to get it is moral.

The hedonistic good is, in terms of its source, similar to interest ethics. Their different objects are reflected in two different definitions of pleasure which are frequently employed.

According to one definition, pleasure means interest per se--  
what you want. When an interest ethics is called hedonistic  
(which it sometimes is) this is the definition being used. The  
second definition of pleasure is that it is the satisfaction of  
what you want. This definition applies to the hedonistic good  
and is, perhaps, the more commonly employed one.

While interest avoids any independent value whatsoever, the  
hedonistic good does not. According to hedonism, although inter-  
est ultimately determines the end, this end is in a sense inde-  
pendent. Writers who hold this view maintain that interest makes  
the satisfaction of itself an independent value. Thus what you  
are interested in, and therefore pursue, is not some specific entity  
itself such as wisdom or beauty, but rather the satisfaction of in-  
terest in such wisdom or beauty. As will be shown, Mill and Bentham  
maintain this position.

The hedonistic good seems to encounter as serious a difficulty  
as does the agathistic good. If the moral agent creates a value  
out of the satisfaction of his interest, then he must have an inter-  
est in this value different from the interest which is a constituent  
of the value. For example, suppose that one has a desire for wisdom.  
If the satisfaction of the desire for wisdom consequently becomes  
a "good", then there must be a desire for this good, in other words  
a "higher" desire for the satisfaction of the initial desire. This  
higher desire, or interest, must also become a value--the satis-  
faction of the higher desire. Otherwise, at the level of the higher  
desire, which is fundamental, one would have not a hedonistic good

but an interest ethics. If the higher desire makes its own satisfaction a value as well, then there must be an even higher desire for this value. In other words if the desire for the satisfaction of the desire for wisdom is, in itself, good, then there must be a desire for the satisfaction of the desire for the satisfaction of the desire for wisdom. It seems apparent that the hedonistic good, like the agathistic, leads to infinite regress.

One can attempt to resolve this problem in another way by claiming (as Mill and Bentham do) that the value is a "first principle", but is not thereby independent of interest. Unless one believes that a mere process of labelling can solve problems, however, it seems that this argument simply transforms the hedonistic good back into its analogue--interest ethics. In that case it faces the usual criticism that moral propositions are reduced to tautologies.

Having discussed some of the problems which arise from the internal inconsistency of morality when it is defined as the good, I now want to indicate what seems to be its unique advantage. Suppose one should succeed in establishing the validity of the hedonistic as opposed to the agathistic good. One would not thereby have automatically defeated oneself as seems to be the case in an attempt to establish the right or interest. For neither form of the good is self contradictory. This does not mean, however, that the moral agent is necessarily better off with morality defined as a form of the good than he would be if it were defined as the right or interest. In the case of either form of good there is an additional problem which has already been mentioned in the previous section.

Morality as the good measures the consequences of an act (rather than the act itself) but the consequences are infinite and therefore impossible to measure. Faced with this fact, one has two choices. One can postulate an infinite moral code but this will convert an ethics of good into a straightforward ethics of right. If, however, one doesn't do this, he will be left to interpret the morality of an act only in terms of interest. This alternative converts the ethics of good into an ethics of interest.

SECTION 6. One may now say that altogether there are four different ways of defining morality, each of which seems to have serious logical difficulties. When a philosopher attempts to reduce morality to some one principle he will inevitably encounter these difficulties either directly or indirectly. He may also encounter empirical difficulties--difficulties resulting from the fact that moral action must occur within the limitations of time and space. Actually these so-called empirical difficulties raise other logical difficulties, particularly in connection with the question as to whether time and space are dimensions within which moral action occurs or attributes of the moral agent himself. Consideration of these other logical difficulties will have to be omitted in a limited thesis of this sort, resulting in a necessarily oversimplified treatment of the empirical difficulties.

In addition to the difficulties involved in defining morality, one might also expect to find difficulties in establishing, within

any particular definition, those actual principles which are moral. Sidgwick does seem to conceive of his function as involving both steps. It should be noted, however, that the difficulties involved in establishing specific principles, seem often to be a reflection of the difficulties in the definitions upon which they are based. For example, there do not seem to be any distinct problems in knowing what exactly is moral if morality is defined either as interest or as the hedonistic good. It is a matter of knowing what one wants. In the case of the right or the agathistic good, principles will have to be ultimately established by some kind of intuition and the kind of intuition employed can itself only be referred to another intuition--not to interest.

This thesis is concerned with exposing the problems Sidgwick encounters in his attempt to reduce morality to the principle of utilitarianism. Particular attention will be paid to the logical difficulties involved in defining morality and it is for that reason that these have been discussed at some length here. In the following chart, the four different definitions are listed, together with their distinctive problems. For convenience in subsequent discussion the definitions of the right and interest have been generally designated as "monisms" to indicate:

1. that either interest or duty is completely denied;
2. that in consequence, both definitions seem to be self contradictory.

Also as a matter of convenience the two definitions of the good have been designated as "dualisms" to indicate:

PROBLEMS OF THE DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF MORALITY

The Definitions

DUALISMS

THE AGATHISTIC GOOD

Morality is ultimately based on duty but the duty attracts the agent to it and in that sense involves interest.

THE HEDONISTIC GOOD

Morality is ultimately based on interest but satisfaction of interest becomes, thereby, a value and in that sense duty is involved.

MONISMS

THE RIGHT

Morality is based entirely on duty and has nothing whatsoever to do with interest.

INTEREST

Morality is solely a matter of interest and involves no duties.

The Problems

If the duty appeals to some interest of the agent, this interest must in turn be the appeal of some further duty and so on ad infinitum. Otherwise morality is ultimately a matter of interest alone.

If satisfaction of interest is a value, this value must be the object of some further interest and so on ad infinitum. Otherwise morality is ultimately a matter of duty alone.

If a moral agent is at no point interested in a duty and yet performs it, it seems he cannot logically be doing so of his own free will. But he cannot then be accused of immorality for a derelict duty if he has no free will.

If morality is defined simply as whatever a person wants, then it has no distinct meaning at all since so called moral statements are simply statements about likes and dislikes.

When morality means the pursuit of some goal, an act is judged not for itself but for its consequences. However, the consequences of an act are infinite and thus impossible to measure.

The more strongly one affirms a self-contradictory statement such as each of these appears to be, the more strongly one denies it.

1. that interest and duty are combined in some way in each definition;
2. that in consequence both definitions require the impossible task of measuring infinite consequences.

Sidgwick's attempt to reduce morality to utilitarianism will necessarily involve two steps (though as it happens not explicitly). First it must be established that morality is defined dualistically and not monistically; for utilitarianism is a goal to be pursued and thus a good. Secondly it must be established that the good is of one particular sort. It might at first appear that utilitarianism is a species of hedonistic good and that it is therefore this form of good which should be established. Such is not necessarily the case however. In the loose sense used in Section 1, utilitarianism is a form of hedonistic good. In a stricter logical sense it does not seem to be so. For to the individual moral agent, the pursuit of the general happiness is virtually as independent of his own interest as would be the pursuit of wisdom, beauty or any similar goal. In this sense utilitarianism is a species of the agathistic good.

From the preceding discussion it would appear then that Sidgwick must:

- a. establish that morality is defined as some form of the good and not as the right or interest;
- b. establish that morality is the agathistic and not the hedonistic good.
- c. establish, by an intuition of course, that the only



principle which is good is utilitarianism.

Insofar as Sidgwick concerns himself with logical as well as empirical difficulties of ethics he does, to some extent, follow a procedure of this sort. Nevertheless there are two important qualifications to this statement. In the first place Sidgwick is not clearly and unambiguously concerned with reducing ethics to utilitarianism. He is often considered a utilitarian but in his principal ethical work he implies, in the introductory chapter, that he is primarily concerned with establishing the validity of all clearly distinct definitions of morality. Actually his book involves a mixture of both purposes.

The second qualification, related to the first, is that Sidgwick is no more willing than were some of his predecessors to accept utilitarianism as an expression of only one of the two forms of good. He hopes, as they did, that the pursuit of the general happiness is somehow at the same time the pursuit of one's own. Thus utilitarianism would be a principle which affirmed and also combined both the agathistic and the hedonistic good.

It would be difficult to explore all the arguments involved in these various purposes. I shall concentrate, in this thesis, on an attempt to trace that thread of argument which is used to reduce morality to utilitarianism, noting the other purposes as they relate thereto.

Given the above qualifications, Sidgwick's "proof" of utilitarianism involves the three steps previously noted. This proof will also involve positive and negative aspects as were

discussed in Section 3. In view of the problems of the different definitions of morality, one can predict that the positive aspect of proof will involve:

- a. resolving the problem of measuring infinite consequences which any good seems to require;
- b. eliminating the infinite regress of duties which an agathistic good seems to encounter.

For the negative aspect of proof there are at hand all of the difficulties which confront the three other definitions of morality.

Throughout the following chapters, the various logical difficulties heretofore noted should be kept in mind. Whether or not these difficulties are directly recognized by the thinker, they are always present and may well be the source of whatever difficulties do appear, even though these appear in greatly altered form.

## CHAPTER II

### HEDONISM PRIOR TO BENTHAM

SECTION 1.<sup>1</sup> Hedonism (understood in its loose sense and not as the hedonistic good) occurs in two forms which may be called egoistic hedonism and universalistic hedonism (or utilitarianism). In the history of hedonism, the egoistic form was, in general, the first to be developed. Not until the seventeenth century was the universalistic form, of which Sidgwick was the last exponent, clearly set forth. Although I am primarily concerned with the problems of utilitarianism, it is necessary for me to briefly review the earlier form of hedonism. This is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, some of the principal problems of hedonism which Sidgwick encounters had already been exposed in earlier times. Secondly, it was the severe criticism of egoistic hedonism by David Hume and others that provided some of the impetus for the development of utilitarianism, particularly the earlier form.

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1. The exposition of this section is based on the following sources: Plato, The Republic and The Philebus; Randall and Buchler, Philosophy: An Introduction; and Watson, Hedonistic Theories from Aristippus to Spencer.

Cyrenaicism, an ancient Greek school of thought, is often recognized as the first systematic expression of egoistic hedonism. Its members held that one should pursue the pleasure of the moment, primarily sensual pleasure, and should avoid thought--for thought prevented full enjoyment. The Cyrenaics held furthermore that nothing was immoral, no matter how much it might seem so, if it provided such pleasure.

Those who adhered to the later Greek school of Epicureanism agreed that the individual's pleasure was the only good but they meant by this the pleasure of life as a whole, not that of the moment. The Epicureans also agreed that nothing pleasurable was immoral but they held that most so-called immoral acts carried with them the painful fear of punishment and so really were immoral.

Both Plato and Aristotle criticized these hedonistic principles and presented various arguments to show that the pursuit of pleasure was self-defeating. Some of these arguments, together with later ones, constitute what has come to be called the "Hedonistic Paradox".

Plato observed that it was logically impossible to pursue pleasure alone, for pleasure which was separate even from consciousness was no more than animal experience and could hardly be called pleasure at all. Yet we noticed above that the Cyrenaics meant to attain virtually this sort of pleasure. How then did they avoid its difficulty? They did so by a certain lack of consistency. Thought interfered with pleasure, so they said, but nevertheless one should use all one's cunning to determine the relative pleasure

which attended the various goods of life.

Aristotle, in his criticism, observed that if the hedonists were successful in achieving great pleasure, then they could not possibly achieve the pleasure of life as a whole since individual pleasurable experiences would distract one from necessary reflection. Now the Epicureans did expect to do both and, like the Cyrenaics, their attempt here required some inconsistency. Greatest pleasure for the Epicureans meant merely mental serenity and, in general, avoidance of pain.

Thus according to Plato and Aristotle if you sought pleasure directly you were not apt to achieve it; and the inconsistencies in the hedonism of their time seemed to bear out this contention. It might be noted that these arguments of Plato and Aristotle are, on their face, empirical arguments. The conscious reflective pursuit of pleasure cannot be undertaken simultaneously with an unconscious spontaneous enjoyment of it. The factor of time prevents this.

SECTION 2.<sup>2</sup> Although Epicurus had held that one ought to seek only one's own happiness, he had not, as had Thomas Hobbes in the modern period, rigidly maintained that man could seek nothing else. For Hobbes, man was a thoroughgoing egoist whose impulses were all strictly determined. John Locke also held this view though, in order to permit man to achieve his greatest overall happiness, he

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2. The following exposition is based on these sources: Jones, A History of Western Philosophy Vol. II; Sidgwick, Outlines of The History of Ethics for English Readers; and Watson, Hedonistic Theories from Aristippus to Spencer.

also held inconsistently that a man could suspend these impulses and exercise thought. David Hume, who agreed with Hobbes and that part of Locke which was deterministic, denied however that man was naturally egoistic. On the one hand, he argued empirically that the facts did not indicate this. Perhaps more important however was his logical argument, an argument which had previously been advanced by Joseph Butler. Hume maintained that pleasure was, as it certainly appeared to be, the satisfaction of a desire. Now obviously one couldn't satisfy a desire unless one had a desire in the first place. And this first desire would then have to be for something other than pleasure. Therefore, stated Hume, it was obvious that a man could not seek only his own pleasure--it was logically impossible.

It appears that this argument which Hume and Butler advance against egoistic hedonism is a reexpression of the logical difficulty which faces the hedonistic good. According to the argument in Chapter I, the satisfaction of interest must be the object of a higher interest whose satisfaction must in turn be the object of a still higher interest and so on ad infinitum. Suppose however that one persists in claiming that the satisfaction of interest is the object of the self same interest. The difficulties of this position are those revealed by the argument of Butler and Hume. Hume's argument seems conclusive against egoistic hedonism. However, in Hume's time and earlier, the tendency was not to discard hedonism completely but to present it primarily in the utilitarian

form.<sup>3</sup>

From the time of Richard Cumberland there had been English moralists who held that moral actions must be directed to achievement of the general happiness.<sup>4</sup> These early utilitarians held, however, that one did not pursue the general happiness directly. Morality required obedience to absolute rules but these rules were of just such a sort as to bring about this result if followed. Hume severely criticized the notion of absolute rules, claiming that whatever a man did was always ultimately a matter of interest. This criticism had considerable influence on Jeremy Bentham who, as we shall see in the next chapter, changed the nature of utilitarianism to a straightforward hedonism of the universalistic sort. The utilitarianism of Bentham was not developed as an alternative to egoistic hedonism however. It comprised both forms of hedonism.

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3. Hume did not even discard egoistic hedonism. He denied only the contention that it was the sole end of man.

4. Cumberland himself spoke of the general good rather than the general happiness.

## CHAPTER III

### SIDGWICK'S UTILITARIAN BACKGROUND

SECTION 1. Jeremy Bentham<sup>1</sup> is often considered the first major exponent of the direct form of utilitarianism. While the earlier utilitarians had held that doing one's duty, whatever it might be, was the best way to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, Bentham maintained that the best and indeed only proper way to do this was to determine the overall pleasure resulting from different acts, and to choose those which produced the most pleasure. Thus was ushered in that form of utilitarianism which is most commonly associated with the name. Bentham was its most consistent exponent, followed by J. S. Mill<sup>2</sup> and Sidgwick, the last of whom showed a strong tendency back toward

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1. Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) was trained in law but did not practice it, devoting himself instead to legal and economic theory. The following discussion of his thought is based on his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789).

2. John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1876) held a permanent position as head of an important branch of the government administration. The discussion of his thought is based primarily on his Utilitarianism (1863) but some reference is also made to the essay On Liberty (1859).



the earlier position. The purpose of this chapter is to present the positions of Bentham, J. S. Mill, and briefly, those of Herbert Spencer.<sup>3</sup> The latter maintained a special form of utilitarianism of considerable influence in Sidgwick's day. I shall concentrate on the aspects of these positions most directly connected with the reduction of morality to the utilitarian principle and those directly criticized by Sidgwick in the development of his own position. My analysis of these thinkers is based on the considerations discussed in Sections 3 through 6 of Chapter I. I consider both the positive and negative aspects of reduction. I also consider both the definition of morality which is given and the attempt to prove that only utilitarianism is moral. Actually the previous chapter's discussion suggests that once a definition of morality has been established there are no particular problems involved in determining the principles which are moral. In any event, special attention will be paid to the explicit and implicit definitions of morality which are set forth and upon which the moral principles are based.

SECTION 2. Bentham defines utility as:

"...that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the

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3. Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903) - The brief comments which follow are largely based on a synopsis of his ethical works contained in Albee's A History of English Utilitarianism.

happiness of the community; if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual."<sup>4</sup>

The principle of utility (i.e. of utilitarianism) he defines as:

"...that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question..."<sup>5</sup>

As he defines it, Bentham's principle of utility requires the pursuit of both individual happiness and general happiness, according to which is in question. His principle therefore encompasses both egoistic hedonism and utilitarianism. One may well ask if these two forms of hedonism can be reconciled to each other, particularly since they seem to be based on different definitions of ethics. Morality cannot be defined in two different ways unless these definitions are reconciled to each other. In the Principles, Bentham relies on the legislator to make it pleasurable for the individual to pursue the general welfare, by punishing him if he does not. Thus individual morality seems to be reduced to egoistic hedonism. So far as the individual is concerned, what is moral is to pursue his own pleasure but the most expedient way to do this is to pursue the general pleasure.

The issue is not, however, this clear cut for Bentham. For when the legislator makes the utilitarian principle attractive, this principle remains of independent worth even though the person is pursuing it only because it is to his own self interest. As

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4. Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, p. 126.

5. Ibid.

Bentham puts it, the sanctions are sources of obligatory power. In the Deontology, a posthumous work prepared from various unpublished manuscripts, Bentham is presented as claiming that man naturally gets most individual pleasure by pursuing the general pleasure. While this may be an inaccurate description of Bentham's position it is possible that he hoped such a state of affairs might eventually be brought about by an exact manipulation of sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

I would note at this point that if it can be proven that the forced pursuit of general happiness is nevertheless of distinct moral worth, then it would appear that the principle which results is based upon a definition of morality as both the agathistic good and the hedonistic good combined into one. For utilitarianism is not, except with this merger, a form of hedonistic good. Otherwise it is based on intuition, not interest.

