

Phil 104, Wednesday, November 24, 2010
Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, IV (continued)

Relation among the methods of ethics:

- *Utilitarianism vs. Intuitionism*: Not nearly as opposed as commonly thought, as we saw last time.
- *Utilitarianism vs. Egoism*: A standoff, as we will see today.

Two unsuccessful arguments to show the egoist that he has to be a utilitarian:

1. *If the egoist assumes that his pleasure is “Good, not only for him but from the point of view of the Universe... it then becomes relevant to point out to him that his happiness cannot be a more important part of Good, taken universally, than the equal happiness of any other person.”*

Reply: Why *should* the egoist assume that his pleasure is good not only for him, but from the point of view of the universe? “If the Egoist strictly confines himself to stating his conviction that he ought to take his own happiness or pleasure as his ultimate end, there seems no opening for any line of reasoning to lead him to Universalistic Hedonism as a first principle; it cannot be proved that the difference between his own happiness and another’s happiness is not *for him* all-important.”

2. Suppose we accept a view of personal identity, according to which one’s present self is no more closely related to one’s future self than one is to another person. Then egoism might seem an unstable compromise between the extremes of caring only about one’s *present self* and caring for *everyone equally*. Is sacrificing the pleasures of one’s *present self* for the pleasures of one’s *future self*—which egoism requires—any *less* problematic than sacrificing the one’s *own* pleasures for the pleasure of *another* person—which utilitarianism requires?

“If the Utilitarian has to answer the question, ‘Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?’ it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist, ‘Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future? Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?’ ”

Reply: One might reject these views of personal identity, and insist that the relation between one’s present and future selves is somehow “closer” than the relation between oneself and others.

The “fundamental contradiction” in practical reason:

In any event, someone “may still hold that his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other; and that therefore a harmony between” egoism and utilitarianism “must be somehow demonstrated, if morality is to be made completely rational.” Recall that, from the beginning, Sidgwick found it impossible to deny that egoism is *reasonable*. Indeed, he thought, the burden of proof rests on those who want to say that any *other* method of ethics is reasonable.

To the extent that utilitarianism coincides with common sense, the most that we can say is that “in any tolerable state of society the performance of duties towards others and the exercise of social virtues seem *generally likely*”—but not *always guaranteed*—“to coincide with the attainment of the greatest possible happiness in the long run for the virtuous agent” (see Bk. II, Ch. V).

To the extent that utilitarianism differs from common sense, the prospects of convergence seem even weaker. “For we have seen that Utilitarianism is more rigid than Common Sense in exacting the sacrifice of the agent’s private interests where they are incompatible with the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

A practical solution? What if we cultivated general sympathy, so that our own pain and pleasure was the pain and pleasure of all? Wouldn’t egoism and utilitarianism then be reconciled? Wouldn’t what utilitarianism required—producing the greatest pleasure for all—also be what egoism required—producing the greatest pleasure for oneself—since the greatest pleasure for all would be the greatest pleasure for oneself?

Reply: Still wouldn’t avoid conflicts between egoism and utilitarianism. “[T]he utmost development of sympathy, intensive and extensive, which is now possible to any but a very few exceptional persons, would not cause a perfect coincidence between Utilitarian duty and self-interest....”

- “Suppose a man finds that a regard for the general good—Utilitarian Duty—demands from him a sacrifice, or extreme risk, of life.”
 - “There are perhaps one or two human beings so dear to him that the remainder of a life saved by sacrificing their happiness to his own would be worthless to him from an egoistic point of view.” But not even this is obvious.
 - In any event, the people one benefits may *not* be one’s loved ones.
- If we try to increase sympathy, the most likely effect is to increase sympathy *for our loved ones*. So will make it harder for us to sacrifice our loved ones when this is what utilitarianism requires.
- Nor is it obvious that it would be good, from a utilitarian standpoint, to make us just as sympathetic to strangers as to our loved ones, even if we could.
- “[T]he course of conduct by which a man would most fully reap the rewards of sympathy” will not be what utilitarianism requires.
 - “[T]he philanthropist’s sympathetic discomfort must necessarily be considerable”
 - “[A] man may find that he can best promote the general happiness by working in comparative solitude for ends that he never hopes to see realised, or by working chiefly among and for persons for whom he cannot feel much affection, or by doing what must alienate or grieve those whom he loves best, or must make it necessary for him to dispense with the most intimate of human ties.”

To sum up:

- Egoism and utilitarianism are equally reasonable.
- There is no way to avoid conflicts between them: that is, cases in which egoism tells us to do one thing and utilitarianism tells us not to do that very thing.

- *There is no rational way to resolve such conflicts.* In “cases of a recognised conflict between self-interest and duty, practical reason, being divided against itself, would cease to be a motive on either side; the conflict would have to be decided by the comparative preponderance of one or other of two groups of non-rational impulses.”

Review Questions:

1. What point is Sidgwick making in this passage?
“Grant that the Ego is merely a system of coherent phenomena, that the permanent identical ‘I’ is not a fact but a fiction, as Hume and his followers maintain; why, then, should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?”
2. Suppose Sidgwick replaced hedonism—the thesis that happiness is pleasure—with a different view of happiness—for example, that happiness is getting what you desire (whether or not this gives you pleasure). Would this avoid the “fundamental contradiction” in practical thought? Or would it make no difference?