

Phil 104, Friday, November 12, 2010
Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, II: i–iii

Egoism:

Egoism: The agent ought to do what, taking the probabilities into account, will bring the greatest possible happiness to herself.

- Everyone accepts that egoism is *reasonable*. “Indeed, it is hardly going too far to say that common sense assumes that ‘interested’ actions, tending to promote the agent’s happiness, are *prima facie* reasonable: and that the *onus probandi* [=burden of proof] lies with those who maintain that disinterested conduct, as such, is reasonable.” This observation will return to haunt Sidgwick.

Hedonism:

By “happiness,” Sidgwick thinks, we should mean “pleasure, and the absence of pain.” So, by Egoism, we mean *Hedonistic Egoism*. A Hedonistic Egoist is “a man who when two or more courses of action are open to him, ascertains as accurately as he can the amounts of pleasure and pain that are likely to result from each, and chooses the one which he thinks will yield him the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain.”

- Note that, although at this point in the book, Sidgwick is discussing Egoistic Hedonism, the points that he is making really apply to Hedonism in general, and so to Universal Hedonism=Utilitarianism.
1. Pleasures and pains are to be understood *generally*; they include “all kinds of agreeable and disagreeable feelings.”
 2. However, only *quantitative*, and not *qualitative*, differences count. The basic quantitative dimensions are:
 1. intensity,
 2. duration, and
 3. probability of occurrence (this perhaps this isn’t a dimension of the pleasure itself, although it is relevant to how egoist should choose).
 3. Pleasures and pains must be *comparable*, in order for the idea of maximizing the sum to make sense.
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How is the *intensity* of pleasure measured?

- *Not* by the “desire to sustain it.” Being tickled is a counterexample! Strong desire to stop it, but not very painful. (Would you tickle this man: <http://www.henrysidgwick.com/pictures.eng.html>?)
- *Not* by the degree of some single, simple quality of feeling, “like the quality of feeling expressed by ‘sweet’, of which also we are conscious in varying degrees of intensity.” There doesn’t seem to be any single, simple quality of feeling common to all “the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments.”
- *Is* measured by the degree to which it is “apprehended” by the *person* who feels it, at the *time* when he feels it, to be “desirable” or “preferable.” “[A]ll pleasures and pains, estimated merely as feelings, have for the sentient individual cognisable degrees of desirability, positive or negative.”

Empirical Hedonism and its problems:

Hedonistic Egoism might be joined with a *non*-empirical method of determining what brings the greatest pleasure (e.g., reliance on religious assumptions about what produces the greatest pleasure). However, Sidgwick thinks that Hedonistic Egoism is best joined with an *empirical* method: “represent beforehand the different series of feelings that our knowledge of physical and psychical causes leads us to expect from the different lines of conduct that lie open to us; judge, which series, as thus represented, appears on the whole preferable, taking all probabilities into account; and adopt the corresponding line of conduct.”

But he doesn't deny that the empirical method still faces a host of difficulties. Indeed, with admirable intellectual honesty, he mercilessly lists its faults.

1. The calculation is *impossibly complicated*. But we can make simplifying assumptions (e.g., “neglecting the less probable and less important contingencies”), as we do in medicine or military strategy.
2. At best, we have to compare an *actual* feeling that we are having now with the *representation* of a feeling that we are not having. But, even worse, we usually are comparing only *two representations*.
3. When feelings are *different in kind*, it is very hard to give definite, certain answers.
 - Things are bad enough “with sensual gratifications, which are thought to be especially definite and palpable. Suppose I am enjoying a good dinner: if I ask myself whether one kind of dish or wine gives me more pleasure than another, sometimes I can decide, but very often not.”
 - “But when I try to arrange in a scale pleasures differing in kind; to compare (*e.g.*) ... excitement with tranquility, intellectual exercise with emotional effusion, the pleasure of scientific apprehension with that of beneficent action... my judgment wavers and fluctuates far more, and in the majority of cases I cannot give any confident decision.”
4. Moreover, “each individual's judgment of the comparative value of his own pleasures is apt to be *different at different times*, though it relates to the same past experiences”
 - “our more emotional and more representative pains are more easily revived than the more sensational and presentative: for example, it is at this moment much more easy for me to imagine the discomfort of expectancy which preceded a past sea-sickness than the pain of the actual nausea.”
 - The same pleasure or pain can be represented differently depending on our condition. “it is a matter of common remark with respect to the gratifications of appetite that we cannot estimate them adequately in the state of satiety, and that we are apt to exaggerate them in the state of desire.”
5. How can we be sure that what *was* pleasant to us in the past *will be* pleasant to us in the future? “For our capacity for particular pleasures may be about to change, or may have actually changed since the experiences that form the data of our calculation.”
6. What if we have *never had* the relevant experience? Then we need to rely on the others' reports of what they have experienced.
 - But their reports may be (unintentionally) *inaccurate*.
 - And they may *not be like us*.

Review Questions:

1. What point is Sidgwick is making in this passage?
“we must assume the pleasures sought and the pains shunned to have determinate quantitative relations to each other; for otherwise they cannot be conceived as possible elements of a total which we are to seek to make as great as possible.”
2. Suppose that, when you listen to Beethoven, you get exactly the same feeling of pleasure that your little sibling gets when s/he listens to the Black Eyed Peas. If Sidgwick could give only one of you a CD, would he give you a Beethoven CD, your sibling a Black Eyed Peas CD, or flip a coin to decide?