

**Phil 104, Monday, November 15, 2010**  
**Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, III: i, vi: 5–9, vii, xi**

**Problems with Common Sense:**

“The Morality of Common Sense” offers a list of moral rules, many of which make no reference to the effects on happiness: don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t break your promises, etc.

men judge some acts to be right and wrong in themselves, without consideration of their tendency to produce happiness to the agent or to others....however... in so far as these judgments are passed in particular cases, they seem to involve (at least for the more reflective part of mankind) a reference of the case to some general rule of duty: and that in the frequent case of doubt or conflict of judgment as to the rightness of any action, appeal is commonly made to such rules or maxims, as the ultimately valid principles of moral cognition” (xi:1).

*Intuitionism*: tries to “throw the Morality of Common Sense into a scientific form.”

Is this possible? How do we distinguish “scientific axioms” from mere opinions?

I: “The terms of the proposition must be clear and precise.”

II: “The self-evidence of the proposition must be ascertained by careful reflection.”

III: “The propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent.”

IV: The proposition must be generally affirmed.

The principles of commonsense do not meet these conditions.

- In some cases, we cannot find any definite principle at all.
- As soon we find definite principles, disagreements arise, and alternatives seem no less plausible.
- Common sense gives us no guidance on how to resolve these conflicts.

**Example 1: Promises**

- Promises to do immoral things. (Would be a huge loophole!)
- Promises made under coercion. (Recall Hobbes’s sovereignty by acquisition.)
- Promises made with deception or concealment of important facts. (What’s the difference between fraud and *caveat emptor*?)
- Promises made before a change in circumstances.
- Promises that cost the promisor much more than they benefit the promisee.
- Promises that harm the promisee.

“[T]he confidence with which the ‘unsophisticated conscience’ asserts unreservedly “that promises ought to be kept,” is due to inadvertence; and that when the qualifications to which we referred are fairly considered, this confidence inevitably changes into hesitation and perplexity. It should be added, that some of these qualifications themselves suggest a reference to the more comprehensive principle of Utilitarianism, as one to which this particular rule is naturally subordinate” (354).

**Example 2: Truthtelling**

- Lying to people who are trying to violate our rights.
- Lying to people who are trying to violate others' rights.
- Lying to people when telling them the truth would harm them. Lying to children when they ask inappropriate questions.
- Lying to questioners who have "no right to know."
- Is lying different from indirectly misleading the questioner?

"On the whole, then, reflection seems to show that the rule of Veracity, as commonly accepted, cannot be elevated into a definite moral axiom: for there is no real agreement as to, how far we are bound to impart true beliefs to others: and while it is contrary to Common Sense to exact absolute candour under all circumstances, we yet find no self-evident secondary principle, clearly defining when it is not to be exacted."

"[I]t seems to be admitted by Common Sense, though vaguely and reluctantly, that the principle [of Veracity], however defined, is not of universal application; at any rate it is not thought to be clearly wrong that untruths should be told to children, or madmen, or invalids, or by advocates, or to enemies or robbers, or even to persons who ask questions which they have no right to ask (if a mere refusal to answer would practically reveal an important secret). And when we consider the limitations generally admitted, it seems still more plain than in the last case [of promise-keeping], that they are very commonly determined by utilitarian reasonings, implicit or explicit."

### **Review Question:**

1. Come up with your own exceptions to the principles—"Never break a promise" and "Never tell a lie." How would a utilitarian explain these exceptions?