SECTION 3. To prove that utilitarianism is moral is, says Bentham, unnecessary and impossible, for what is used to prove everything else cannot be itself proved. Nevertheless, he does give a sort of proof in the first page of his work -

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do... The principle of utility recognizes this sub-  
jection, and assumes it for the foundation of the system..."<sup>7</sup>

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6. See Sidgwick. Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers, p. 233.

7. Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, p. 125.

This method of proving utilitarianism (or showing that it needs no proof) relies on what is called psychological hedonism. According to psychological hedonism it is a fact that men do pursue only pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Psychological hedonism is thus distinguished from ethical hedonism which is the doctrine merely that men ought to pursue only pleasure and avoidance of pain. Bentham claims that both doctrines are true without explicitly indicating that one proves the other. J. S. Mill, as we shall shortly see, explicitly holds that psychological hedonism proves ethical hedonism. He indicates two different ways in which this proof occurs. The most cogent of these may have been that which Bentham also had in mind. Mill argues that if man does in fact pursue only pleasure, then this must include what he ought to pursue, since moral conduct is a part of conduct in general.

Psychological hedonism occurs in two forms and it is sometimes difficult to determine which of them a thinker means, or whether he confuses the two and uses them both interchangeably. In both forms, this doctrine actually seems to have implications not only for the principles of morality but, even more, for the very defining of it. Since Bentham's concern with moral principles is very closely related to his concern with defining morality, I want to indicate here what these implications are.

The difference between the two forms of psychological hedonism is based on a difference in the definition of pleasure. What may be called the logical form defines pleasure as whatever a person desires and is certainly true because tautological. If a martyr

chooses to go to the stake he must ultimately have wanted to do so and if pleasure is defined as whatever he wants, then the stake must be, in this sense, pleasurable. As was mentioned in Chapter I, this first definition of pleasure is applicable to interest ethics. Consequently the logical form of psychological hedonism, if it proves anything at all, proves that the definition of morality is interest--not the hedonistic good. (Of course it would not seem that a tautology could really prove anything.)

The second form of psychological hedonism, which may be called empirical, defines pleasure not as desire but as the satisfaction of desire. It is not true by definition, as it is with the logical form, that men pursue only the satisfaction of desire. If this doctrine is true it must be so by empirical evidence. Nevertheless, it is this form which, if true, would prove that morality is the hedonistic good.

It is not clear whether the psychological hedonism which Bentham uses as a proof of utilitarianism is of the empirical or the logical form. On the one hand, he considers pleasure as a goal to be pursued and in that case his psychological hedonism would seem empirical. For one would not be likely to pursue mere desire but rather the satisfaction of desire. Furthermore, Bentham implies that the pursuit of pleasure is a meaningfully moral obligation--he claims to be writing a work about what ought to be and not merely what is. Further still, Bentham states, with disapproval, that when a person claims to be basing his actions on some duty, he is really simply basing them on whatever he feels like doing and then

calling that a duty. Thus Bentham seems to deny interest ethics, in which case he presumably would not be using the form of psychological hedonism which assumes such ethics.

On the other hand, Bentham's comments when he comes to explicitly define morality suggest that, after all, it is the logical form of psychological hedonism that he has in mind. According to him utilitarianism is not only moral but the very definition of morality!

"Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done... When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong, and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise they have none."<sup>8</sup>

To put it another way, seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number is moral (i.e. seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number). This is a mere tautology. Now since, for Bentham, seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number is, or is made, the most effective way to seek one's own happiness it would seem that the tautologous nature of utilitarianism was related to a similarly tautologous kind of egoistic hedonism. Such a hedonism would be established by the logical form of psychological hedonism, which is that one cannot desire anything other than what one desires.

Another indication that it is the logical form of psychological hedonism which Bentham uses is his criticism of all duties. He claims that there are no absolute duties. Yet according to the

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8. Ibid., p. 127.

explanation of an ethics of good in Chapter I, any "good" must be in a sense, absolute and independent of interest. It is the logical form of psychological hedonism which establishes pure interest ethics.

Insofar as the nature of Bentham's psychological hedonism is unclear, his definition of morality is also unclear as are also the problems accompanying it. It is certain, however, that he does not define morality as the right. Indeed it is the criticism of that definition which constitutes his principal negative proof of utilitarianism.

SECTION 4. If utilitarianism is right, says Bentham, then to show that other principles are wrong, all one needs do is to show that they differ. Nevertheless he does somewhat more than this and thus his comments here do contribute to his proof. He distinguishes two other principles--that of "asceticism" and that of "sympathy and antipathy".

According to Bentham, asceticism is the exact opposite of utilitarianism. It approves those actions which increase pain and decrease pleasure. It has never been consistently pursued, notes Bentham, and if it was so pursued by any substantial number of people it would turn the world into a hell.

Perhaps more significant than asceticism, which seems to me an almost purely theoretical construct, is the principle which holds that the approval of an action is its own justification and does not depend on any resultant increase or decrease of happiness. As

Bentham defines it, this principle is equivalent to both duty and interest ethics.

It was indicated in Chapter I that a very sharp distinction is usually made between interest ethics and duty ethics (the ethics of right). Duty ethics holds not only that what you ought to do is not simply what you want to do but further that duty in general should be done for its own sake and not because you want to do it. Bentham denies this distinction and considers that duty ethics is really nothing but concealed interest ethics despite others of his statements which suggest that he himself agrees with interest ethics. His reason for equating duty and interest seems to rest on the observation that moral systems vary greatly as to their standards of right and it appears therefore that the standards which they hold absolute must simply be their own preferences. Bentham concludes, therefore, that the principle of sympathy and antipathy is really the negation of all principle.

It will be noted that this criticism of an ethics of right is not the same as that given in the introduction. Bentham's criticism rests on the assumption that what is a duty for one must be a duty for all and that what is a duty at one moment must be so at the next. Denying this assumption, as some contemporary thinkers such as Karl Barth do, seems to involve no immediate logical contradictions however. Of course there may be practical difficulties as when one person's performance of his duty interferes with another's performance of his.

One could not expect Bentham to criticize an ethics of right



for its denial of free will since he himself seems to do the same, claiming that moral action is based on natural necessity. This difficulty--the denial of free will--is nevertheless still there.

At any rate, Bentham concludes from his discussion that asceticism is self-defeating, sympathy and antipathy is not a principle at all and we are left with utilitarianism as the only right principle to be governed by.

SECTION 5. Bentham holds that utilitarianism is a workable principle. It is not easy to apply--indeed there are considerable practical difficulties but there are (apparently) no logical contradictions for him. To achieve the greatest happiness one must measure and compare pleasures. Each pleasure or pain considered by itself must be measured for its intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty and propinquity or remoteness. The act which produces the feeling must be measured for fecundity--its likelihood to produce more of the same, for purity--its likelihood not to produce the opposite, and for extent--the number of persons who are affected by it. To determine whether the tendency of any particular act is good or bad one merely sums up, using the above measurements, the values of each pleasure and each pain which appears to be produced by the act. If the balance is on the side of pleasure, then the act has a good tendency; if not, it has a bad one. This balance can be determined for every individual affected by the act or for the community as a whole.

In the latter case one sums up the degrees of good tendency

for each individual for whom the act is good on the whole. One does the same with the degrees of bad tendency for those individuals for whom the act is bad on the whole. One then subtracts the total degrees of bad tendency from the total degrees of good tendency to find the balance for the community as a whole.

It is not to be expected, says Bentham, that this process will be strictly followed prior to every moral judgment, but it may be kept in view and should (presumably) be applied as closely as possible. Indeed it is such a process that men customarily employ in deciding what to do.

SECTION 6. I have indicated briefly how Bentham reduces morality to utilitarianism. I have considered both his definition of morality and his attempt to show that only utilitarianism is moral, though the latter seems, according to some statements, to involve a different definition of morality. I have also considered both the positive and negative aspects of his proof. We must now discuss these same elements in the utilitarianism of J. S. Mill.

Bentham meant by utility the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but he also meant the greatest happiness of each individual and apparently assumed that the two could be reconciled.

Mill explicitly states that:

"...the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."<sup>9</sup>

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9. Utilitarianism, p. 24.

Mill too, however, seems to assume that the general happiness and the agent's own happiness can be fairly easily reconciled. He believes, as does Bentham, that enticing or forcing a person to pursue the utilitarian goal does not destroy the morality of such pursuit. And he has his own reasons for expounding, much like Bentham, the even bolder doctrine that man naturally gets most individual pleasure by pursuing the general pleasure. According to him, man's concern for the general happiness is in a sense a natural outgrowth of his awareness of dependence on others for satisfaction of his own desires.

SECTION 7. Mill, like Bentham, holds that utilitarianism, as a first principle, is incapable of proof in the ordinary sense of the word, but he prefers to describe this situation as one in which a sort of proof is still possible rather than one in which there is no proof at all.

Again like Bentham, Mill proves utilitarianism (in one way) by a form of psychological hedonism but he also attempts, in contrast to Bentham, to prove psychological hedonism itself. Proof of the latter, according to him, is possible only by experience. It is a question of fact to be determined by self-observation and the observation of others. Thus Mill seems explicitly to state, at least at this point, that the only form of psychological hedonism which can be proven, if any can, is the empirical form (for the truth of the logical form does not, of course, depend on experience). But he then goes on to present his belief that

empirical observations will establish the identity of desire and pleasure!

"I believe that these sources of evidence, impartially consulted, will declare that desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable, or rather two parts of the same phenomena; in strictness of language, two different modes of naming the same psychological fact...".<sup>10</sup>

If pleasure and desire are two words with the same referent, then they may be considered definitions of each other. The definition of pleasure as desire rather than satisfaction of desire is that upon which the logical, not the empirical, form of psychological hedonism is based. There are other indications also, that it is not only the empirical form which Mill has in mind. For example, when he comes to explicitly define morality, he calls it a feeling of obligation which evolves when a person recognizes that he depends upon others for satisfaction of his own desires. Now this seems to imply that morality is merely self interest, regardless of how enlightened it may be. Again it is the logical form of psychological hedonism which would establish interest ethics.

In Mill as in Bentham, I find it difficult to determine which form of psychological hedonism is really intended. One fact seems certain, however. Whether or not Mill's psychological hedonism derives its cogency implicitly from the logical form, it is not explicitly accepted as merely tautological.

If psychological hedonism is true, says Mill, then ethical hedonism must be true. If pleasure is the sole end of all human

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10. Ibid., p. 58.

conduct then it must obviously be the end of moral conduct since that is merely a particular kind of conduct.

The psychological hedonism which he establishes, Mill uses as one proof of ethical hedonism generally. But he has another proof in connection with which he establishes utilitarianism per se (although the aspect of that second proof which establishes utilitarianism could be used with the first proof as well). Of Mill's two proofs, psychological hedonism can function independently but the other requires psychological hedonism in addition to itself, as will be shown. This second proof also depends on empirical observation.

"The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it."<sup>11</sup>

In other words the only proof there can be for the desirable, here meaning the ultimate end or what ought to be desired, is that it is in fact desired. Now Mill establishes, by his psychological hedonism, that the only thing which is in fact desired is the individual's own happiness and the immediate inference from this would be that that is the only thing that ought to be desired (which is the position of egoism). Mill, however does not draw this inference alone. Concerning utilitarianism, which is after all what he intends to prove, he states that:

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11. Ibid., pp. 52-3.

"No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good, that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons."<sup>12</sup>

Mill's argument restated seems to be:

- a. the individual desires only his own pleasure,
- b. the pleasure of the aggregate of individuals is therefore desired,
- c. the pleasure of the aggregate of individuals therefore ought to be desired,
- d. the individual ought to desire the aggregate pleasure.

In the argument, Mill apparently means by "desirable" both what ought to be desired and what is desired, otherwise c. does not follow from b. It also appears that d. does not follow from c. but this point we will consider later.

The ambiguity in the meaning of desirable functions as Mill's other proof but it does not establish ethical hedonism unless what is in fact desired is only pleasure. In other words, it requires psychological hedonism in addition to itself.

We may conclude that there are, for Mill, two positive proofs of ethical hedonism generally, one of which functions independently while the other does not. Propositions a. through c. can be established by either one of the two. By the first proof they would be established as follows:

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12. Ibid., p. 53.

Desire and pleasure are identical--therefore propositions  
a. and b. are true;

If pleasure is the sole end of all human conduct, then it must  
be the end of moral conduct which is merely a particular kind  
of conduct--therefore proposition c. is true.

By the second proof these propositions would be established as  
follows:

Desire and pleasure are identical--therefore propositions a.  
and b. are true.

The only proof that anything is desirable (meaning apparently,  
both worthy of desire and desired) is that it is desired--  
therefore proposition c. is true.

There is, in addition to the two proofs of ethical hedonism gener-  
ally, a single proof for utilitarianism per se which is used by  
Mill in connection with the second proof but could, it seems, be  
used with the first, instead.

Of these three proofs Bentham also appears to have used one--  
namely the first of the two proofs for ethical hedonism in general.

As cumbersome and dubious as these proofs may themselves appear  
to be, one must keep in mind the further difficulty that both of the  
proofs for ethical hedonism in general are based on a psychological  
hedonism which has not been clearly defined.

SECTION 8. Both Bentham and Mill seem to be more explicitly and  
thoroughly concerned with establishing the proposition that only  
utilitarianism is moral than they are with establishing a definition

of morality in the first place. For, when it comes to the negative aspect of proof--the discrediting of all definitions of morality other than that on which utilitarianism is based, there is only one definition which they completely and clearly oppose. That is the ethics of right.

Both thinkers believe that by a manipulation of reward and punishment a man can be made to get most individual pleasure by pursuing the general pleasure. They further believe that this use of sanctions does not destroy the distinct moral worth of the general pleasure. As was previously noted, this position would seem to imply a merger of the agathistic and the hedonistic good.

Neither thinker makes clear which type of psychological hedonism he is using as a proof of utilitarianism. Since only one type is applicable to the hedonistic good while the other is applicable to interest ethics, there is no clear opposition to interest ethics either.

Mill, like Bentham, does clearly oppose the ethics of right. According to Mill, there is only one moral principle, besides utilitarianism, which appears in any way to be a really distinct and independent principle. This principle is justice. Justice, however, only appears to be a distinct principle but is not actually so; for it provides no means of reconciling different views as to what exactly is just.

"Not only have different nations and individuals different notions of justice, but in the mind of one and the same individual, justice is not some one rule, principle, or maxim, but many, which do not always coincide in their dictates,



and in choosing between which, he is guided either by some extraneous standard, or by his own personal predilections."<sup>13</sup>

This appears to be a pivotal argument, not only for Mill but also for Bentham (and to some extent, for Sidgwick as well). We find it in Bentham in his criticism of the so-called principle of sympathy and antipathy where he concluded that moral rules are really nothing but personal preferences. As with Bentham, so with Mill, this criticism seems to be primarily practical in nature. Proponents of the right can easily explain how an individual chooses between conflicting duties. He does so by a "higher" duty. An infinite regress of duties seems, of course, to imply a lack of free will but Mill does not seem to be any more concerned with free will than Bentham was. It is not this logical difficulty of the right upon which he bases his criticism.

For Mill, the only way to reconcile the various contradictory notions of justice is to submit them to the utilitarian standard. Indeed, says he, the only reason that justice appears to be independent of utility in the first place is because it is concerned with the broadest and strongest interest of man--namely his security. The sentiment of justice has developed out of what are, or resemble, two natural instincts--that of self-defence and that of sympathy. These become the desire to punish one who does harm and the belief that there is a definite individual to whom harm has been done. These standards are so necessary to us that we come to think of them as absolute though they are not.

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13. Ibid., p. 82.

SECTION 9. Mill, like Bentham, believes that utilitarianism is workable. He argues that the complications involved in measuring pleasure are not overwhelming. To assess the consequences of an action there is the whole past experience of mankind.

Mill differs from Bentham very sharply in one respect. In defending utilitarianism against those who call it a doctrine worthy only of swine, Mill claims that it is perfectly consistent with the doctrine to recognize distinctions in the quality of pleasure as well as distinctions in quantity. The test of whether one pleasure is higher than another is whether or not all or most of those who have experience of both prefer the one to the other regardless of any feeling of obligation to do so. Now a test of this sort, having no criterion independent of simple desire, except the proviso that it be a general desire, would not seem to be measuring differences in quality but rather those differences in quantity which need considerable experience to discover. It would seem to be measuring, in other words, what Bentham called the fecundity, purity and extent of an act.

We cannot, however, infer merely from the nature of his measuring tool, that Mill does not really support distinctions in quality. He explicitly notes the tendency of utilitarians to support what amount to distinctions in quality, but on quantitative considerations, and states that it is possible to do more than this. Furthermore, a subsequent discussion of this issue further develops just such a position.

In this discussion, Mill holds that it is perfectly possible to pursue an end such as virtue or health for its own sake and not merely as a means to pleasure. Whatever is so pursued is not then a means to the utilitarian end because it is, instead, a part of that end. Money, which is initially desired only as a means to pleasure, may in time become desired for its own sake and the same is true of most of the great objects of human life. This argument is difficult to make clear. However, to say that happiness, as the only ultimate end, can have parts which are not quantitative but qualitative merely seems to draw out a special implication of the initial belief in qualitative differences among pleasures.

Since Mill admits qualitative as well as quantitative differences, he must have some other technique for determining moral action as well as measurement of pleasure. There is difference of opinion as to what this other technique is.

Sidgwick apparently understands him to mean that the avoidance of harm to others is the primary specific rule which a utilitarian should follow. Anschutz, in one of the few even partially definitive works on Mill,<sup>14</sup> considers that it is self-realization (defined in several different ways) that Mill presents as the specific goal of morality.

Sidgwick's position (to be considered later) that qualitative distinctions in pleasure are fatal to utilitarianism seems to me a valid one. I do not therefore plan to discuss the elements of

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14. R. P. Anschutz, The Philosophy of J. S. Mill, pp. 18-19, 22-7.

self-realization ethics in Mill since these definitely seem to involve criteria other than pleasure. Concerning the rule about refraining from harm, Mill does make this a principal part of his doctrine so far as one's relations with others are concerned, though it does not give any guidance for purely private morality. In his work On Liberty we find that:

"The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control... That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection."<sup>15</sup>

Mill states that this principle is not an absolute principle, in the way that duty ethics would have it, but is grounded on the permanent interests of man, that is, on utility.

