The Methods of Ethics

Henry Sidgwick

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—The division of the work into Books, chapters, and numbered sections is Sidgwick's. —Cross-references follow this system:

'chapter 3' means 'chapter 3 of *this* Book'.
'chapter 4.2' means 'chapter 4, section 2, of *this* Book'.
'II/3' means 'Book II, chapter 3'.
'IV/3.4' means 'Book IV, chapter 3, section 4'.

An accompanying page-number refers to the page where the passage in question *starts*.—This version omits most of the 2,000+ cautions that Sidgwick includes, such as 'I think. . . ', 'I conceive. . . ', 'it seems. . . ' and so on. Even with these out of the way, the work doesn't come across as bullyingly dogmatic.—In this version, most notably on pages 166 and 196, the author addresses the reader ('you'), but in the original it is always 'the reader' and 'he'.—This version is based on the sixth edition of the work (1901), the last non-posthumous one. The first edition appeared in 1874, the year after Mill died.

First launched: October 2011

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Glossary

affection: Sometimes used here in its early-modern sense, covering every sort of pro or con attitude—desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc. Thus, the phrase 'benevolent affections' [page 23] isn't pleonastic and 'malevolent affections' [page 154] isn't self-contradictory.

appetite: A strong desire for some immediate end; perhaps a craving. Our narrower sense of the word is captured on page 21 by the phrase 'appetite of hunger'.

art: Sidgwick sometimes uses 'art' in an older sense in which an 'art' is any human activity that involves techniques or rules of procedure—e.g. medicine, farming, painting.

categorical: Opposite of 'conditional'. 'If it won't do anyone any harm, tell the truth' is a conditional imperative; 'Tell the truth!' is a categorical imperative (see page 98; also page 4).

crucial experiment: Experiment that *settles* some question one way or the other.

Dead Sea apple: A disease-caused bulge on the bark of an oak, vaguely resembling an apple.

desert: Deservingness. The stress is on the second syllable, as in 'dessert' (the sweet course of a meal).

disinterested: This meant for Sidgwick what it still means in the mouths of literate people, namely 'not *self*-interested'.

duty: Most English-language moral philosophers, Sidgwick included, speak a dialect in which 'I have a duty to do A' means the same as 'I morally ought to do A'. That is not what it means in English, where 'duty' is tied to jobs, roles, social positions. The duties of a janitor; the duties of a landowner; 'My Station and its Duties' [title of a famous paper].

expedient: Advantageous, useful, helpful.

expose: In some parts of ancient Greece, unwanted babies were 'exposed', i.e. left out in the wilds to be killed by nature.

extra-regarding: This phrase uses 'extra' to mean 'outside one's own feelings', and is contrasted with 'self-regarding'. When you hang a picture, your immediate aim might be **(i)** the picture's being on the wall or **(ii)** your enoying seeing the picture on the wall. Of these, **(i)** is extra-regarding, **(ii)** is not.

felicific: happy-making.

generous: On page 157 Sidgwick uses this word in a sense that was dying in his day, namely that of 'noble-minded, magnanimous, rich in positive emotions' etc. In that passage he uses 'liberal' to mean what we mean by 'generous'. Elsewhere in the work, it's for you to decide which sense is involved.

indifference: Indifferent conduct is neither praiseworthy nor wrong; you are 'indiffferent to' the pain of others if your thinking that a certain action would cause pain doesn't affect your behaviour; 'indifferent' sensations are neither nice nor nasty.

infelicific: Not felicific.

intuition: Sidgwick uses this word in one of the two senses that it has traditionally had, in which it names the activity of (or capacity for) seeing or grasping something's truth through a single mental act, in contrast with 'demonstration' which is getting there by following a proof of it. The moral position that he calls 'intuitionism' is the thesis that the truth or validity of some moral rules can be seen *immediately* rather than through any kind of demonstration; and thus that those rules are *basic*. See Sidgwick's own explanation on page 44.

jural: Of or pertaining to the law.

mental: About half the occurrences of this are replacements for 'psychical'; Sidgwick evidently treats the two words as synonymous.

