Phil 104, Wednesday, November 10, 2010
Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, I: i, iv

The methods of ethics:
As its title announces, Sidgwick's book is an investigation of several "methods" of ethics = "any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings 'ought' to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary action."

- Notice that a method of ethics, so defined, need not necessarily tell you to act *morally*, in the sense of doing things for *other* people.

Why investigate *several* methods of ethics? Because "there is a diversity of methods applied in ordinary practical thought." People confusedly hold many different views at the same time.

- This is why, Sidgwick thinks, it always seems legitimate, rather than incoherent, to ask, "Yes, but *why* ought I do what is right?"—why there is a "persistent unsatisfied demand for an ultimate reason." "[A]ny single answer to the question 'why' will not be completely satisfactory, as it will be given only from one of these points of view, and will always leave room to ask the question from some other."

A method of ethics might specify:

(1) ultimate principles of conduct and/or
(2) the ultimate good or end to be realized by voluntary action, which is either:
    (a) individual (i.e., the agent's) happiness,
    (b) universal (i.e., everyone's) happiness,
    (c) individual excellence, or
    (d) universal excellence.

Commonsense and *Intuitionism* hold that there are:

- several different *ultimate* principles of conduct (e.g., "Justice, Good Faith, Veracity")
- that are "binding without qualification and without regard to ulterior consequences."
- The difference between them is that Intuitionism holds this "explicitly and definitely, as a result of philosophical reflection."
- Intuitionists *deny* that the *principles of conduct* are to be explained in terms of some *independent* conception of some ultimate *end*. If there is an ultimate end, it is simply *right conduct itself*: virtue.

The *hedonistic* methods explain the principles of conduct in terms of an ultimate end to be realized by voluntary action: namely, happiness.

- *Egoistic* hedonism (=Egoism) says that this end is *individual* happiness: the happiness of the agent to whom the principle applies.
- *Universal* hedonism (=Utilitarianism) says that this end is *general* happiness: the happiness of everyone counted equally.

But shouldn't there be two further methods: which take the ultimate good to be excellence—either *individual* excellence or *universal* excellence? Sidgwick responds:

- No one who believes that excellence is an ultimate end approves of sacrificing *one's own* excellence for the excellence of *others*. So there is no method of *universal* excellence.

- And the method of *individual* excellence is more or less *intuitionism*, since *virtue*—which *just is* complying with intuitionistic principles—takes priority over any other kind of excellence.

The argument against psychological hedonism:
Psychological Hedonism: The only thing that ever motivates anyone is his or her own pleasure or pain.

- Psychological Hedonism does not imply Egoistic Hedonism. PH is a *descriptive* claim about what end we *in fact* seek. EH is a *normative ethical* claim about what end we *ought* to seek.
- However, one might argue that, if we *cannot* seek any end other than pleasure, then it doesn't make sense to say that we *ought* to seek some end other than pleasure. *Ought* to do implies *can* do. So doesn't PH entail EH?
- No, Sidgwick says. Because we should similarly argue that it makes no sense to say that we *ought* to seek pleasure. *Ought* to do also implies can *fail* to do. In other words, PH not only does *not imply*, but moreover is *incompatible* with EH—indeed, incompatible with *any* ethical view!

Sidgwick assumes for the sake of argument that there are desires to do things that will sustain or produce pleasures (or will end or avoid pains). His question is whether there are desires (or aversion) for *other* things. He answers that we find such desires "everywhere in consciousness."

Example of hunger:

- Both a desire to eat and a state that makes eating more pleasurable.
- But not itself a desire *for the pleasure of* eating. That's something different. A gourmand who isn't hungry now might desire the pleasure of eating (and so desire to get himself hungry in order to experience that pleasure).
- Nor an aversion to the *pain* of an unsatisfied desire to eat.
  - The aversion is simply a negative desire, to leave the present state, whereas hunger is a desire for a positive object, to eat.
  - Granted, the unsatisfied desire to eat can itself cause pain. But the desire *to avoid the pain* of the unsatisfied desire to eat can be satisfied *either* by ceasing to desire to eat *or* by satisfying that desire. By contrast, the desire to eat is satisfied only by eating.

Example of desire to benefit your loved ones:

- Not for the pleasures of benefiting them. Those pleasures depend on a prior "desire to do good to others for their sake and not for our own."
- Not for the pleasure of sympathetic feeling (e.g., feeling your friend's pleasure). Our desires to help our loved ones are much stronger than any "consciousness of sympathetic pleasure… in ourselves."
- Not for the avoidance of pain of sympathetic feeling (e.g., not feeling your friend's pain). Our desire to help our loved ones is satisfied only by helping them, whereas our desire to rid ourselves of sympathetic pain is satisfied *either* by helping them, or *by* distracting ourselves from thoughts about their pain (e.g., asking them not to phone us from the hospital, or to email us about their break-up, etc.).

Moreover, there is the *paradox of hedonism*:

1. Many pleasures can be felt *only if* one desires *something other* than those pleasures. In general, not only is desire "that is not felt to be thwarted in its primary impulse to actions tending to its satisfaction" not painful, it is often part of a state that is *pleasurable*.
    - *Example of competitive games*: We do not desire or imagine pleasure in winning, but instead desire and imagine pleasure in the *striving* to win, which itself *requires* a desire to win.
2. Furthermore, many pleasures can be felt *only if* one does *not* desire those pleasures. This is because focusing on one's self and one's own sensations can get in the way.
    - This is more evident with the pleasures that attend activities and emotions, rather than those that attend passive sensations (like tasty food). "[T]he pleasures of thought and study can only be enjoyed in the highest degree by those who have an ardour of curiosity which carries the mind temporarily away from self and its sensations."

The paradox of hedonism shows that there's no general reason to doubt the claims that:

- The desire to act virtuously (or the desire that prompts a virtuous agent to act virtuously) is not a desire for the pleasure of the agent…
- … the desire to act virtuously can prompt actions that conflict with the actions that are prompted, or would be prompted, by desires for the pleasure of the agent…
- … but nevertheless acting virtuously can, in itself, be pleasurable for the agent.

This is "merely another illustration of a psychological law, which, as we have seen, is exemplified throughout the whole range of our desires."

Review Questions:

1. Which of Sidgwick's "methods" of ethics best describe (a) Aristotle's and (b) Kant's approaches?
2. What role does the following passage play in Sidgwick's argument that psychological hedonism does not imply ethical hedonism?

    > "a psychological law invariably realised in my conduct does not admit of being conceived as 'a precept' or 'dictate' of reason: this latter must be a rule from which I am conscious that it is possible to deviate."