SECTION 10. We have now considered the principal elements involved in the attempts of the two major utilitarians prior to Sidgwick, to reduce ethics to the greatest happiness principle. It only remains to comment briefly on the utilitarianism of Herbert Spencer. Spencer, in his later six-volume work on ethics, does not understand utilitarianism exactly as do Bentham and Mill. He does consider it to mean the greatest happiness of the greatest number but for him greatest here signifies complete happiness. This will become clearer as we show how he proves utilitarianism.

Like that of Bentham and Mill, Spencer's proof can be said to be based on psychological hedonism. Spencer does not however claim

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15. J. S. Mill, On Liberty, p. 9.

as do the others, that psychological hedonism is the state of things right now but rather that it will be, in the perfectly evolved society of the future. Spencer repeats the observation of the earlier thinkers that moral conduct is merely a part of conduct in general and then goes on to say that conduct depends on the stage of evolution (which is always a progression from the worse to the better). Now we call life good, says Spencer, only because it is, on the whole pleasurable. Yet in an imperfectly evolved society we can only preserve life by encroaching on the life and pleasure of others. We find, however, by studying what is common to the various aspects of conduct that the evolutionary tendency is toward a state in which each individual's own perfect pleasure will naturally be achieved in those actions which provide the perfect pleasure of every other individual. Since this is what will be, it includes what ought to be, says Spencer.

Utilitarianism is the only ethical principle that recognizes natural causation (i.e. evolution) according to Spencer. All other systems ignore natural right and reduce morality to pure caprice. Nevertheless, the utilitarian end cannot be achieved directly by the measuring system of Bentham. In the present imperfect state of evolution, we can only approximate it by obeying certain general rules which, although they are based on interest, have in one case at least, almost the force of a duty completely independent of interest.

SECTION 11. Bentham, Mill and, to a lesser extent, Spencer were all proponents of the later form of utilitarianism. Sidgwick, as will be shown, inclined to the earlier form. But there is one very important respect in which all of these thinkers seem alike. In their attempts to reduce morality to utilitarianism, none of them seems willing to clearly discredit more than one of the four different definitions of morality. Bentham, Mill and Spencer explicitly denounce the ethics of right. Sidgwick, we shall find, explicitly denounces the ethics of interest. Beyond this, however, they do not seem to go.

It is within this context that Sidgwick takes his departure from the latter form of utilitarianism--particularly that of Mill.

Bentham, Mill and Spencer all understood utilitarianism rather loosely, as they all anticipated, with more or less confidence, a time when the pursuit of general happiness would also be the best way to achieve one's own. In so doing they seemed to presuppose a merger of the agathistic and hedonistic good. Sidgwick also hoped that utilitarianism and egoistic hedonism could be reconciled but he was far less confident of this.

When they came to prove their rather loosely defined utilitarianism, Sidgwick's predecessors relied on some variant of psychological hedonism. Only one of the two forms of psychological hedonism is applicable to the hedonistic good however, while the other is applicable only to interest ethics. Consequently, there seemed to be no clear opposition to interest ethics any more than

there was to either form of good. Indeed interest seemed to be at the root of both proofs. For even the empirical form of psychological hedonism consisted merely of a statement of people's wants.

Sidgwick developed a position almost at the opposite pole from that of his predecessors. For him, the proof of utilitarianism was based ultimately on the right although, like them, he also seemed to accept both forms of the good as well.

Of Sidgwick's predecessors, Mill and especially Bentham believed in the measurement of pleasures as a means of achieving the general happiness. Sidgwick severely criticized the effectiveness of such a process and tried to re-establish the earlier position that obedience to duty was the best means of achieving the utilitarian end.

## CHAPTER IV

### SIDGWICK'S PROOF OF UTILITARIANISM - NEGATIVE ASPECTS

SECTION 1. I have considered two of the major and one of the minor exponents of the later utilitarianism. In my exposition of their arguments I have already suggested certain criticisms of them. It should be noted, however, that no one of these three men was a philosopher by profession and the two major exponents, at least, were almost more concerned with the practical applications of utilitarianism than they were with its theoretical adequacy. When we come to Sidgwick, the situation is different.

Educated at Cambridge University, Sidgwick spent virtually the rest of his life there, first as an instructor in classics, then later as a professor of philosophy. In the very first years of teaching, immediately after completing his formal education, he began a study of J. S. Mill, and his first adherence to any definite ethical system was to Mill's utilitarianism. But Sidgwick was, as he himself explicitly stated, deeply concerned with the theoretical problems of ethics generally and consequently with those of any system to which he adhered.



Illustrative of Sidgwick's concern for theoretical problems are the two somewhat different purposes which he gives for his ethical thought. One of these is to make an impartial investigation of all the really distinct moral systems. This is the avowed purpose of the work The Methods of Ethics<sup>1</sup> in which his thought is developed. The second purpose is to reduce morality to utilitarianism. This is the purpose probably credited to him most often and is what he seems to indicate in his own description of the development of his thought.

An explicit statement of the first purpose is found in the preface of the first edition and is amplified in the first chapter of the work. Sidgwick states in the preface that the purpose of the Methods is primarily the exposition of the various existing systems of morality--not a reduction to any particular one of them.

"It claims to be an examination, at once expository and critical, of the different methods of obtaining reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done which are to be found--either explicit or implicit--in the moral consciousness of mankind generally; and which from time to time, have been developed...by individual thinkers..."<sup>2</sup>

Sidgwick goes on, in Chapter 1, to say that the purpose of this exposition is to reveal, in a purely disinterested manner, the difficulties of each of these methods.

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1. The Methods of Ethics was Sidgwick's first major work and was first published in 1874. It represents generally the position he retained throughout his life. He revised this work four times--the second through the fifth editions--and was in the process of revising the sixth (1901) at the time of his death. It is generally held that the revisions did not substantially alter the arguments of the work. Consequently, my study is based almost exclusively on the sixth edition and quotations are from that edition.

2. The Methods of Ethics, p. 4.

"In ethical treatises...there has been a continual tendency to ignore and keep out of sight the difficulties of the subject; either unconsciously...or consciously that he [the writer] may not shake the sway of morality over the minds of his readers. This last well-meant precaution frequently defeats itself; the difficulties thus concealed in exposition are likely to reappear in controversy; and then they appear not carefully limited, but magnified for polemical purposes... To eliminate or reduce this indefiniteness and confusion is the sole immediate end that I have proposed to myself in the present work. In order better to execute this task, I have refrained from expressly attempting any such complete and final solution of the chief ethical difficulties and controversies as would convert this exposition of various methods into the development of a harmonious system. At the same time I hope to afford aid to the construction of such a system..."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the strongest explicit statement of this first purpose is found in the preface to the second edition where Sidgwick makes the following remark:

"I find that more than one critic has overlooked or disregarded the account of the plan of my treatise...and has consequently supposed me to be writing as an assailant of two of the methods I chiefly examine, and a defender of the third... I am concerned to have caused so much misdirection of criticism."<sup>4</sup>

Despite these explicit statements of a primary concern to expose various systems rather than to reduce them to a single one, Sidgwick indicates, at other places, great concern with this second purpose. The preface to the sixth edition contains a description of the development of his thought. In this he indicates how he came to believe that duty ethics was implicitly utilitarian but "slowly and reluctantly" concluded that utilitarianism and egoistic hedonism could not be reconciled. In the conclusion of the Methods

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3. Ibid., p. 3.

4. Ibid., p. x.

he states that he has "failed" to provide a harmonious system. These two statements, among others, seem a bit strong if the production of a harmonious system was only incidental to his main purpose in the first place.

The strongest indication of Sidgwick's second purpose is, however, not something he himself explicitly says. The fact is that he does not impartially consider all the really distinct moral systems and he does believe that he has reduced two of those which he does consider to each other. These points will be amplified subsequently.

Sidgwick's two purposes may be said to make up a more general purpose--hopefully to reduce morality to utilitarianism but to do so with complete fairness and thus without having to discredit, or deny the distinctiveness of, all other moral systems.

SECTION 2. The very organization of his work, and its title, reflect Sidgwick's general purpose although they, perhaps, cause a little confusion. For example, it may seem strange to write a book on "methods" of ethics rather than on duties or the good. Actually, this term "methods" and its plural use indicates Sidgwick's desire for fairness to all distinct moral systems. He uses the term in two senses--a wider and a narrower one (though he does not explicitly describe them so).

The wider method determines which narrower method or methods of ethics are correct. Now two of the narrower methods which Sidgwick recognizes are what I have called definitions of morality.

For Sidgwick, however, they are different narrower methods based on the same definition. He distinguishes between the right and the good but not as different definitions of morality--merely as different narrower methods based on a single definition--which turns out to be the right again. Consequently there is only one wider method and this is intuition.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the meaning of Sidgwick's narrower method, we must realize that no matter whether a moral standard applies to acts or consequences, it is always the morality of the act with which we are ultimately concerned. Sidgwick's narrower method means, roughly, how we determine the moral act. As noted above the narrower method is conceived almost as what I would call the definition itself, since a definition of morality is basically a statement as to how the morality of the act is determined. (Again I note that Sidgwick himself does not consider his different methods to be different definitions.)

If morality is the right, then the moral act is determined by the "method" of direct intuition. If morality is the good, then the moral act is determined by the "method" of evaluating consequences. This way of describing different systems (definitions) gives, in effect, a practical focus to the difficulties of them--namely, their workability.

A primary concern with the narrower method is indicated by the organization of Sidgwick's work and the plural form of the word

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5. Much of this chapter and the following will be devoted to amplifying these points.

method used in the title. Indeed, more than half of the 500 pages are devoted to this practical focus. Nevertheless, his discussion of the validity of these narrower methods, while briefer, is of equal importance. (In subsequent discussion I shall, for simplicity, refer to the narrower methods merely as methods.)

Like Bentham and Mill, Sidgwick does not, in effect, clearly discredit all the definitions of morality other than that on which utilitarianism is based. On the contrary, while his predecessors did not openly admit that the three definitions they retained might be distinct from and opposed to each other, Sidgwick (though not considering them definitions) does admit this with respect to two of the three but not the third. He clearly opposes what I have called interest ethics. He does, however, recognize both the right and the good but does not clearly distinguish between the hedonistic (in the strict sense of the term) and the agathistic good.

The distinction between the right and the good accounts roughly for two of the three methods Sidgwick discusses in his work. However, he does not consider the good so broadly as is possible but considers it as pleasure alone, whereas there could be other goods, such as beauty, wisdom, health, etc.

Having claimed that pleasure is the only good<sup>6</sup>, Sidgwick goes on to distinguish sharply between egoistic hedonism and utilitarianism. At first glance, this distinction would seem to indicate a distinction between the agathistic and the hedonistic good. This

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6. Sidgwick's basis for this claim will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

is not so for Sidgwick. He claims that even egoistic hedonism is ultimately based on an intuition and not on self interest. In other words, a person ought to pursue the satisfaction of his wants as a matter of duty and regardless of whether or not he wants to. This apparently complete denial of the hedonistic good is, however, only apparent as subsequent discussion will attempt to show. The only point I am making here is that Sidgwick's distinction between egoistic hedonism and utilitarianism does not indicate a clear explicit distinction between the agathistic and the hedonistic good.

Sidgwick's distinctions between the right and the good, and between egoism and utilitarianism as the only valid goods, are the basis for the organization of his work. Accordingly, the Methods of Ethics is divided into four "books"<sup>7</sup>, the first dealing with introductory matter and the other three with the three methods he has distinguished. Book I is an Introduction. Book II concerns The Method of Egoism. Book III concerns the right but, since Sidgwick speaks of different methods for determining the moral act, he prefers to call this a method--The Method of Intuitionism. Book IV concerns The Method of Utilitarianism.

SECTION 3. The reader would expect that one of the principal functions of Sidgwick's introductory book would be that of establishing that there are three different methods of ethics and that there are no others. Actually, however, most of the justification

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7. The Methods of Ethics is a single volume work. The term "book" here is equivalent in function to the term "part".

for distinguishing these three methods and no others is contained within the separate discussions of the methods which are thus justified. It is true that there is, in the introductory book, a short 12-page chapter<sup>8</sup> explicitly devoted to the question of the number of truly distinct methods. There are also certain other passages in Book I<sup>9</sup> that have to do with this question. But very important aspects are referred to, and more extensively discussed in Books III and IV.

There are four propositions involved in Sidgwick's attempt to establish his three methods. These are:

1. Interest is by no means a method of ethics.
2. The right and the good constitute two really distinct methods of ethics.
3. The good is only pleasure.
4. Egoism and utilitarianism are also really distinct methods of ethics--as distinct from each other as egoism is from the right.

Proposition 1. The first proposition is the only one of the four which is established primarily in Book I. It is however of very great importance as it constitutes the principal negative aspect of Sidgwick's proof of utilitarianism. Interest is the only definition of morality that Sidgwick explicitly denies, just as the right is the only definition that Bentham and Mill explicitly deny.

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8. Chapter VI, entitled "Ethical Principles and Methods"

9. Especially in Chapter VII but also in Chapters I and VIII.

The latter part of this chapter is devoted to Sidgwick's negative aspect of proof. It shows how Sidgwick refutes the position of Bentham and Mill that utilitarianism is ultimately based on a natural self-interest. Before proceeding to these points, I want to indicate the extent to which Sidgwick does develop the other three propositions in Book I and further, to mention where in the later books the more thorough discussions of them are found.

Proposition 2. Early in Chapter I of Book I Sidgwick states, as a matter of common observation, that the right and the good are two distinct methods of ethics and in a later chapter of this book he more or less reiterates this position.<sup>10</sup> In Chapter XIII of Book III however, he claims to have established these two methods by his "wider" method (which is a "wider" form of the right). Thus Sidgwick eventually reaches the conclusion that the distinctiveness of the right and the good have firmer bases than that of common acceptance and that these bases are intuitions.

Proposition 3. With respect to the third proposition, Sidgwick does not initially claim that the good is only pleasure. He admits the existence of one other good which he calls perfection of the moral agent. But, says he, the only way we can know what constitutes perfection is by an intuition and therefore, perfection is not a good but a right or duty.<sup>11</sup> I note here as a matter of clarity that this argument seems to involve a denial of the agathistic

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10. The Methods of Ethics, pp. 2-3, 78.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-4.



good. For the agathistic good is an intuition that has made itself a good by its "appeal" to the moral agent. Sidgwick, however, seems to be implying here that what the good is cannot be established by an intuition.

This argument, which recognizes only two goods--pleasure and perfection--and then claims that perfection is not a good but a form of right is very brief. It occupies only a few passages in Chapter VI of Book I. In contrast, the entire last chapter of Book III is also devoted, in effect, to establishing that the good is only pleasure; but the argument there is different. In that chapter Sidgwick claims that the only way one can know what the good is is by an intuition and that we know by intuition that the good is only pleasure.

Proposition 4. The proposition that egoism and utilitarianism are also clearly distinct methods of ethics remains to be considered. Sidgwick explicitly postpones<sup>12</sup> the proof of this proposition until later in the work. As it happens, not until the third chapter of the last book are the arguments clearly given (though they are alluded to in the previous book). Sidgwick claims, there, that the right (the narrower right) is instinctively utilitarian--that utilitarianism is the form into which the right tends to pass. Consequently the distinction between utilitarianism and egoism virtually amounts to the distinction between the right and the good.

These four propositions, which I have briefly discussed here,

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12. Ibid., pp. 84-5.

are central to Sidgwick's thought and will be more thoroughly considered in subsequent sections of this and the next two chapters of this thesis. Due to the apparent circularity of the proofs (they provide the basis for the classification on which they are in turn based) it was necessary, for clarity, to review them at this time.

I have now reached the point at which to begin the main exposition of Sidgwick's own thought. The purpose of this exposition is to reveal the problems Sidgwick encounters in his attempt to reduce morality to utilitarianism. There are three sorts of problems:

- a. The problems which he recognizes in the utilitarianism of his predecessors, Bentham and Mill.
- b. The problems which he recognizes in his own utilitarianism.
- c. The problems in his own utilitarianism which he encounters but does not seem to fully recognize.

The problems which Sidgwick recognizes in the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill are a part of the negative aspect of his own proof of utilitarianism. For his proof is almost directly opposite to that of his predecessors. These problems are discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

The problems which Sidgwick encounters in his own proof of utilitarianism are discussed in Chapters V and VI of the thesis. Those chapters also indicate the solutions with which he seems to be satisfied.

There are certain logical problems which Sidgwick failed to recognize in the solutions he offered. These are discussed in the seventh and concluding chapter of the thesis.

SECTION 4. In an early and very important chapter of his work,<sup>13</sup> Sidgwick explicitly denied that morality could be defined as interest. In doing so, he adopted a position almost exactly opposite that of his predecessors, Bentham and Mill. Although neither of these latter men showed a clear preference for any single one of the possible moral definitions, many of their statements support an interest ethics. Bentham claimed that the only ends men in fact sought were pleasure and avoidance of pain and these ends were, accordingly, the only ones which they ought to seek. The apparent assumption that what is includes what ought to be was later made explicit by Mill, who argued that the only proof a thing was desirable (worth desiring) was that it was in fact desired. A pure interest ethics is not, however, the same as an ethics of good and it is an ethics of good upon which utilitarianism must be based.

Observing the tendency toward an interest ethics on the part of Bentham and Mill, Sidgwick argues that if the pursuit of the utilitarian end is, as they say, a matter of obligation--a good--then this end must itself be ultimate and not dependent on interest. For the right cannot be reduced to interest. (Sidgwick refers to morality as the "right" here.) In support of his statement he examines four variants of this reduction. According to

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13. Book I, Chapter III. "Ethical Judgements"

the first, right means what an individual approves but, says Sidgwick, if this is so, then there should be no arguments over right or wrong. Yet such arguments are commonplace. The second variant holds that right is what an individual approves in accord with others. But an individual can cease to be in accord with others. The objection to the first argument would then be applicable here too. Right may however refer to public opinion apart from individual feeling, but we admit that some things are right to do though they are disapproved by the public. The final variant--that right is what God approves--is inapplicable to people who do not believe in divine retribution and the others expect retribution because the actions are independently good or bad.