***mutatis mutandis*:** A Latin phrase that is still in current use. It means '(*mutatis*) with changes made (*mutandis*) in the things that need to be changed'.

natural theology: Theology based on facts about the natural world, e.g. empirical evidence about what the 'purposes' are of parts of organisms etc.

positive: This multicoloured word is used by Sidgwick in four of its senses. **(1)** Especially in Book II, in contrast with **negative**. **(2)** In the opening paragraphs and elsewhere, in contrast with **'practical'** (with the latter including 'ethical'): a 'positive' study is one that involves no value-judgments or moral rules. **(3)** On page 71 and elsewhere, the contrast is with **'relative'**: You measure a set of weights relatively if you get the facts about which is heavier than which; you measure them positively if you find out how much each weighs. Also:

positive law: On pages 8 and 15 and elsewhere this means the law of the land: a plain humanly established system of laws, in contrast with **divine law** and **moral law**. Also:

positive morality: This refers to 'the actual moral opinions generally held in a given society at a given time' (page 12). This may be a coinage of Sidgwick's (see page 101).

principles: When on page 42 Butler is quoted as speaking of 'the cool principle of self-love' he is using 'principle' in a sense that it had back in his day, in which 'principle' means 'source', 'cause', 'drive', 'energizer', or the like. (Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is an enquiry into the *sources in human nature* of our moral thinking and feeling.)

psychogenetic: = 'having to do with the origin and development of mental states and processes'. It replaces Sidgwick's exotic 'psychogonical'.

realise: When Sidgwick speaks of 'realising' a virtue he means 'making it real', 'acting on it', 'exhibiting it in one's actions'. He explains 'self-realisation' when he uses it.

remorse: In some places these days 'remorse' means simply 'regret over something one has done' ['buyer's remorse']. In the present work it means what it once meant everywhere: '*guilty-feeling* regret over something one has done'—a sense of having acted in a morally wrong way. This is essential to an understanding of the important first paragraph of I/5.4.

requital: Pay-back: rewarding a good deed, punishing a bad one, paying a debt, etc.

sophistication: Deception by means of bad but plausible argument. So self-sophistication [page 30] is one kind of self deception.

sympathy: From Greek meaning 'feel with': in its early modern sense, and still in Sidgwick's use, you can 'sympathise' with someone's pleasure as well as with her pain. It covers every kind of 'echo' of someone else's feelings.

tact: 'A keen faculty of perception or ability to make fine distinctions likened to the sense of touch.' (OED)

tautology: A kind of circular truth that doesn't convey any news. On page 166 Sidgwick says that a certain proposition boils down to 'Immoral acts ought not to be performed', which is a tautology because what it *means* to call an act 'immoral' is that it ought not to be performed.

BOOK II: Egoistic hedonism

Chapter 1: The principle and method of hedonism

1. My aim in this Book is to examine the method of determining reasonable conduct that I have already sketched under the name of 'egoism', using this term as short-hand for 'egoistic hedonism'—the thesis that the ultimate end of each individual's actions is his own greatest happiness. Ought this to be counted among the received 'methods of *ethics*'? There are strong grounds for holding that simple egoism can't be a basis on which to construct a system of morality that is satisfactory to the moral consciousness of mankind in general. In chapter 3.2 and chapter 5 I shall carefully discuss these reasons. At present I'll just point to the wide acceptance of the principle that it's reasonable for a man to act in the way that does most for his own happiness. It is explicitly accepted by leading proponents of intuitionism and of utilitarianism (which is my name for universalistic hedonism). I have already noticed [page 5] that Bentham, although he regards the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the 'true standard of right and wrong', regards it as 'right and proper' that each individual should aim at his own greatest happiness. And Butler is equally prepared to grant that

> 'Our ideas of happiness and misery are nearer and more important to us than any of our other ideas. . . . Virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection towards and pursuit of what is right and good, as such; but let us admit that when we sit down in a cool hour we can't justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit until we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it.' [*Fifteen Sermons*, no. 11]

And even Clarke in his *Boyle Lectures*, despite having emphatically maintained that 'virtue truly deserves to be chosen for its own sake and vice to be avoided', still admits that it is 'not truly reasonable that men by •adhering to virtue should give up their lives, if by doing this they eternally deprive themselves of all possibility of getting any benefit from that •adherence'.

And, generally, in Christian times it has been obvious and natural to hold that achieving virtue is essentially an enlightened pursuit of happiness for the agent. And this has been held not only by coldly calculating people but also—emphatically—by such a chivalrous and high-minded preacher as Berkeley. This is only one side of the Christian view; the opposite doctrine, that an action done from self-interest is not properly virtuous, has continually asserted itself—either openly conflicting the former thesis or somehow reconciled with it. But although the former thesis is less refined and elevated, it seems to have been the commoner view. Common sense pretty well assumes that ·self·-interested actions that favour the agent's happiness are *prima facie* reasonable, and that the onus of proof lies with those who maintain that disinterested [see Glossary] conduct, as such, is reasonable.

