

**Phil 104, February 22, 2007**  
**Sidgwick: The Case Against Common Sense**

**The question of the basis of morality:**

What basic principles explain why certain actions are right and other actions are wrong?

**What we look for in an answer:**

1. *Explanation*: Principles that do not merely sort actions into right and wrong, but principles that *explain why* actions are so sorted.
2. *Agreement with moral judgment*: Principles should sort actions in a way that more or less agrees with our moral judgment.
3. *Plausibility*: The principles should seem compelling in their own right. They should help to explain why it *matters* whether an action is right or wrong.
4. *One or many?* There need not be a single basic principle. There might be several. But arriving at several principles has certain disadvantages.
  - a. First, we may doubt whether these principles really are basic, and wonder whether there isn't some more basic principle that explains them.
  - b. Second, if there are several principles, then they may conflict. Since they are equally basic, it is not clear how we settle these conflicts.

**Sidgwick's proposal:**

*Utilitarianism*: It is wrong to produce a smaller total sum of pleasure less pain than you otherwise could.

**Problems with Common Sense:**

"The Morality of Common Sense" seems to disagree. It 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.

*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.
- Slavery contracts.

- Promises made under coercion.
- Promises made with deception, concealment of important facts, or misleading.
- Promises that cost the promisor more than they benefit the promisee.
- Promises that harm the promisee.

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 misleading, or from concealment?

**The relationship between utilitarianism and intuitionism:**

*The negative point:* commonsense is a mess.

*The positive point:* utilitarianism systematizes (organizes, extends, harmonizes, etc.) commonsense in a natural way. When we need to explain exceptions, draw definite boundaries, resolve conflict, we turn instinctively to utilitarianism. Indeed, common sense seems "unconsciously Utilitarian" (424).

In our terms:

First, utilitarianism agrees with much of our moral judgment.

Second, utilitarianism is plausible in its own right.

“What should we do?”

Utilitarianism: “Make the world as good as we can.”

“What makes the world better?”

Utilitarianism: “That people (and, perhaps other animals) have better lives.”

What makes people's lives better?

Utilitarianism: “More pleasure and less pain.”

More precisely: When we put together:

*Consequentialism:* We are morally required to do what would produce the best outcome.

*Aggregation:* The outcome is better if the sum of what is good for each person (or animal) minus what is bad for each person (or animal) is greater.

and

*Hedonism:* What is good for us as an end is pleasure, and what is bad for us as an end is pain.

We get:

*Utilitarianism:* We are morally required to do what would produce the greatest total of pleasure minus pain.