From his examination, Sidgwick concluded that the notion of right is logically simple and cannot be analyzed. It may have been initially derived from interest as some thinkers (such as Mill) hold, but that does not mean it is reducible to interest now.

It should be noted that the arguments against interest ethics which are presented here are different from that presented in Chapter I of this thesis. The argument of Chapter I was that the definition of morality as interest makes moral statements meaningless--i.e. mere tautologies. Sidgwick does mention this difficulty but very briefly in a later chapter and as if it were so obvious as to scarcely even merit recognition as an argument.

The arguments given above are Sidgwick's principal arguments against interest and occupy the chapter in which he explicitly claims to be discussing the definition of morality. These four

arguments reduce generally to this--that right cannot be equivalent to interest since individuals disagree about what is right but they do not disagree about the mere fact of their different wants. This argument is very similar to that used by Bentham and Mill to support a virtually opposite position. For them, the disagreements of individuals about what is right are evidence that all so-called duties are arbitrary, and both men seem to conclude, at certain points in their works, that the right is equivalent to interest. For Sidgwick, however, these arguments show that the source of the moral standard is intuition and not interest.

The concept of the good, on which utilitarianism is based, seems to combine in some way both interest and independent values. Bentham and Mill accept interest but do not recognize a need for truly independent values. The desire for a thing can by itself make that thing independently valuable, says Mill. Moreover, both Mill and Bentham seem to hold that forcing a person to pursue something can make that thing independently valuable. Sanctions are sources of obligatory power. Sidgwick, on the contrary, accepts the independent values but does not recognize a need for interest. He argues that recognition of a "reasonable end" (by which he seems to mean an intuitively moral one) itself virtually provides the "impulse" to action. The adoption of an end is not a matter of interest but one of volition.

SECTION 5. Sidgwick, as we see, criticizes the tendency characteristic of his two predecessors to define morality as interest. He

also criticizes their further position that the only object in which man in fact has an interest is happiness.<sup>14</sup> It will be recalled that this latter position is called psychological hedonism.

I indicated in the previous chapter that there are two forms of psychological hedonism--the logical and the empirical--and that neither Mill nor Bentham make clear which form they use. Of the two forms the logical form is tautological. What this means is that it is, in a strict sense, not hedonistic at all but is closer to interest ethics. It claims that what you want to get is what you want to get. Hedonism, however, claims that what you want to get is the satisfaction of your want. Only empirical psychological hedonism could establish this. Sidgwick, however, shows, using the famous argument of Butler and Hume, that the empirical form is logically impossible.

Sidgwick first observes that psychological hedonism is often used to support egoistic hedonism but that even if psychological hedonism is true, it does not necessarily provide such support. It may simply be that whatever people recognize as their duty is in fact what they enjoy doing, and not that this enjoyment is itself what they ought to seek. Of course, if instead of defining psychological hedonism in terms of pleasure alone we define it in terms of greatest pleasure, then obviously a man who by nature can seek only greatest pleasure, cannot by obligation seek anything else. In this case however obligation becomes meaningless.

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14. Book I, Chapter IV. "Pleasure and Desire".

But is psychological hedonism true? Sidgwick observes that Mill's equating of pleasure and desire may lead to the logical, but tautological, form of psychological hedonism. He concludes, however, that we must understand Mill to be, in reality, talking about the empirical form when he says that psychological hedonism is so obvious as to hardly be disputed. Then he brings forward Butler's argument that there must necessarily be desires other than for pleasure. This earlier English moralist holds that there are "particular movements" to external objects, such as honor, power, etc., which can be said to be interested only in the sense that every movement of a creature is interested. These movements are presupposed by the idea of a pursuit of interest. Sidgwick, summarizing the argument, states that "we could not pursue pleasure at all, unless we had desires for something else than pleasure; for pleasure consists in the satisfaction of just these 'disinterested' impulses."<sup>15</sup>

Now this argument, which we have previously considered in Chapter II, seems to be simply a variant of the logical criticism of the hedonistic good. It appears therefore to have logical cogency-- that is it appears as convincing as the statement "if equals are added to equals the results are equal". Sidgwick tends to interpret its cogency as a product of empirical investigation and not therefore absolute.

"Butler has certainly over-stated his case, so far as my own experience goes; for many pleasures...occur to me without any perceptible relation to previous desires, and it seems quite

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15. The Methods of Ethics, p. 44.

conceivable that our primary desires might be entirely directed to such pleasures as these. But as a matter of fact, it appears to me that...I can distinguish desires of which the object is something other than my own pleasure."<sup>16</sup>

Having chosen to rest his case on empirical findings, Sidgwick gives a number of examples. Hunger, according to his observation, is a direct impulse and one example of a primary desire. In this case, the secondary desire for satisfaction may seem somewhat difficult to distinguish from the primary one. However, if we consider the pleasure we get not purely from attaining something, as is the case with hunger, but mainly from the pursuit of it, then it is clear that we do first pursue it. Once we are pursuing it, we become interested in it, and may at that point desire the pleasure of attaining it.

In the case of pleasures of pursuit, the distinction between these primary and secondary desires (or as Sidgwick prefers to call them--extra-regarding and self-regarding impulses) is further accentuated by the fact that they tend to conflict with each other.

"A man who maintains throughout an epicurean mood, keeping his main conscious aim perpetually fixed on his own pleasure, does not catch the full spirit of the chase... Here comes into view the fundamental paradox of Hedonism, that the impulse of pleasure if too predominant, defeats its own aim."<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, says Sidgwick, the conflict between the two kinds of impulses is not absolute and man's greatest happiness, if this be his goal, is usually attained by a sort of alternating rhythm of the two. Sidgwick concludes that we certainly do not always have

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16. Ibid., pp. 44-5.

17. Ibid., p. 48.



impulses toward pleasure. Psychological hedonism is false. We do however sometimes have impulses toward pleasure. The possibility remains of validating both egoism and utilitarianism provided that some better means can be found for doing so. In the next chapter we shall consider Sidgwick's reliance upon intuition for this purpose.

SECTION 6. Having presented his arguments against psychological hedonism, Sidgwick, much later in his work<sup>18</sup>, suggests that even if it were true, it would not necessarily support utilitarianism. He pays special attention to one of Mill's arguments. Mill had held that:

- a. The individual can desire only his own happiness.
- b. The happiness of the aggregate of individuals therefore ought to be desired.
- c. The individual ought, therefore, to desire the aggregate happiness.

Sidgwick remarks, of this proof that:

"...an aggregate of actual desires, each directed towards a different part of the general happiness, does not constitute an actual desire for the general happiness, existing in any individual; and Mill would certainly not contend that a desire which does not exist in any individual can possibly exist in an aggregate of individuals. There being therefore no actual desire for the general happiness, the proposition that the general happiness is desirable cannot be in this way established..."<sup>19</sup>

Sidgwick's argument here seems quite convincing but it must

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18. Book III, Chapter XIII.

19. Ibid., p. 388.

be remembered that Mill and Bentham share another position connected with proof of utilitarianism. Both men seem to feel that the pursuit of general happiness tends to be or can be made to be the best way to achieve one's own. If this statement is true then it does seem that the acceptance of psychological hedonism necessarily involves the acceptance of utilitarianism. Sidgwick, however, questions the statement's truth. He observes that nowhere in Bentham's own works does he give a complete answer as to how this reconciliation of utilitarianism and egoistic hedonism occurs. Neither he says, does Mill show how individuals will achieve even the best chance at their own happiness in this life by pursuing the utilitarian goal. Sidgwick thus finds difficulties with both arguments by which his predecessors sought to connect utilitarianism with psychological hedonism; and this is in addition to his view that psychological hedonism is not valid in the first place.<sup>20</sup>

One final point I will mention here is Sidgwick's criticism of Mill's view that there are qualitative differences among pleasures. Sidgwick's criticism is very brief.<sup>21</sup> He simply points out that qualitative distinctions would have to be made on the basis of criteria other than pleasure but for hedonism there can be no such criteria. If pleasure is the only ultimate end then the

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20. The arguments, here, I have taken from another of Sidgwick's works--Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers. The comments are found in his exposition of Bentham and Mill, pp. 232-236.

21. The Methods of Ethics, pp. 120-121, 128-131; Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers, p. 236.

results of an act cannot be measured in any way other than by pleasure.

SECTION 7. When Sidgwick criticizes his utilitarian predecessors there are at least two difficulties which he seems to miss. The first difficulty is the lack of a clear statement by Bentham and Mill as to which form of psychological hedonism they are using to prove utilitarianism. Sidgwick states, with respect to Mill, that we must assume Mill to use the empirical form, since the other form is tautologous. However, I am not sure that we can, with fairness to Mill, make this assumption. It may be that Mill (and Bentham too) vaguely hoped to have the best of both forms--the certainty of the logical form with the meaningfulness of the empirical one.

The second difficulty is Mill's apparently ambiguous use of the word desirable in his argument that the only proof that a thing is desirable is that it is desired. If desirable simply means desired then this argument is true but tautologous. If desirable means worthy of desire then the argument is significant but not necessarily true. Only if the word is used ambiguously can there even be an appearance that the argument is successful. Sidgwick claims, in later editions of the Methods to have noted this ambiguity and yet he himself seems to employ it at a critical point in the development of his own position. Having completed the discussion of Sidgwick's negative aspects of proof, I shall now turn to an exposition of that position.

## CHAPTER V

### THE VALIDITY OF UTILITARIANISM

SECTION 1. Although the very organization of Sidgwick's work and the proportion of it which is devoted to questions of workability suggest a major emphasis on this factor, Sidgwick is also concerned to show the validity of his "methods". The primary chapters in which he attempts this (Chapters XIII and XIV of Book III) occupy only 34 out of the 500 pages in the work but are of much greater importance than their proportion to the whole would indicate.

The starting point for Sidgwick's own proof of the validity of utilitarianism is his criticism in Book I of the proofs of Bentham and Mill. He argued, against their psychological hedonism, that what is could not be a proof of what ought to be and, furthermore, pursuit of pleasure was not the only thing that existed, anyway. As against his predecessors, Sidgwick claims that any real obligation must be based on an intuition even when this obligation is considered an end to be pursued (the good) rather than a duty to be obeyed (the right). In neither case can obligation be derived from mere observation of facts. I note, however, that

intuition and the right are virtually equivalent concepts and are so used by Sidgwick. The right is determined only by intuition; and moral intuitions always establish some right, whether that right happens to be that one ought to perform a duty or ought to seek an end. In either case it means that one ought to do something regardless of interest or consequences, though what one ought to do may itself involve consideration of consequences. Now Sidgwick recognizes, as we mentioned, that there is a distinction between the right and the good and accordingly he goes on to recognize a need for a "wider right" (wider intuitionism) as a means of establishing the intuitive certainty of the good.

In a very important passage of Book I, Sidgwick sets forth this position. He first remarks:

"I have used the term 'Intuitional' to denote the view of ethics which regards as the practically ultimate end of moral actions their conformity to certain rules or dictates of Duty unconditionally prescribed."<sup>1</sup>

He then goes on to state that, while this view of ethics is often thought to ignore consequences altogether, there is no ethics which does not consider consequences to some extent--for there is no clear point at which an act ends and consequences begin. This intuitional view, according to Sidgwick, is that only the immediate results of an act are to be considered.

"But again:", continues Sidgwick, "we have to observe that men may and do judge remote as well as immediate results to be in themselves good, and such as we ought to seek to realize, without considering them in relation to the feelings of sentient

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1. The Methods of Ethics, p. 96.

beings... We have therefore to admit a wider use of 'Intuition' as equivalent to immediate judgement as to what ought to be done or aimed at."<sup>2</sup>

If hedonism is presented as an obligatory end, then it, like all other goods, must derive from one of these wider intuitions.

"If Hedonism claims to give authoritative guidance, this can only be in virtue of the principle that pleasure is the only reasonable ultimate end of human action: and this principle cannot be known by induction from experience. Experience can at most tell us that all men always do seek pleasure as their ultimate end (that it does not support this conclusion I have already tried to show): it cannot tell us that anyone ought so to seek it. If this latter proposition is legitimately affirmed in respect either of private or of general happiness, it must either be immediately known to be true,--and therefore, we may say, a moral intuition--or be inferred ultimately from premises which include at least one such moral intuition; hence either species of Hedonism, regarded from the point of view primarily taken in this treatise, might be legitimately said to be in a certain sense 'intuitional'."<sup>3</sup>

Sidgwick reiterates his distinction between the wider and narrower intuitionism in Book III.

"...in such maxims as that...justice should be done 'though the sky should fall', it is implied that we have the power of seeing clearly that certain kinds of actions are right and reasonable in themselves, apart from their consequences;--or rather with a merely partial consideration of consequences... And such a power is claimed for the human mind by most of the writers who have maintained the existence of moral intuitions; I have therefore thought myself justified in treating this claim as characteristic of the method which I distinguish as intuitional. At the same time...there is a wider sense in which the term 'intuitional' might be legitimately applied to either Egoistic or Universalistic Hedonism; so far as either system lays down as a first principle--which if known at all must be intuitively known--that happiness is the only rational ultimate end of action."<sup>4</sup>

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2. Ibid., p. 97.

3. Ibid., p. 98.

4. Ibid., pp. 200-201.

Restated briefly, Sidgwick's position is that no hedonist (nor a proponent of any other good) can be completely opposed to an ethics of right since he relies upon it to establish that happiness (or wisdom, beauty, etc.) is the ultimate end. He does not consider happiness to be a means to some even further end--this ultimate end is unconditional and not dependent on consequences.

One would expect that the sole function of the "wider intuitionism" would be to establish the validity of various specific goods. In fact, however, Sidgwick uses it to establish what almost amounts to the general validity of the good itself. He also uses it to establish the validity of the narrower intuitionism. The narrower intuition he otherwise refers to in terms of "ordinary intuitions" or "the morality of common sense", while the wider he considers to involve "philosophical intuitions". By means of philosophical intuitions he claims to have established not merely various specific goods but the validity of all three of his methods of ethics including utilitarianism.

SECTION 2. In accordance with his emphasis upon workability, Sidgwick devotes most of his third book (on intuitionism) to a discussion of what he considers practical difficulties of the narrower intuitionism. While his discussion of the workability of the two other methods is considered in the next chapter of this thesis, it is important to immediately review the remarks on narrower intuitions. For these give perspective to the wider philosophical intuitions which he distinguishes in the last part of the

same book and upon which the various methods are based. At the outset of this review I must mention a peculiarity in Sidgwick's very understanding of duty ethics. There is, for him, a third type of intuitionism in addition to ordinary intuitionism and philosophical intuitionism. This third type is ultra intuitionism. Ultra intuitions apply to absolutely specific circumstances and do not involve any reasoning process at all.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, ordinary intuitions--what we usually call duty ethics-- are statements of general rules (always tell the truth, always keep promises, etc.). As such they involve a process of reasoning to determine whether the rules apply in any given case.<sup>6</sup>

This distinction between general intuitions and absolutely specific ones may be connected with another position of Sidgwick's. He maintains, as previously mentioned, that a duty ethics cannot completely ignore consequences since there is no clear point at which an act ends and consequences begin. When I introduced this point in Chapter I, I suggested that the delineation of an act from its consequences must itself be by an intuition if a duty ethics is to be retained. This, however, is not exactly the position which Sidgwick takes. He claims that rules of duty do not apply to the act as such but either to the "motive" of the act or its "intention". The intention of an act involves, for Sidgwick, all foreseen consequences. The motive of the act also involves some consequences but

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5. Ibid., Book I, Chapter VIII, Section 2.

6. Ibid., Book I, Chapter VIII, Section 3.



only those which are "desired".<sup>7</sup> It seems rather unusual to require that a duty ethics consider all foreseen consequences when even an ethics of the good could scarcely hope to do more than this. Yet Sidgwick, over the course of his argument, considers the workability of duty ethics as being applied to one or the other of these two alternatives (motives or intentions) and he himself considers that intentions are the most proper objects of rules of duty. Given the somewhat unusual object to which Sidgwick claims that rules of duty apply, what does he do in the analysis of these rules? He attempts to discover among the commonly accepted duties some which have the cogency of scientific axioms. He requires, among other things, that any such maxims should be truly self evident and not conflicting with each other. Three general categories of duties are considered.<sup>8</sup> Duties which involve the affections are called duties of Benevolence.<sup>9</sup> If we consider specific services, such as those which Benevolence requires, in terms of their distribution, we discover the duties of Justice.<sup>10</sup> For these prescribe how such services are to be distributed. One criterion of just acts is that they do not run counter to normal expectations. This is the most definite criterion and is indeed the basis for a third major category of duties--that of Laws and

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7. Ibid., Book III, Chapter I, Section 2.

8. There are several other categories but by far the most attention is given to these three.

9. The Methods of Ethics, Book III, Chapter IV.

10. Ibid., Book III, Chapter V.

Promises.<sup>11</sup> From his rather extensive analysis (over 100 pages) of these three categories and some others, Sidgwick draws virtually the same conclusions about duty ethics as had Mill and Bentham (the latter two with far more brevity). There is no agreement among people as to what constitutes duty and, accordingly, no clearly self evident duties<sup>12</sup> (at least of the narrower sort).

The nature of Sidgwick's argument is to develop various sub-categories of his main duties and then give, for each, examples of the common disagreements on specific duties. For my purposes it would be tedious and unnecessary to present these arguments in detail. I shall merely demonstrate his procedure by some examples.

In the case of duties of Benevolence, some people hold that children should obey their parents as to choice of mate and profession. Others say that they have no such obligation. Again there are those who hold that parents should sacrifice domestic to public good while others hold the contrary. Some say marriage should, without exception, be permanent. Others hold that there may be exceptions. One group holds that gratitude should be given in proportion to services rendered. Another claims that it should be given in proportion to the effort of the benefactor.

Similar disagreements are found in the case of duties of Justice. One criterion of just acts is that they fulfill expectations. But there is disagreement as to whether tacit expectations

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11. Ibid., Book III, Chapter VI.

12. Ibid., Book III, Chapter XI entitled "Review of the Morality of Common Sense".

should be fulfilled or only explicit ones. Moreover, the definition of expectations depends on customs and customs vary.

Some people hold that freedom is the only principle of Justice. All acts are just except those which interfere with someone else's freedom. It is not clear however to whom the principle of freedom applies since it cannot apply absolutely. It cannot apply to children, idiots, or for some, even to a lower stage of adult civilization. Furthermore, the principle itself cannot be absolute since, in the pure sense, it allows any amount of annoyance except actual constraint. To what extent does it apply? Does the principle apply to property, for example? In a world of limited goods, the holding of property is interference.

Another view of justice is that it involves the general rewarding of valuable deeds; but there is no really adequate way to determine the value of a deed. Market value does not seem adequate as a basis for justice and the adoption of a socialistic ideal begs the question.

These, then, are some examples of the considerations from which Sidgwick concludes that there is no agreement about what in fact are duties.<sup>13</sup>

There are two points about Sidgwick's argument that might be mentioned here. Firstly, this argument results in the same sort of

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13. It would seem that the nature of Sidgwick's argument, if not its precision, could be readily duplicated. All that is involved is to observe the avowed moral tenets of a few different religions, governments, civilizations, etc. Numerous disagreements--even about such basic questions as the definition of murder, will be almost immediately evident.

apparently empirical rather than logical objection to duty ethics which Mill and Bentham raised. It does not seem logically necessary that what is a duty for one person must be so for another, though disagreements on duties may create practical difficulties if one person's pursuit of his duty interferes with another's pursuit of his. There is a logical difficulty of duty ethics but that is its apparent denial of, and at the same time dependence upon, free will. Sidgwick however does not recognize a problem of free will in this context.

The second point is that, surprisingly, Sidgwick's objection to duty ethics is based on almost the same argument which in Book I he used as an objection to the opposite of duty ethics--i.e. interest. In both cases the objections rest on the observation that there are disagreements among people about what their duties are.

SECTION 3. Although Sidgwick's argument against duty ethics is very similar to that of Bentham and Mill, there are two important differences. In the first place, he suggests that while no rules of duty (common sense morality, as he calls it) are absolute, they are nevertheless binding more often than not. "...the Morality of Common Sense may still be perfectly adequate to give practical guidance to common people in common circumstances..."<sup>14</sup> This concession of Sidgwick's is one which Bentham and Mill would not be likely to grant.

The second and crucial difference between Sidgwick's argument

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14. The Methods of Ethics, p. 361.

and that of his predecessors is that Sidgwick does not completely denounce duty ethics. Although none of the narrower ordinary intuitions are axiomatic, there are, for him, some wider philosophical ones which are. And these wider intuitions provide the proof of his various methods--among them utilitarianism.

In the pursuit of philosophical intuitions there are two hazards which must be avoided, says Sidgwick. One of these is to so concern yourself with a particular aspect of common sense morality that your very discussion of it is based on an implicit acceptance of the self same morality. Another hazard, to which the ancient Greeks succumbed, is the making of sham axioms which are in reality nothing but tautologies. Plato, for example, held that the good life consisted in the exercise of Virtue. As to what conduct was virtuous, however, he could only say that it was knowledge of the Good and action in accordance therewith.

If the hazards are avoided, we are capable of arriving at certain axiomatic intuitions. There are three such intuitions.

SECTION 4. One self evident intuition is the maxim of "Justice".

This maxim may be best stated as follows: "It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment."<sup>15</sup> A simpler statement of the same

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15. Ibid., p. 380.

maxim would be that "...whatever action any of us judges to be right for himself, he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances."<sup>16</sup> This positive statement of the maxim would, however, permit sin, provided the sinner was willing for others to do likewise; thus the negative form is more exact.

The maxim of Justice is obtained simply by reflection upon the general action of rightness as commonly conceived. In physical science we are forced to accept variations for which no rational explanation can be discovered. It is generally agreed that this cannot be permitted in ethical judgments.

SECTION 5. The maxim of "Prudence" is also axiomatic. It is that "...Hereafter as such is to be regarded neither less nor more than now,"<sup>17</sup> with respect to an individual's conscious life. It is thus a principle recommending impartial concern for all parts of one's life.

The principle of Justice was derived "...by considering the similarity of the individuals that make up a Logical Whole or Genus."<sup>18</sup> There are others, no less important, which emerge in the consideration of a Mathematical or Quantitative Whole. Such a Whole is presented in the common notion of the Good...of any individual human being."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we see that no temporal part of the

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16. Ibid., p. 379.

17. Ibid., p. 381.

18. By a Logical Whole is meant a qualitative whole--a whole of qualitatively different parts which should however be considered on the same value level.

19. The Methods of Ethics, pp. 380-381.

good of an individual--whatever that good may be--should be preferred to any other merely on the basis of the time difference alone.

We may note that Sidgwick is discussing absolute rules of right which, notwithstanding Bentham and Mill, he does believe to exist--though there are only three of them. Nevertheless he assumes in the maxim of Prudence and in that of Benevolence to follow that what is right is to properly distribute the good.

SECTION 6. The maxim of "Benevolence" maintains that "...each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him."<sup>20</sup> While Prudence is concerned with proper temporal distribution, Benevolence is concerned with the spatial distribution.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the derivation of this maxim, Sidgwick remarks:

"So far we have only been considering the 'Good on the Whole' of a single individual; but just as this notion is constructed by comparison and integration of the different 'goods' that succeed one another in the series of our conscious states, so we have formed the notion of Universal Good by comparison and<sup>22</sup> integration of the goods of all individual human--or sentient

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20. Ibid., p. 382.

21. This distinction between spatial and temporal distribution as a manner of describing Prudence and Benevolence is not, in its exact terminology, employed by Sidgwick. It is used by Hayward in his book The Ethical Philosophy of Sidgwick and is found in various places in that work.

22. Some utilitarians held that the greatest happiness should be sought only for humans. Others said that all sentient creatures should be included. Hence the qualification here. The issue does not seem to be very important philosophically.

--existences. And here again, just as in the former case, I obtain the self-evident principle that the good of any one individual is of no more importance from the point of view... of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realized in the one case than in the other. And it is evident to me that I am bound to aim at good generally... not merely at a particular part of it. From these two rational intuitions we may deduce as a necessary inference, the maxim of Benevolence..."<sup>23</sup>

In other words, it is evident that the general good does not repose more in one individual than any other; and it is further evident that one should seek the general good--thus the maxim of Benevolence.<sup>24</sup>

SECTION 7. The existence of three self-evident maxims has been revealed but these belong to the ethics of right, or intuitionism, in the wider (philosophical) sense, and not "...in the restricted sense which, for clear distinction of methods, I gave to this term at the outset of our investigation."<sup>25</sup> These maxims being both self evident and of the wider sort are capable of supporting an ethics of the good as well as of right. Hence we find that the maxim of Prudence is implied in the commonly accepted method of egoism, the maxim of Benevolence is implied in the method of utilitarianism,

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23. The Methods of Ethics, p. 382.

24. Sidgwick claims that his confidence in the axiomatic character of his intuitions is strengthened by the fact that other moralists have advanced somewhat similar ones. He cites Samuel Clarke's 'rules of righteousness' and Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperatives' as examples. In the first edition of the Methods Sidgwick did not present his maxims as direct intuitions but rather as interpretations of the intuitions of Clarke and Kant.

25. The Methods of Ethics, p. 386.



and the maxim of Justice is the basis of intuitionism. The correlation between maxims and methods is not quite that simple, however. For Sidgwick further maintains that the maxim of Justice "...belongs in all its applications to Utilitarianism as much as to any system commonly called intuitional."<sup>26</sup> Although there is virtually no additional argument in this chapter, Sidgwick maintains a page later not only that the basis of intuitionism (Justice) applies equally to Utilitarianism but that "Utilitarianism is thus presented as the final form into which intuitionism tends to pass, when the demand for really self-evident first principles is rigorously pressed."<sup>27</sup>

Let us summarize what has been accomplished in this analysis of the ethics of right--the method of intuitionism. We first observed that there are a narrower and wider meaning and discovered that the narrower one was indeed subject to the inconsistencies and incoherence which Bentham and Mill had claimed. This narrower meaning was furthermore that on which the initial distinction of methods was based. Intuitionism, in the wider sense and transcending particular methods, did however provide three self-evident maxims. These three maxims turned out, as it happened, to be the proof of the three methods. It was, moreover, discovered that the maxim of Justice was as applicable to utilitarianism as to the narrower intuitionism and it was then virtually concluded with no further argument that these two methods were reducible to each other.

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26. Ibid., pp. 386-387.

27. Ibid., p. 388.

We are thus left with two methods--egoism and utilitarianism (the latter including the narrower intuitionism). We have then begun to prove utilitarianism in a somewhat more satisfactory manner than Mill<sup>28</sup> was able to do, according to Sidgwick. But the proof is not finished. Though a failure, Mill's proof was at least an attempt to prove utilitarianism alone. Here we have only managed to reduce ethics to two conflicting principles. Furthermore we haven't even proved Hedonism since what the good is, which the maxims of Prudence and Benevolence are to distribute, has not yet been determined. We shall consider this latter question first and then discuss the problem of two conflicting principles.

SECTION 8. Before proceeding to an answer of what it is that is good, which in the course of his argument is Sidgwick's very next concern, let us briefly consider how he defines the good, as indicated in an earlier chapter.<sup>29</sup>

We find that just as his conception of the right is a bit unusual (rules of duty not only apply to consequences but to all foreseen consequences) so, in a sense, is his conception of the good. He begins with the observation that the good cannot be defined as pleasure, since we commonly recognize a matter of taste such that what is pleasant may not be good. Furthermore if the good were defined as pleasure, then a hedonist who held that what was good

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28. In contrasting his own proof with that of his predecessors, Sidgwick refers specifically to Mill's position at this point, though a generally similar contrast could be drawn with Bentham's.

29. The Methods of Ethics, Book I, Chapter IX entitled "Good"

was pleasure would merely be stating a tautology. The good can, however, be defined as a sort of desire. It is not what is desired, since this might cease to be so when actually acquired (due to accompanying consequences which were not considered). It is what would be desired given knowledge of all alternatives and consequences.

Thus the good is, in effect, defined as desire accompanied by perfect knowledge. The peculiar thing about this conception of the good, and particularly when advanced by Sidgwick, is that it almost seems to reduce the good to interest. For the qualification that there be perfect knowledge seems merely to require that the interest be enlightened and enlightened interest far from being at all different from interest per se is, on the contrary, the purest form of it. Yet Sidgwick takes great pains, in other parts of his work, to show that what is good is determined not by interest but by intuition. In view of his two positions he seems to be describing the good as a goal which a thoroughly knowledgeable person would want as a matter of obligation and regardless of whether or not he wanted it.

SECTION 9. Given Sidgwick's somewhat unusual definition of the good, what is it that he believes is the good? He examines what in effect are two groups<sup>30</sup> of possible answers and finds that neither of them are tenable.

The first group of answers merely leads you in a logical circle.

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30. Sidgwick does not explicitly group these answers but he treats them similarly.

For example, one answer holds that the good means conformity to common rules of morality but these rules are based on the wider intuitions and these wider intuitions merely tell one to seek the good. Sidgwick considers other answers of this sort but, as they do not seem very controversial and have not generally been questioned by his critics, they will not be considered here.

The conclusion to the study of the first group is that neither virtuous character nor conduct can be called the ultimate good since they presuppose this good. Sidgwick then remarks:

"And what has been said of Virtue seems to be still more manifestly true of the other talents, gifts and graces which make up the common notion of human excellence or perfection. However immediately the excellent quality of such gifts and skills may be recognized and admired, reflection shows that they are only valuable on account of the good or desirable conscious life in which they are or will be actualized... Shall we then say that Ultimate Good is Good or Desirable conscious or sentient Life--of which Virtuous action is one element but not the sole constituent? This seems in harmony with Common Sense..."<sup>31</sup>

In further support of this position, Sidgwick notes that we cannot attribute good to mere preservation--for preservation is considered good only when accompanied by consciousness--that consciousness which is, on the whole, desirable rather than undesirable. Moreover, so far as virtuous activity is considered a part of the good, it is so only because the consciousness accompanying it is desirable for the agent. A virtuous life would not be good on the whole if it involved great pain, says Sidgwick.

Thus we arrive at Sidgwick's second group of answers which is

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31. The Methods of Ethics, pp. 395-396.

inclusive of all those which would propose as good something in isolation from "desirable conscious life". But even if it is granted that only "desirable conscious life" is the good, such a conclusion is not adequate for utilitarianism. In order to prove utilitarianism (in its usual meaning) Sidgwick should instead prove that ultimate good is pleasure. Are desirable consciousness and pleasure identical? Only if they are has he succeeded. Now there are, in consciousness, cognitions and volitions as well as feelings. The desirability of feelings cannot be measured by any other standard than individual pleasure so here, at least, the two notions are identical. What of cognitions and volitions? Sidgwick claims that we will find on reflection that if we distinguish these cognitions and volitions from the feelings that accompany them and from the objective relations (such as in cognition prompt us to speak of truth or falsity) they are neither desirable nor undesirable but are completely neutral. (I shall consider this matter of objective relations in the following section.) What is accomplished by this abstraction of feelings from the cognitions and volitions they accompany? Briefly stated, Sidgwick's argument concerning whether desirable consciousness and pleasure are identical seems to result in the following:

- a. One element of desirable consciousness--feeling--is identical with pleasure.
- b. The other two elements--cognitions and volitions are desirable and therefore part of ultimate good only insofar as they are connected with feelings.

- c. Therefore it is the feeling in these elements that is part of ultimate good.
- d. Therefore desirable consciousness is in all cases identical with pleasure.

SECTION 10. It has been proved in a negative way (by negation of the two groups of answers) that ultimate good is desirable consciousness--which means pleasure. Sidgwick now pauses in the development of his proof and makes a partial retreat. A man may prefer a painful truth to a comfortable fiction but in this case he is not judging the conscious state as such but an objective relation. Similarly, a man may prefer painful freedom to comfortable slavery because he has a predominant aversion to the latter. In these cases it would seem that there were desires which were not governed by feeling merely as feeling (i.e. pleasure) but by some objective standard. If so, then the maxim of Benevolence would not lead to utilitarianism alone.

But now Sidgwick moves forward to the positive and crucial proof for pleasure as the sole ultimate good. "I think, however, that this view ought not to commend itself to the sober judgement of reflective persons."<sup>32</sup> The positive proof is twofold. "I appeal firstly to his the reader's intuitive judgement after due consideration of the question when fairly placed before it; and secondly to a comprehensive comparison of the ordinary judgements

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32. Ibid., p. 400.

of mankind."<sup>33</sup> Concerning the first part of the proof, he gives his own intuitive judgement.

"Admitting that we have actual experience of such preferences as have just been described, of which the ultimate object is something that is not merely consciousness: it still seems to me that when (to use Butler's phrase) we 'sit down in a cool hour' we can only justify to ourselves the importance that we attach to any of these objects by considering its conduciveness, in one way or another, to the happiness of sentient beings."<sup>34</sup>

It seems then that there are no desires governed by objective standards. There only appear to be. We also find this to be true when we consider the second part of the proof--the study of Common Sense judgements.

"...several cultivated persons do habitually judge that knowledge, art, etc.--not to speak of Virtue--are ends independently of the pleasure derived from them. But we may urge not only that all these elements of 'ideal good' are productive of pleasure in various ways; but also that they seem to obtain the commendation of Common Sense, roughly speaking, in proportion to the degree of this productiveness."<sup>35</sup>

In other words, any objective element is valuable roughly in proportion to its pleasantness. The inference seems to be that the pleasantness is therefore what is valued.

SECTION 11. Sidgwick has now proved, to his satisfaction, that the ultimate good is pleasure (or desirable consciousness) and nothing else. It is pleasure, then, of which the wider intuitions of Prudence (for egoism) and Benevolence (for utilitarianism) are to prescribe

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33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., p. 401.

35. Ibid.

the distribution. Thus we have found that the two methods which the wider intuitions support are indeed hedonistic.

At this point it is necessary, for the sake of clarity, to review the somewhat different functions of Sidgwick's various wider or philosophical intuitions. We may recall that a primary reason for distinguishing the wider intuitionism was in order to establish that any specific good, even though involving consequences, was in a sense based on a right or duty--the duty to pursue it. The intuition which established that only pleasure is the good is presumably of this sort. On the other hand, Sidgwick also relies on philosophical intuitionism to establish his three methods of ethics. Since the initial determination of these methods was based on the common distinction between the right and the good, one would suppose that the provision of an intuitive basis for the methods would also constitute an intuitive basis for the right and the good. So far as can be seen, this is what Sidgwick intends. (Whether or not he succeeds in this will be considered in the last chapter.)

From this review of Sidgwick's philosophical intuitions, it is evident that these intuitions not only provide the proof for the validity of utilitarianism; they also establish the second and third of the four propositions by which Sidgwick justifies his delineation of the three methods of ethics.<sup>36</sup> They thus "prove" the validity of egoism (and in a sense intuitionism) as well.

SECTION 12. How does our proof of utilitarianism compare now with

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36. See Chapter IV, Section 3 of this thesis.



that of Mill's? We had first proved an abstract principle of distribution--not just one, however, but two. At that time we did not know what was to be distributed. Well, we now have our commodity, such as it is, but we are still torn between two principles of distributing it--utilitarianism and egoism. Can the two be reconciled? Sidgwick's answer is no--not at least by any human effort. He claims that both egoism and utilitarianism are equally axiomatic and therefore concludes in the very last chapter of the work<sup>37</sup> that he has not succeeded in providing a rational morality.<sup>38</sup> For such a morality cannot be based on two different "methods". The postulation of a god who reconciles these two methods to each other would resolve this difficulty but there are no evident grounds for this postulate. We may conclude that Sidgwick's hope--though not his express intention--to reduce ethics to a single principle, has not materialized.

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37. Book IV, concluding chapter entitled "The Mutual Relations of the Three Methods"

38. Some of Sidgwick's critics have argued that he does not actually believe there is so serious a conflict between the two methods as he appears to. In the course of my study I have not, however, found sufficiently compelling arguments to assume that Sidgwick does not mean what he says. In the concluding chapter he describes the reconciliation of the two methods as a matter of life or death to the practical reason. In the description of his thought he states how he slowly and reluctantly came to believe that no complete solution between them was possible. In a previously quoted portion of the preface to the second edition he denies the assumption of some critics that he is a proponent of only one of the three methods he examines.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WORKABILITY OF UTILITARIANISM

SECTION 1. The distinction I have employed between the validity and the workability of a moral principle (and consequently of the definition of morality on which it is based) is not intended to be an absolute one. I use it merely as a convenient means of ordering the arguments of Sidgwick and of Bentham and Mill. Indeed, so far as logical problems are concerned, there seems to be no actual distinction at all. A moral principle which is illogical cannot be valid, since it contradicts itself. Neither, however, can such a principle be workable since the more successfully one adheres to it, the more successfully will he avoid it.

I treat Sidgwick's discussion of workability separately and at some length, firstly, because the workability of utilitarianism has been a key point at which to attack this principle. Furthermore, Sidgwick presents in these discussions additional proofs for his reduction of morality to utilitarianism. Finally, it is in the workability of utilitarianism, especially, that Sidgwick himself clearly recognizes many of the difficulties of this principle.

Sidgwick is almost exclusively concerned with the problems of workability in Books II and IV. In Book II on egoism, he understands a method to mean determination of the most expedient means to reach the end (here, one's own happiness). In Book IV on utilitarianism he understands it to mean, in general, the determination of unconditional rules, obedience to which will itself bring about the end (here, the general happiness). Actually the method of egoism could, as he admits, be applied equally well to utilitarianism.<sup>1</sup> His two interpretations of method correspond roughly to the earlier and later versions of utilitarianism. What he prefers to call the method of utilitarianism corresponds to the earlier version, as described in Chapter II. The method of egoism corresponds, when applied to the utilitarian end, to the later version of Bentham, according to whom one sought the end directly and not by dutiful obedience to rules.

The discussions in Books II and IV form, in effect, a continuous argument, the conclusion of which is that the rules of duty are themselves implicitly utilitarian and, though subject to serious problems, are in general a better guide to the utilitarian end than is the direct measurement of pleasure. Thus this argument involves a severe criticism (almost a refutation) of the positions of Bentham and Mill, both of whom relied more or less confidently on the direct measurement of pleasure for making utilitarianism work.

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1. He does not suggest that the method he associates with utilitarianism could also be applied to egoism. This alternative seems plausible however, particularly if one assumes a divine adjustment of dutifulness and reward.

The criticism of the direct form of utilitarianism is the substance of Book II. A proof for the indirect form together with a very careful analysis of its problems is the substance of Book IV. I shall trace the progress of this argument through Book II and then through Book IV.

The problem of workability for Bentham's utilitarianism--and for Sidgwick's "Method of Egoism"--can otherwise be stated as the problem of measuring pleasure in order to determine what actions will, in fact, provide the greatest pleasure. Sidgwick agrees with Bentham that only quantitative measurement is consistent with hedonism and it is such measurement with which he is concerned in Book II. Three techniques for measuring the pleasurable results of actions are considered:

- a. reliance upon one's own personal comparisons--empirical hedonism (or the empirical-reflective method),
- b. reliance upon the common opinions of mankind--objective hedonism,
- c. reliance upon general laws derived from a scientific investigation of the concomitants of pleasure and pain--deductive hedonism.

The most important criticisms are given in the discussion of the first technique--empirical hedonism--since Sidgwick concludes, as we shall see, that the other two techniques are ultimately reducible to this one.

SECTION 2. Before proceeding to discuss each of the three

techniques, Sidgwick gives his definition of pleasure for measuring purposes. In the refutation of psychological hedonism, he denied Mill's contention that pleasure and desire were identical--we do not always naturally seek pleasure. In that argument he appeared to understand pleasure as meaning the satisfaction of a desire. This would seem to be the definition most appropriate to hedonism. But pleasure can be understood to mean desire itself, in which case, of course, the two are identical. The latter may be called the naturalistic definition and is, as we have seen, the basis of logical psychological hedonism. Sidgwick seems here to indicate again that he does not agree with the naturalistic definition but does agree with the hedonistic one. He argues that there may be desires which are out of proportion with the accompanying pleasure. Still, he says, pleasure must be defined in relation to desire. "I propose therefore to define Pleasure...as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or--in cases of comparison--preferable."<sup>2</sup>

If pleasure is a feeling conceived as something one would want, then it is probably understood here as the satisfaction of a desire. There seem to be two possible meanings of "feeling". One is that it means satisfaction or dissatisfaction and in that case a desired feeling would obviously mean satisfaction. The other meaning of feeling would be an emotion or sensation considered objectively. However, if pleasure means merely an object which would be desired,

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2. The Methods of Ethics, p. 127.

and not a satisfaction which would be desired, then Sidgwick's definition of pleasure is virtually equivalent to Mill's. The only difference is that while Mill says pleasure means what you want, Sidgwick says pleasure means what you apprehend as "wantable".

SECTION 3. So far as utilitarianism is concerned, the burden of Book II is to show the need for some method more effective than direct measurement of pleasure for achieving the general happiness. Nevertheless, Sidgwick does not believe that it is necessary to altogether discard the direct method. Thus, the criticisms he gives he considers serious but not absolutely conclusive against either egoism or utilitarianism. Indeed the role he assumes in this Book is not that of a critic but rather a defender of the method of direct measurement against the objections raised by others.

One of the logical difficulties facing utilitarianism, and indeed any ethics of good, is that the consequences of an act appear to be infinite and therefore impossible to measure by any definite standard. This is the first problem Sidgwick considers and, since it is of particular importance and Sidgwick's discussion is relatively brief, I quote him below.

"It may be objected that the calculation of the pleasurable results of an act is too complex for practice; since any complete forecast of the future would involve a vast number of contingencies of varying degrees of probability, and to calculate the Hedonistic value of each of these chances of feeling would be interminable. Still we may perhaps reduce the calculation within manageable limits, without serious loss of accuracy, by discarding all manifestly imprudent conduct, and neglecting the less probable and less important

contingencies; as we do in some of the arts that have more definite ends such as strategy or medicine. For if the general in ordering a march, or the physician in recommending a change of abode, took into consideration all the circumstances that were at all relevant to the end sought, their calculations would become impracticable; accordingly they confine themselves to the most important; and we may deal similarly with the Hedonistic art of life."<sup>3</sup>

Sidgwick's conclusion seems to be that the problem of measuring infinite consequences can be avoided by considering only the most important and most probable ones. He then goes on to other difficulties. First he discusses what he considers to be two rather minor ones.

An idealist of the time held that pleasure as feeling could not be conceived apart from its conditions which were not feelings. Sidgwick merely notes that his critic refutes himself--for he argues at great length about the concept pleasure. Another objection, quickly demolished, is that greatest pleasure cannot be realized all at once and therefore cannot be an ultimate end. The word end, or good, is not commonly understood as a goal reached all at once.

The remainder of the chapter on empirical hedonism is devoted to three very serious objections to which Sidgwick devotes most of his attention. The first objection is that if the more permanent objects of pleasure--such as family, knowledge, culture, etc. are sought as ends in themselves, then we no longer have hedonism. If, however, they are sought only as means to pleasure, it seems likely that they will not provide it. While this problem is indeed the

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3. Ibid., pp. 131-132.

Fundamental Paradox of Egoistic Hedonism, says Sidgwick, it merely indicates the self-limiting nature of this goal--not its impossibility. First of all, there is commonly an alternating rhythm of self-regarding and extra-regarding impulses.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, even where this alternation is not adequate, as for example where someone initially has nothing but desire for pleasure, still it is possible for him to achieve it. It is simply necessary for him to recognize first that the pursuit of other ends is needed for him to attain pleasure and then to place himself under the control of one of the many extra-regarding impulses which, at least latently, still exist within him.

The second of these objections will also be found, in fact, only to create a certain danger, but not to make hedonism impossible. The practice of consciously measuring pleasures is apt to interfere with our full enjoyment of them. On the other hand, it would seem that pleasure depends on consciousness and the more conscious we are, the more pleasure we get. At first sight we appear to have here an irreconcilable contradiction. Again the answer seems to involve, though less explicitly, Sidgwick's notion of an alternating rhythm of extra-regarding and self-regarding impulses. It is not consciousness per se, but reflective consciousness, which interferes with enjoyment. Therefore, one must simply avoid measurement at the moment of actual enjoyment (which is probably accompanying an extra-regarding impulse) and engage in it later (presumably under the

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4. See Chapter IV, Section 4 of this thesis.



influence of the self-regarding impulse).

The third and most serious objection is that the results of one's own measurement of pleasure are likely to be either very imprecise or actually false. In order to determine the weight of this objection, says Sidgwick, we must answer the following questions.

- a. How far can each of us estimate his own past experience of pleasures and pains?
- b. How far can the above knowledge permit forecasts of the greatest happiness within one's reach in the future?
- c. How far can one appropriate, for use in such forecasts, the past experience of others?

Concerning the first question, it seems to Sidgwick that even the simplest sort of comparison between two pleasures of the same kind, such as the enjoyment of two types of food or of intellectual activities, yields a definite result only if the differences in pleasantness are great. In the majority of cases where different kinds of pleasures are compared, such as labor with rest or scientific knowledge with charitable enterprise--no confident decision can be given. Still further difficulties are involved when the pleasures are mixed with some pain or when an attempt is made to compare pure pleasures with pure pains and determine the quantity of one which would exactly balance a quantity of the other.

We must then agree that the results of measuring one's own pleasure are not very precise. We must also agree that they are

apt to be false, since a man's estimate of any given pleasure is likely to vary. This is partly because some pleasures and pains are more easily recalled than others. Thus we often pleasurablely recall a situation which was unpleasant at the time. What we are recalling is the excitement, which would, by itself, have been pleasurable. A second and more conspicuous cause of one's variations in judgements about the same pleasure is a change in mental or bodily conditions. The pleasures of appetite cannot be adequately measured if we are full, and when we are hungry they are apt to be exaggerated. Furthermore, while feeling a pain or an intense pleasure we will probably underrate other pains or pleasures. These variations cannot be avoided by maintaining a passionless state. Some pleasures require prior desire, even intense desire, in order to be fully enjoyed.

In consideration of the above observations, we conclude that it is very difficult to estimate one's past experience of pleasure and pain. Indeed, the problems exposed involve a more general problem as well. Pleasure only exists as it is felt. Whatever a person thinks pleasurable, at the moment of feeling it, is pleasurable for him. If this is so, however, it is impossible to prove empirically that pleasures differ, such that each has a definite intensity. For only one pleasure is ever experienced at a time. In the light of the more general problem, any comparison that we could make would, regardless of apparent precision or accuracy, be merely imaginary. Concerning this general problem, Sidgwick remarks, "If...we are asked what ground we have for regarding this

imaginary result as a valid representation of reality, we cannot say more than that the belief in its general validity is irresistibly suggested in reflection on experience, and remains at any rate uncontradicted by experience."<sup>5</sup> In other words, even if we have no proof that there are really differences among pleasures, experience "suggests" that there are. And, Sidgwick argues in a similar way, experience also suggests that we can measure pleasure-- at least roughly and for purposes of practical guidance. We can make a number of observations at different times and in different moods and thus diminish the measuring error.

The final conclusion with respect to question (a) is that we cannot prove empirically that there are any differences in pleasure and, even if we could, such differences would be very difficult to measure precisely and accurately. Nevertheless, when we reflect on experience we come to believe that such differences do exist and that we can, at least roughly, measure them.

Question (b) concerned the extent to which our measurements permitted forecasts of future greatest happiness. In answer to this question we find that all the problems which make it difficult for us to measure past pleasures also reappear when we try to predict future ones. Both our tastes and susceptibilities may change.

The problems reappear again when we consider question (c). In addition there are certain other difficulties in trying to predict what will give one pleasure on the basis of other people's

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5. The Methods of Ethics, p. 146.

experiences. For one thing, these people may differ from us. For another, our sympathetic awareness of alien experiences may make us believe that we would enjoy or get pain from something when we actually would not. We might, of course, be able to alter ourselves so that we would enjoy what we did not before but we do not know how far this is possible.

Our final conclusion with respect to questions (b) and (c) must then be the same as for (a). Granted the apparent problems, we do seem to measure pleasure.

SECTION 4. Can we avoid the difficulties of empirical hedonism by resorting to objective or deductive hedonism? Sidgwick's answer is no. These two techniques ultimately depend on empirical hedonism. Objective hedonism--the reliance upon common opinions as to what gives pleasure--could, at best, only be true for the average man and actually there is no common agreement about the sources of happiness or the order of their importance. In interpreting for himself the findings of objective hedonism, one is thus thrown back on his own opinions. A view of hedonism falling midway between objective and deductive hedonism is the view that doing what is right is the best source of happiness. This may be true in a settled state of society but is not in periods of social unrest. Moreover, that it appears to be so is partly due to the force of law and public opinion, but to avoid these one need only appear to do the right, not actually do it. In a perfect society this might not be so but it is now.

Deductive hedonism holds that there are physiological or

psychological activities or functions that are concomitants of pleasure and pains. It assumes that these concomitants are themselves easier to measure and predict. One philosopher holds that medium activities are most pleasurable, another that it is full development of faculties. Even assuming that the concomitants are easier to measure, there is still the problem of measuring the concomitance and this takes us back to all the problems of empirical hedonism. Although not explicitly stated, this seems to be Sidgwick's conclusion respecting deductive hedonism.

To repeat, then, there is no way to avoid empirical hedonism as the method of egoism--the only method by which an individual seeks his own greatest happiness and one of the methods by which it is possible to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

There is one important qualification to these findings, however, especially with respect to objective hedonism. Although there is no agreement about the sources of happiness or their importance, these disagreements only occasionally cause conflicts. Common sense opinions are still a generally valid guide to achievement of greatest happiness--when there are conflicts though, empirical hedonism must decide.

SECTION 5. Granted the difficulties of empirical hedonism, is it possible to find another method that might be more workable so far as utilitarianism is concerned? Sidgwick does not suggest that we could find such an alternative for egoism but he does think that we can do so for utilitarianism. We recall that in Book III he

criticizes the narrower intuitionism--the morality of common sense--as being inconsistent and uncertain. For similar reasons he holds, in Book II, that common sense is not a valid alternative to empirical hedonism. In other words, common sense is not completely adequate when used to determine unconditional rules of duty nor when used to determine the best means to the egoistic end. In both cases, however, he maintains that it is generally adequate.

In Book IV, Sidgwick relies heavily on this position that common sense judgements only occasionally conflict--a position that Mill and Bentham would not be likely to grant. In that chapter he maintains, in effect, that while common sense judgements are not an adequate alternative to empirical hedonism as the method of egoism, they are adequate as the method of utilitarianism. Bentham and Mill had argued, from observing the inconsistencies of duty ethics, that such ethics should be completely replaced with utilitarianism.<sup>6</sup> Sidgwick, making the same general observation but assuming the general adequacy of duty ethics, reaches the rather different conclusion that duty ethics is itself, though incompletely and imperfectly, utilitarian. The morality of common sense is an attempt to reach the utilitarian end.

We noted in Chapter V how Sidgwick, after having established the wider intuitions of benevolence, prudence and justice, maintained,

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6. In his Utilitarianism, Mill did devote a chapter to showing that the principle of justice was reducible to utilitarianism. In so doing he indicated that the rules of justice were purely expedient, however. He did not at all suggest, as did Sidgwick, that they still carried about them something of the character of absoluteness.

with virtually no argument, that benevolence and justice both tended to support utilitarianism. He then inferred that utilitarianism was, therefore, the final form into which intuitionism (the narrower intuitionism) tended to pass. This position appears to be what justifies him in taking the earlier position (in Book I) that egoism and utilitarianism were significantly distinct methods of ethics in the first place.

Now in Book IV, which is on utilitarianism, we find a proof of the former and, by inference, a proof of the latter of these two positions. And in so doing, we have justified the separate consideration of utilitarianism by means of which we justify it.

What is the proof which accomplishes this? What proof supports the position that common sense morality really is an attempt, though incomplete, to achieve the utilitarian end? For one thing, utilitarianism supports, in general, the rules of common sense. Moreover, where these rules conflict, utilitarianism is naturally called in as arbiter. Thirdly, when people interpret the same rules differently or support different rules in the same age and country, they are commonly found to defend their respective positions with utilitarian reasons. Finally, the differences in rules between different ages and countries are usually found to be strongly correlated to differences in the effects of action on happiness.

This proof consists of factual statements about which there can, of course, be dispute. Sidgwick devotes a chapter to this

proof much of which consists in elaborating his second point--that utilitarianism arbitrates conflicts among rules. He does, however, consider some objections to his positions. According to one view utilitarianism cannot recognize any inequality in the treatment of persons whereas common sense prescribes it. A person is held to have special duties toward kindred and those in great need which he does not have toward others. This problem is not serious for Sidgwick. If inequality of treatment is the best practical way to achieve the utilitarian end, as seems to be the case, then there is no conflict.

It may be claimed that utilitarianism asks more of men than common sense does. But in the practical application of utilitarian impartiality, men have more knowledge of their own desires and needs than they do of others and are thus better able than others to provide for their own happiness. Also, under the stimulus of self interest, men are likely to accomplish more generally and thus more greatly increase general happiness so far as it depends on labor. It may, on the contrary, be claimed that utilitarianism asks less. In answer to this objection Sidgwick doubts that common sense does approve any striking disproportion between sacrifice and benefit. Furthermore, it is difficult to tell when there really is a great disproportion because of the remote effects and the sympathetic pleasures which may accrue to the one who makes the sacrifice. Even if the disproportion is truly great it may be justifiable in terms of utilitarianism to praise a disposition



which, in general, would incline toward the utilitarian end.

There is no claim made that the rules of common sense morality are perfectly utilitarian.

"Indeed, if it [utilitarianism] could succeed in proving as much as this, its success would be almost fatal to its practical claims; as the adoption of the Utilitarian principle would then become a matter of complete indifference. Utilitarians are rather called upon to show a natural transition from the Morality of Common Sense to Utilitarianism, somewhat like the transition in special branches of practice from trained instinct and empirical rules to the technical method that embodies and applies the conclusions of science..."<sup>7</sup>

An additional reason, besides these given previously for holding that common sense rules are instinctively utilitarian, is the widely accepted theory that these rules derive from past experience of pleasures and pains.<sup>8</sup> But if this theory is true, then we have evidence that the rules could not be perfectly utilitarian. We note, for one thing, that the average man is only partly able to sympathize with the pleasurable and painful experience of his fellows. Furthermore, he may not be intelligent enough to see the real cause of such experiences. Such influences deflecting common sense rules from utilitarianism would be somewhat counterbalanced by the necessity that the rules should at least preserve the society. But imperfect morality is only one danger to preservation and, in any case, the rules could be perfectly preservative without providing maximum happiness. Furthermore, rules appropriate for one time and

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7. The Methods of Ethics, p. 425.

8. Sidgwick implies that this theory cannot, on the other hand, be used as Mill tried to use it to show that such rules do not now have the character of absolute intuitions.

place might not be so at another.

"We must conclude then, that we cannot take the consensus of competent judges, up to the present time, as to the kind of conduct which is likely to produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole. It would rather seem that it is the unavoidable duty of a systematic Utilitarianism to make a thorough revision of these rules..."<sup>9</sup>

Thus in Book IV Sidgwick presents in opposition to the direct form of utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill that "rule utilitarianism" which had preceeded them. But he notes that a perfect rule utilitarianism, in effect, ceases to be utilitarianism at all. On the other hand, if rules of duty are not perfectly utilitarian and are yet the best means for achieving that end, then they must be made so. For it is ultimately utilitarianism and not duty ethics (the "morality of common sense") upon which exact morality is based.

Sidgwick considers what amount to three possible techniques for altering the rules, each one being a bit less drastic than the preceding. These are:

1. a complete revision of the moral code,
2. retaining the existing code but making gradual modifications in it,
3. retaining the existing code without any modifications in the code itself but only in the form of exceptions to the enforcement of it.

SECTION 6. Regarding the first technique, Sidgwick finds that a thorough revision of the rules encounters serious difficulties. In

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9. The Methods of Ethics, p. 465.

the first place, people vary greatly and so then must the rules. But if we consider only a limited homogeneous group, we are dealing with people who already have a definite code. If we abstract their code from them so as to replace it with a new one, we are left with purely hypothetical beings for whom it would be difficult to construct a code. We could not be sure in such a case that they would immediately accept the utilitarian principle anyway.

It seems that even if the rules were thoroughly revised the new code could not be immediately introduced. Still it might serve as an ideal to which existing moral codes could gradually approximate. But the latter plan also encounters difficulties. His present moral code may be the best that a man can be made to obey. Secondly, the other aspects of man's nature (which influence what he finds pleasurable) may change, rendering the ideal obsolete before it is reached. Spencer proposes to solve this latter problem by constructing an ideal based not on man's present nature but on his nature in the final perfect society. It seems difficult, however, to predict the nature and relations of such persons clearly enough to formulate a moral code. And even if we could do so, we are presently far from such a society, and what appears to be the most direct way to get there--obedience to its moral code--may not be. Finally, if we try to find some concomitant of happiness and make that the practically, though not the theoretically, ultimate end of our moral code we may find that what we thought to be a concomitant actually is not. Furthermore, there is no indication

that we could apply such a supposed concomitant as health or preservation with any greater precision than happiness.<sup>10</sup>

SECTION 7. Sidgwick concludes from the previous considerations that a thorough revision of the rules is impossible. It is so whether the new code is to immediately replace the existing one or only to function as an ideal. Considering the second technique, he now finds that even gradual modifications of the existing code create serious difficulties. In the first place, the only method available by which to ascertain these modifications is empirical hedonism and we have already seen the difficulties of that. Sidgwick understands Mill to have tried to avoid these difficulties by simply leaving a large area of activity completely unrestricted.<sup>11</sup> According to Sidgwick, the determination of the boundaries of this area would itself have to be determined by empirical hedonism, and furthermore, within that area a moral person who wished to be guided by the principle of utilitarianism would still have to use that method.

Given then empirical hedonism as the only possible method for modifying common sense rules, we find in the second place that any modification that contradicted an existing rule would be very difficult to justify. The possible advantage would have to be weighed against the pain of social disapproval for the one who suggested

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10. Arguments similar to these are described in Section 4 of this chapter in connection with the discussion of deductive hedonism.

11. Sidgwick is referring here to what he considers the main thesis of Mill's essay On Liberty.

the change, the weakening of the general authority of moral rules over men's minds, and the weakening in the man himself of the force of social approval--a force which tends to strengthen the moral authority of rules.

There are also dangers in merely adding to the rules without contradicting any of them. Granted that the one who suggests a new rule can himself follow it, he may cause much annoyance to others and weakening of his own good example by trying to persuade them to obey it also.

SECTION 8. There are many problems involved even in a gradual modification of the rules. However, much of a utilitarian's attempts to reform common sense rules will merely consist in getting them enforced. For many rules substantially directed to a utilitarian end receive formal acceptance but not the full support of public opinion.

Now, even in the mere matter of enforcement there are difficulties--mainly in determining what exceptions should be allowed. This brings us to the third technique. For, "...the admission of an exception on general grounds is merely the establishment of a more complex and delicate rule, instead of one that is broader and simpler; for if it is conducive to the general good that such an exception be admitted in one case, it will be equally so in all similar cases."<sup>12</sup> Insofar as an exception is of this nature, it

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12. The Methods of Ethics, p. 483.

seems to be subject merely to the difficulties involved in adding a rule, which Sidgwick has already discussed. But there are cases where it could clearly be conducive to the utilitarian end that a rule should not be applied to all similar cases. For instance, celibacy would be clearly immoral if universally followed but would not otherwise be so considered. It may in other words be moral to do that which would be immoral if widely imitated, although such cases must be rare. Where these cases do occur the danger of imitation may have to be avoided by doing the act secretly, and the act may not be moral unless it is so done. But the notion that secret acts could be good would be undermining to morality. "Thus the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this; that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret."<sup>13</sup> There can therefore be, in utilitarianism, grounds for an esoteric morality at odds with the common sense morality.

From initially observing the rough coincidence of common sense and utilitarianism we now find that there can actually be two divergent and conflicting codes.

"...it may be said that these, too, form part of the complex adjustment of man to his circumstances, and that they are needed to supplement and qualify the morality of Common Sense.

However paradoxical this doctrine may appear, we can find uses where it seems to be implicitly accepted by Common Sense; or at least where it is required to make Common Sense consistent with itself."<sup>14</sup>

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13. Ibid., p. 488.

14. Ibid., p. 489.

For instance, people commonly think that rebellions are sometimes morally necessary but these same people hold that such rebellions should be strongly resisted and their leaders severely punished if the rebellion fails.

SECTION 9. We have considered the method of empirical hedonism--the direct measurement of pleasure--as a means of achieving the utilitarian (as well as the egoistic) end. We have found that this method seems to be almost completely unworkable though we do appear to use it. As an alternative we have considered using the rules of common sense morality. There is substantial empirical evidence to the effect that these rules are instinctively utilitarian. They are not however completely utilitarian; indeed, if they were, utilitarianism would be unnecessary. Since they are not, some revision of the rules is needed. We find, however, that such revision is extremely difficult to justify. Even worse, we find that it is expedient for utilitarianism that there be two sets of rules--an esoteric morality of rules which do not apply in all similar circumstances, and a common morality of rules that do. We are not told that such a moral system would be unworkable, yet it is admittedly paradoxical. (Presumably the determination of which of these sets of rules will apply in any given case is determined by empirical hedonism though Sidgwick is not clear on this point.)

## CHAPTER VII

### SOME LOGICAL PROBLEMS OF SIDGWICK'S PROOF

SECTION 1. I have now indicated the problems which Sidgwick encounters and recognizes in his own proof of utilitarianism. He tends to represent these problems as empirical ones. Empirical problems are problems resulting from the limitations of the physical world. They are discoverable by sense observation and are usually considered the province of scientists rather than philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

It seems, however, that the problems Sidgwick recognizes, though presented as empirical, at least reflect logical problems. That is, there appear to be logical contradictions involved in the very meaning of the moral concepts used. Furthermore, the logical problems do not seem to be unique to utilitarianism. They seem to be, in most cases, merely altered forms of the problems of the agathistic good. The agathistic good is the definition of morality on which utilitarianism is based.

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1. Through history they were not always so considered.



The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I shall explain in what way basic logical problems seem to be reflected in those problems Sidgwick encounters. Secondly, I shall consider the adequacy of Sidgwick's solutions as solutions to these basic problems as well as to problems as he presents them.

SECTION 2. There are two sorts of problems which Sidgwick recognizes in his utilitarianism--problems of validity and problems of workability.

There are two major problems of validity. The first is the problem involved in basing a good (utilitarianism) on a duty (the duty to pursue it). Although Mill and Bentham seem to deny that there are any duties at all, Sidgwick claims that they must acknowledge a duty to pursue the utilitarian end. He means that whether or not a utilitarian, say, tells the truth may depend on the resulting general happiness, but whether or not he pursues the general happiness does not depend on some still further result. Pursuit of the general happiness is an unconditional duty for a utilitarian.

The problem in this situation (a problem Sidgwick only implicitly mentions) is in the basic meaning of the word pursuit. Pursuit is an act of a moral agent. The location of initiative for the act can be one of three possibilities--outside the agent, inside the agent, or partly inside and partly outside. If the initiative is wholly outside, then it seems that pursuit simply means obedience to duty so far as morality is concerned. The term pursuit is seldom used in this way, however. If the initiative is wholly inside,

then pursuit simply means desire. This usage seems somewhat more common. We may hear someone say that he desires this or that but is too tired, busy, etc. to pursue it. We interpret his statement as meaning that basically he does not desire the thing so much as he does the freedom from pursuing it, or he would pursue it.

Our assumption here is only, however, that pursuit and desire occur together--not that they are the same.

Perhaps the most accurate description of the term pursuit is that it involves initiative which is partly inside and partly outside the moral agent. Strictly speaking, the term "interest" (or desire) of interest ethics does not have an object. There the term merely refers to the fact of an act as such. In the term "pursuit" is the interest which has an object and the object itself is in some way independent of interest. It must be so since otherwise pursuit would consist of nothing but interest in interest (a vicious circle).

If the term "pursuit" is a composite of initiative partly internal and partly external to the moral agent, then it is very similar to the term "good". Both "pursuit" and the "good" refer to desire for something independent of desire (in the case of the good it might be phrased as something independent of desire which is desired). However, when the phrase "pursuit of the good" is used and used meaningfully, the term "pursuit" is being considered to mean the desire alone while the term "good" is being considered to mean the something independent of desire.

What does it mean to claim that there is a duty (something independent of desire) to pursue the good in view of the foregoing? It seems to mean that the desire for something independent of desire is independent of desire, but this is a contradiction.

The apparent necessity to base a good on a duty, and yet the contradiction involved in doing so, constitutes the first problem of validity which Sidgwick indirectly encounters.

The second problem of validity is that of developing a consistent moral system from two different and equally self evident intuitions--egoism and utilitarianism. Sidgwick states this as an empirical problem but it seems to reflect logical difficulties. Even if the world was such that pursuit of one's own happiness was the best way to achieve general happiness, still the ultimate end of any particular individual would have to be a single one. Accordingly, one would choose either egoism or utilitarianism and the fact that the other end was also achieved would be a matter of indifference.

The difficulty which I wish to emphasize, however, is that a logical (rather than empirical) merger of utilitarianism and egoism seems to involve a merger of the agathistic and the hedonistic good and such a merger is a contradiction. The agathistic good means that a duty makes itself interesting while the hedonistic good means the opposite--that interest makes satisfaction of itself a duty. In the case of a merger of utilitarianism and egoism, this difficulty is apt to be transformed into a vicious circle as follows:

- a. Interest makes the satisfaction of itself a duty.
- b. Satisfaction of private interest is equivalent to the satisfaction of general interest.
- c. Satisfaction of general interest interests the moral agent.
- d. Consequently, the interest which makes the satisfaction of itself a duty is itself made by this duty.

The vicious circle involved in an attempt to merge, logically, utilitarianism and egoism is the second problem of validity which Sidgwick encounters, though this problem is not recognized by him as such.

In his utilitarianism, Sidgwick encounters and recognizes a great many problems of workability. These problems are connected with one or the other of the two techniques for achieving the utilitarian end--direct measurement of pleasure or rule utilitarianism. I want to point out some logical difficulties reflected in the problems of these two techniques. Specifically, I will note three logical problems reflected in the problems of direct measurement and one in the problems of rule utilitarianism.

Sidgwick recognizes that the consequences of an act seem to be infinite and therefore difficult to measure. This is the first of the logical problems of direct measurement and is one of those Sidgwick most clearly recognizes as such. Of course, stated as a logical problem, the consequences are not merely difficult but impossible to measure.

Sidgwick also observes that one is more apt to be successful in achieving pleasure if one does not pursue it directly but, instead, pursues objective values such as knowledge or culture. This problem seems to be a reflection of the second logical difficulty. That difficulty is that one cannot have a desire merely for the satisfaction of desire. Sidgwick recognizes the difficulty when he uses it as his criticism of psychological hedonism. He does not, however, consider it a logical one and he only claims that satisfaction of desire cannot be the only end, not that it cannot be the ultimate end. However, it seems that satisfaction of desire cannot be an ultimate end, since an ultimate end is unconditional while satisfaction of desire is conditional on some objective desire.

Sidgwick raises several other objections to the technique of direct measurement, all of which seem to reflect the same logical problem. He argues that the reflection necessary for measurement of pleasure is apt to interfere with its enjoyment. Moreover, the measurement is likely to be too subjective due to such things as mental and bodily changes. Finally, pleasure only exists while felt and only one pleasure can be felt at a time, so there is no proof that there are any differences among pleasures in the first place.

The logical problem here is that objective measurement of pleasure seems impossible. The technique of direct measurement involves the measurement and comparison of the pleasurable results of various acts. It means the ability to determine how much of

what one wants is produced by one act as compared with what is produced by another. In order for one to determine this, there must be some standard of comparison.

It seems obvious that the standard of comparison must be what one wants. Once the most pleasurable acts have been determined, they are, for hedonism, the ones to be chosen. Accordingly, there must be a basis for the choice of these acts. It seems that the basis for this choice must also be what one wants. Consequently, the choice of an act is its own standard of comparison and no separate (objective) standard exists.

Sidgwick's argument that the reflection necessary for measuring pleasure interferes with it clearly reflects the above problem if reflection is understood as application of an objective standard. One cannot get what one wants by comparing acts in terms of something other than what one wants.

The argument that measurement of pleasure is subjective also clearly reflects the logical difficulty described.

Sidgwick also denies that there is any proof of differences among pleasures in the first place. This claim also reflects the above difficulty. If the very choice of a given act is itself the standard for measuring its pleasurable results, then comparison is impossible--for comparison requires a standard separate from any particular act.

Besides the problems of direct measurement, Sidgwick also mentions several problems of the other technique of utilitarianism--

rule utilitarianism. He points out, early in his discussion, that rules of duty must not be perfectly utilitarian; for if they are, then the deliberate choice of the utilitarian end is a matter of indifference. (I might add that the moral agent must necessarily be indifferent to the utilitarian end, since he cannot owe ultimate allegiance to two different moral systems.)

As a matter of fact, Sidgwick believes that rules of duty tend to be, but are not perfectly, utilitarian. Since they are not perfectly utilitarian, they must be made so. Otherwise, obedience to duty does not always achieve the utilitarian end. Sidgwick finds, however, that it would be very difficult to adjust the rules for closer fit. It would be difficult either to get such an adjustment accepted or to justify it. He also observes that certain duties best serve the utilitarian end if they are obeyed by some but not by all. Duties such as celibacy are of this nature. Accordingly, rule utilitarianism requires that there be an esoteric morality (indeed a secret morality) in addition to, but different from, the public rules of duty.

The logical difficulty reflected in the foregoing problems is that rules of duty are by definition absolute and unconditional. Therefore, they cannot be adjusted to better achieve some end. If, as a matter of empirical fact, the rules of duty are perfectly utilitarian to begin with, then, as Sidgwick says, adoption of the utilitarian end is a matter of indifference. If it is claimed that duty ethics and utilitarianism are logically equivalent, this claim

is a contradiction in terms.

In view of the foregoing, it would be not merely difficult but logically impossible to get an adjustment of the rules accepted, or to justify it. As for the position that utilitarianism may require an esoteric morality as well as the common one, this problem does not seem to be, in itself, a logical one. It is not illogical to claim that what is a duty for one person or at one time need not be so for another person or at another time.

Instead of the position that a single set of rules is perfectly utilitarian, one might just as feasibly adopt the position that it is the interaction among a number of different sets that is perfectly utilitarian. However, this position, while it would avoid the problem of an esoteric morality, would face all the other problems mentioned. The basic logical problem of rule utilitarianism--that it is a contradiction in terms--would still remain.

SECTION 3. From the analysis of the preceding section, it appears that there are at least six different logical problems reflected in the problems of utilitarianism which Sidgwick recognizes. (See the following chart.) I do not think, however, that these logical problems are unique to utilitarianism. They seem to be merely altered forms of the problems of a definition of morality. One would expect that this definition of morality would be the agathistic good, since that is the definition on which utilitarianism is based. In some cases this is so but not in all. The probable reason is that utilitarianism is the one type of agathistic good whose object



SIX LOGICAL PROBLEMS OF UTILITARIANISM

1. It is a contradiction to maintain that "pursuit of the good" (the desire for something independent of desire) is a duty and therefore independent of desire.
2. Egoism (the hedonistic good) and utilitarianism (an agathistic good) cannot be reduced to each other without resulting in a vicious circle to the effect that the duty which makes itself desired is created by this desire.
3. The consequences of an act are infinite and impossible to measure by a finite standard, such as the good is.
4. The ultimate end of desire cannot be merely satisfaction of desire. This is a vicious circle.
5. The measure of pleasurable acts is identical with the choice of such acts. It is logically impossible to provide an objective measure of pleasurable acts as a basis for this choice.
6. Rule utilitarianism is a contradiction since rules of duty are absolute and not conditional on some end.

is roughly similar to the hedonistic good. As it happens, Sidgwick's treatment of the problems of direct measurement is undertaken in the context of egoistic hedonism and this is the hedonistic not the agathistic good.

The purpose of this section is to indicate in what way the basic problems of moral definition have been altered to result in the problems noted.

It will be recalled that, according to the agathistic good, morality is ultimately based on duty but the duty attracts the agent to it and in that sense involves interest.

Although there may be others, I have recognized two major problems of the agathistic good.

1. When morality means the pursuit of some goal, an act is judged not for itself but for its consequences. However, the consequences of an act are infinite and thus impossible to measure. This may be called the problem of infinite consequences.

2. When morality means a duty which appeals to some interest of the agent, this interest must in turn be the appeal of some further duty and so on ad infinitum. Otherwise, morality is ultimately a matter of interest alone.

The problem of infinite consequences Sidgwick himself explicitly states, though he tends not to regard it as a particularly serious one. (Problem 3.)

If one attempts to merge the good with duty ethics, as Sidgwick does in his rule utilitarianism, then the problem of infinite consequences will be avoided. For one will have combined a monistic definition of morality with a dualistic one. One simply obeys rules of duty. However, this attempted solution transforms the infinite

consequences into a contradiction in terms. (Problem 6.)

Sidgwick does not explicitly state the problem of infinite regress, but two of the logical problems I have noted seem to be altered forms of this difficulty.

According to the agathistic good, an object independent of interest makes itself interesting. There must, however, be a source of this interest and for the agathistic good it is a higher object. If, however, one denies that there is a higher object, then one must claim that the object which is independent of interest is nevertheless itself interesting. To put it another way, the desire for something independent of desire is independent of desire. (Problem 1.) This position transforms the infinite regress into a contradiction.

One may attempt to merge the two forms of the good, as Sidgwick wishes could be done (a merger of egoism and utilitarianism). In that case, there will be no infinite regress. For the duty which makes itself desired will be created by that same desire. This, however, is a vicious circle. (Problem 2.)

The last two of the six logical problems seem to be altered forms of the hedonistic rather than the agathistic good. According to the hedonistic good, morality is ultimately based on interest but interest makes the satisfaction of itself a value and in that sense duty is involved.

The hedonistic good faces the same problem of infinite consequences as does the agathistic good. It also, however, faces a

distinctive problem of infinite regress.

If satisfaction of interest is a value, this value must be the object of some further interest and so on ad infinitum. Otherwise, morality is ultimately a matter of duty alone.

If one denies that there is a higher interest in the satisfaction of interest, then there will be no infinite regress. However, interest in satisfaction of the self same interest is merely a vicious circle. (Problem 4.)

Moreover, if there is no higher interest, then measurement of the amount of interest satisfaction provided by various acts must be made in terms of the self same interest. Consequently, no objective standard of measurement is possible. (Problem 5.)

SECTION 4. The solutions which Sidgwick offers to the problems he recognizes can, in view of the foregoing, also be considered solutions to the problems of the agathistic good (or in some cases, to those of the hedonistic good). If Sidgwick is to succeed in reducing morality to utilitarianism, it is not enough, however, for him to solve the problems of the agathistic good. He must also, as the negative aspect of his proof, discredit the other three definitions of morality. This he clearly does not do. On the contrary, he claims that utilitarianism (an agathistic good) is really the perfected form of duty ethics and he would like to find evidence for believing that satisfaction of one's own desires (the hedonistic good) was exactly fitted to achieve the utilitarian end. The only one of the four definitions of ethics which Sidgwick clearly discredits is interest ethics.

It may be that Sidgwick's negative proof has to be inadequate in order for his positive proof to have even the appearance of cogency. From my original analysis of four definitions of morality, it seemed that each definition contained part but not all of what was necessary to make a moral system logically consistent. Moreover, each definition alone had some serious logical flaw. If this analysis is correct, then even the mere appearance of positive proof of some principle would require a merger of several definitions.

Sidgwick's positive proof for utilitarianism seems, on the surface, to be more adequate than his negative proof. Three of the solutions he offers to his problems seem to function as solutions to the problem of infinite regress.

For one thing, Sidgwick claims that the duty to pursue the good is not a duty like other duties. It is a wider duty (or as he calls it, a wider intuitionism). On the other hand, Sidgwick does not recognize a wider interest. If this is so, then there is no infinite regress but neither does one have an ethics of good any longer. Since the wider duty is ultimate, morality is a matter of obedience to this unconditional rule and faces the usual criticism of duty ethics--that it seems contradictory.

A second argument which appears to be a solution to the problem of infinite regress is the argument from common experience. This is Sidgwick's final answer to his own problems of workability. No matter how paradoxical the technique of direct measurement may

appear, experience indicates that it is workable. Phrased in terms of the problem of infinite regress, one would say that experience indicates that pursuit of the good is possible even though illogical. This sort of argument doesn't even claim to solve logical problems--but only suggests that the world is illogical and solutions are therefore unnecessary. Its difficulty is that it can be used by anyone to support anything.

If it can be shown that egoism (the hedonistic good) and utilitarianism (an agathistic good) are logically compatible, (not merely compatible in fact) then this might be a third solution to the problem of infinite regress. However, these two principles do not seem to be logically compatible and, in any event, Sidgwick only looks for empirical compatibility and does not find even that.

Some of Sidgwick's solutions to his problems function as solutions to the problem of infinite consequences rather than to the problem of infinite regress.

Sidgwick directly faces the problem of measuring infinite consequences and claims that one can avoid this problem by concentrating on the most important and most probable ones. This solution seems to beg the question since it is impossible to know what the most important ones are unless one has a view of them all--for the most important ones are not necessarily the most probable.

Sidgwick's concept of the wider intuitionism seems to function as a solution to the problem of infinite consequences, as well as to the problem of infinite regress. If pursuit of the good is

itself a duty, then one ultimately does not need to measure infinite consequences. He only needs to obey the duty. The concept of the wider duty is, however, subject to the difficulty previously noted. Moreover, an ultimate duty to pursue the good is doubly difficult. For the problem of measuring infinite consequences still remains within the substance of the duty.

A third possible solution to the problem of infinite consequences would be rule utilitarianism, whereby one would automatically achieve the utilitarian end by obedience to rules. Rule utilitarianism is, however, a contradiction in terms, as Sidgwick indirectly recognizes. Here again he invokes common experience as an answer to its paradoxical nature. And, again, it is not an answer to any logical problem.

There are three other important statements of Sidgwick's which could be construed as solutions to one or the other of the two basic problems I have been considering.

Sidgwick claims that one pursues an end not because of desire for it but because of an "impulse" toward it. The term "impulse" must mean desire, duty (initiative independent of desire) or a combination. If it means duty, which is most likely, then this way of describing the good converts it into the right.<sup>1</sup> In that case, the problems of the agathistic good are, of course, avoided but only to be replaced with those of duty ethics.

Sidgwick has an unusual definition of the good. He virtually

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1. See Chapter I, Section 5 of this thesis.

defines it as perfectly enlightened interest, yet presumably means it to retain its character of absoluteness independent of interest.<sup>2</sup> This is a contradiction in terms but if the contradiction is not recognized it may appear that the good and interest are merged.

Sidgwick also has an unusual definition of the right. He defines it in such a way that it requires consideration of all foreseen consequences and yet is still presumably in no way a matter of interest.<sup>3</sup> This too is a contradiction in terms and, here, if the contradiction is not recognized, it may appear that the good and the right are merged.

From the discussion of this section, I reach the conclusion that the solutions Sidgwick provides to the problems of his utilitarianism encounter their own problems in turn. None of his proposed solutions seem to be adequate either for the problems of utilitarianism or for the agathistic good, on which it is based.

SECTION 5. It has been frequently mentioned in the course of this thesis that the logical problems of morality seem to be problems of definition. Once a definition of morality has been accepted, there seem to be no particular logical problems in determining specific moral principles. Despite this situation, much of Sidgwick's thought is devoted to determining moral principles per se and much of the criticism he has faced is criticism of these

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2. See Chapter V, Section 8 of this thesis.
3. See Chapter V, Section 2 of this thesis.



principles. Accordingly, it seems important to consider these principles and some of the criticisms against them.

Since Sidgwick inclines, in his thought, toward the pole of duty rather than that of interest, he considers that moral principles are derived by intuition. He denies the certainty of duty ethics per se but claims that there are wider intuitions which establish both duty ethics and two ethics of good--egoism and utilitarianism.

An intuition is, by definition, self evident and one would therefore expect that Sidgwick's wider intuitions could be presented very briefly and without supporting argument. There may be situations, however, in which one intuition, while not immediately self evident, is based on another intuition which is. (Of course in this situation there must also be an intuition to the effect that the more evident intuition is indeed the basis of the less evident one.) Sidgwick's intuitions seem to be of this nature; for he gives considerable space to justifying the intuitions he claims to have.

Sidgwick's first intuition--the maxim of Justice--is that:

"It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures and circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment."<sup>4</sup>

Sidgwick claims that the maxim of Justice is the basis for

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4. The Methods of Ethics, p. 380.

duty ethics (what he calls the morality of common sense). It is not immediately evident to me that this is the case. In the first place, if "reasonable ground for difference of treatment" means intuitive ground, then the maxim would not be accepted by a proponent of interest. He would claim that a person's desire was quite sufficient ground for treating another differently than he would expect to be treated himself. Another problem is that if one considers morality in complete abstraction from the nature and circumstances of an individual, then individuality virtually ceases to exist. Obviously, it is logically impossible for there to be differences in moral acts if there are no individuals to act. The point at issue ought to be whether there are any differences when the nature and circumstances of the individual are considered.

Sidgwick's second wider intuition is the maxim of Prudence. This maxim is that "...Hereafter as such is to be regarded neither less nor more than now"<sup>5</sup> with respect to an individual's conscious life. According to Sidgwick, this maxim is the basis of an abstract egoism. Sidgwick explains that the intuition means no temporal part of the good for any individual should be preferred to any other part merely on the basis of the time difference. Strictly speaking, this is not what the original maxim says. The maxim, explained, seems to rest on the implied assumption that what one ought to do is to properly distribute the good and then merely goes on to indicate what a proper distribution entails. I do not find the implied assumption

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5. Ibid., p. 381.

to be self evident--particularly in the absence of an indication as to what the good is. Determination of what the good is, however, Sidgwick relegates to a separate intuition.

If one does assume that what he ought to do is to properly distribute the good, then is the maxim of Prudence convincing? Is it intuitively convincing that no temporal part of the good should be preferred to any other on the basis of the time difference alone? Yes, I think it would be so if one could abstract so completely from the time difference as to even disregard the agent's aversion to a delay.

In that case, it would be logically impossible for the moral agent to prefer some temporal part of the good on the basis of the time difference alone, but only because the time difference had no relation at all to his interest or duties. The real question for morality, in the case of this maxim, is whether when interest and duties are considered it is still true.

The third maxim, the maxim of Benevolence, is that "...each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except insofar as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him."<sup>6</sup> This maxim, says Sidgwick, is the basis of a general utilitarianism--a utilitarianism not made exact however, until one determines, by a separate intuition, what the good is.

Although this maxim is an intuition, it is, says Sidgwick,

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6. Ibid., p. 382.

a deduction from two other intuitions. One of these is that the good of one individual is no more important, from the point of view of the universe, than that of any other unless more good can be realized for one than the other. The other intuition is that one is bound to aim at good generally and not at a particular part.

The maxim of Benevolence seems to me to have some of the same difficulties as does the maxim of Prudence. It, too, is phrased in terms of the good without any explicit indication that this is part of the intuition. It has a similar logical certainty if the maxim is understood such that preferences are considered in complete abstraction from the individuals who hold them. The problem for the maxim of Benevolence is not to establish that the good, considered apart from the moral agent, is equal for all but that it is so when the moral agent's interest and duties are considered.

These three intuitions of Sidgwick have been the subject of much criticism. Indeed the main point I make here has, in slightly different form, already been advanced by prior critics.

Both F. H. Bradley and Ernest Albee argue that the maxims-- particularly those of Justice and Benevolence--are merely statements of the objectivity involved in any moral system. Any moral system implies that there is some reason for a person's acts independent of the person who does them.<sup>7</sup>

I would agree with this criticism in general but not completely.

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7. See especially Albee, A History of English Utilitarianism, p. 404; also Bradley, Mr. Sidgwick's Hedonism, Section 7.

Those who hold interest ethics would deny that objectivity is involved in every moral system. Moreover, duty ethics may be independent of a person only in the sense that the duty is independent of what he wants and not in the sense that it is the same for everyone.

Besides the three intuitions already mentioned, Sidgwick has another which is necessary in conjunction with Prudence and Benevolence to establish egoism and utilitarianism. This is the intuition which establishes what the good is, and it establishes that it is pleasure. Bradley points out, however, that the intuition that the good is pleasure seems merely to be based on ambiguous use of the word "desirable".<sup>8</sup>

Mill, in his proof of Utilitarianism, argued that the only proof there was that a thing was desirable was that people did in fact desire it. He also argued that since pleasure was the only thing they could desire, it must include what they ought to desire. The second argument is the position of psychological hedonism and was criticized by Sidgwick. The first argument has been generally held to rest on a mere verbal ambiguity between two meanings of the word desirable--the one (and more common) meaning being what ought to be desired, the other what simply is desired. Bradley holds that Sidgwick's proof of pleasure as the sole ultimate good involves this same ambiguity as did Mill's. At some points, Sidgwick defines the desirable as the good, at others he defines it as pleasure--

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8. Bradley, Mr. Sidgwick's Hedonism, Section 3.

meaning what is desired. Thus obviously he can prove that pleasure is the good.<sup>9</sup> Now if we will reconsider the quotation and subsequent comments from Sidgwick's preliminary proof as discussed in Chapter V, Section 9, we will see, I think, the truth of Bradley's criticism.

Sidgwick asks "Shall we then say that Ultimate Good is Good or Desirable conscious or sentient Life...?"<sup>10</sup> This is a question it is true, but a rhetorical one--for the answer we finally reach is a decided yes. Now if this question, understood as the statement it really is, is considered to be proved, then it is subject to Bradley's criticism. If desirable merely means the good, as Sidgwick virtually suggests by a phrase indicating that the two terms are synonyms, then his statement is a mere tautology. If however, desirable merely means what is desired, or pleasure, then we must look elsewhere than in his argument for the proof that pleasure is the good.

Sidgwick's final argument for holding that the good is pleasure is not subject to the above criticism. For his final argument is on the one hand a straightforward personal intuition and on the other a comprehensive comparison of common sense judgements.

Both Bradley and another critic, G. E. Moore, agree that of the two parts of this proof--the appeal to the reader's own intuitive

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9. Sidgwick does not always define pleasure as desire, however, though he does in connection with this proof. Sometimes he defines it as satisfaction of desire. See Chapter VI, Section 2 of this thesis.

10. The Methods of Ethics, pp. 395-96.

judgement and the comprehensive comparison of common sense judgements--the second lacks any force.<sup>11</sup> For in this regard, Sidgwick finds that Common Sense approves actions roughly in proportion to the pleasure they produce, but that finding only proves that virtue in general is pleasant, not that pleasure is the end. Moore adds the further point that if Sidgwick's proof is merely considered the personal intuition he claims, then anyone with a different intuition may simply deny it.

From this review of Sidgwick's four wider intuitions, it appears that none of them establish what they are intended to establish. Their intuitive certainty results from their being either tautologies or definitions. Even if they were intuitively certain, however, they would not resolve the logical problems of utilitarianism. For these problems underlie the very technique of gaining moral principles by intuitions.

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11. Bradley, Mr. Sidgwick's Hedonism, Section 6  
Moore, Principia Ethica, Section 54.

SECTION 6. The purpose of this thesis has been to expose the problems encountered by Henry Sidgwick in his attempt to base morality on the utilitarian principle.

My approach in this thesis was to focus upon strictly logical problems and to consider those problems which were basic to the very definition of morality on which utilitarianism is based.

My procedure was to first consider the problems encountered by Sidgwick's utilitarian predecessors, follow this with a consideration of the problems Sidgwick himself encountered and recognized, and complete the study with an exposition of the problems Sidgwick encountered but did not fully recognize.

I found that Sidgwick's proof for the validity of utilitarianism was almost exactly opposite that of his predecessors. He emphasized the aspect of duty while they emphasized the aspect of interest as the basis of the principle.

The problems which Sidgwick found in his predecessors' proof for utilitarian validity, he felt he had at least partly solved. He was not so confident of his solutions to the problems of making utilitarianism work. These problems he explored very thoroughly, however.

Most of Sidgwick's problems he represented as empirical, but there seemed to be clearly logical problems reflected in them. Upon analysis, it seemed that these problems were (for the most part) merely altered forms of the problems of the agathistic good.

Sidgwick's solutions to the problems he encountered and recognized may also be considered as solutions to the logical problems of the agathistic good. Considered either way, they did not seem adequate. One important solution--the wider intuitionism seemed to convert the good into the right. Other solutions such as rule utilitarianism seemed to be simply contradictions in terms. Still others, invoking common experience, did not even attempt to solve logical problems.

The conclusion of this thesis is, therefore, that Sidgwick thoroughly considered many of the serious logical problems of utilitarianism, though he himself tended to understand them as empirical difficulties discovered by empirical observation. He did not, however, solve these problems. His attempted solutions seem to be logical fallacies or else simply appeals to common experience.



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