But the common notions of *·self·-interest*, *happiness* etc. are somewhat vague and ambiguous; so that to make these terms usable in scientific discussion we must let them retain the main part of their meanings while trying to make them more precise. We get that result, I think, if by 'greatest possible happiness' we understand the *greatest attainable*

surplus of •pleasure over •pain, using •those two terms in a comprehensive way, to include respectively all kinds of agreeable and disagreeable feelings. And if we're to accept this quantitative definition of the goal, consistency requires that pleasures be sought in proportion to their pleasantness, so that a less pleasant consciousness mustn't be preferred to a more pleasant one because of some other qualities that it may have. The distinctions of •quality that Mill and others urge can be admitted as grounds of preference if, but only if, they can be resolved into distinctions of •quantity. Practical reasoning that is commonly called 'egoistic', once we have cleansed it of ambiguities and inconsistencies, tends to fit this pattern; and it's only in this more precise form that it's worth our while to examine such reasoning closely. So that's what we must understand an 'egoist' to be—a man who, when two or more courses of action are open to him, does his best to discover what amounts of pleasure and pain are likely to result from each and chooses the one that he thinks will yield him the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain.

2. Adopting the basic **principle** of egoism doesn't necessarily require the ordinary empirical **method** of seeking one's own pleasure or happiness. A man may aim at the greatest happiness within his reach, and yet not try to discover empirically what amount of pleasure and pain is likely to come from any given course of action, because he thinks he has a surer method—a deductive method—for identifying the conduct that will make him happiest in the long-run. He may believe this on grounds of **revealed religion**, because God has promised happiness as a reward for obedience to certain commands; or of **natural religion**, because a just and benevolent God must have organized the world in such a way that happiness will in the long run be distributed in proportion to virtue. It is by combining these two that Paley connects •the universalistic hedonism that he adopts as a method for determining duties with the •egoism that he thinks to be self-evident as a basic principle of rational conduct. Or a man may connect virtue with happiness by a strictly **ethical process of a *priori* reasoning**, as Aristotle seems to do by assuming that the *best* activity will always be unshakably accompanied by the greatest pleasure; with 'best' being fixed by reference to moral intuition, or to the common moral opinions of men generally or of well-bred and well-educated men. Or the deduction by which maximum pleasure is inferred to be the result of a particular kind of action may be **psychological or physiological**; we may have some general theory connecting pleasure with some other physical or mental fact, enabling us to deduce the amount of pleasure that will come from any particular kind of behaviour. Suppose for example that we hold (as many do) that the best chance of pleasure in the long run comes from a perfectly healthy and harmonious exercise of our bodily and mental functions. Given that view we may accept the hedonistic principle without being called on to estimate and compare particular pleasures; rather, we'll have to define the notions of *perfect health* and *harmony of functions* and to consider how those two goals may be achieved. Still those who advocate such deductive methods often appeal to ordinary experience, at least for confirmation, and they admit that only the individual who experiences a pleasure (or pain) directly knows how pleasant (or painful) it is. So it seems that the obvious method for egoistic hedonism is the one I'll call 'empirical-reflective; and I think it's the one that is commonly used in egoistic deliberation. So the next move should be to examine this method as to ascertain clearly the assumptions it involves, and estimate the exactness of its results.

Chapter 2: Empirical hedonism

1. The empirical method of egoistic hedonism, and indeed the very conception of *greatest happiness* as an end of action, rests on the basic assumption that pleasures and pains have definite quantitative relations to each other. If they don't, they can't be conceived as elements—·pleasures positive, pains negative·—of a total that we are to try to make as great as possible. What if some kinds of pleasure (·let's call them 'superpleasures'·) are so much pleasanter than others that the smallest conceivable amount of a superpleasure would outweigh the greatest conceivable amount of any other pleasure? ·That wouldn't wreck the calculation·, because if we knew that it was the case, we could handle any hedonistic calculation involving superpleasures by treating all other pleasures as practically non-existent.[1] But in all ordinary prudential reasoning, I think, we implicitly assume that all the pleasures and pains we could experience bear a finite ratio to each other in respect of pleasantness and its opposite. If we can make this ratio definite, we can balance the intensity of a pleasure (or pain) against its duration; for if finitely long pleasure (or pain) x is intensively greater than another, y, in some definite ratio, it seems to be implied in this conception that if y were continuously increased in extent without change in its intensity it would at a certain point just balance x in amount.[2]

If pleasures can be arranged in a scale, as greater or less in some finite degree, this leads to the assumption of a hedonistic zero—a perfectly neutral feeling—as a point from which the positive quantity of pleasures can be measured. And this emerges even more clearly in the balancing of pleasures against pains. For pain must be reckoned as the negative quantity of pleasure, to be subtracted from the positive in estimating over-all happiness; so we must conceive as at least theoretically possible a point of transition in consciousness at which we pass from the positive to the negative. We don't absolutely have to assume that this strictly neutral feeling ever actually occurs; but experience seems to show that a state close to it occurs quite commonly; and we certainly experience transitions from pleasure to pain and vice versa, and thus (unless all such transitions are abrupt) we must at least momentarily be in this neutral state.

[1] Some enthusiastic and passionate people have said that there are feelings so exquisitely delightful that one moment of their rapture is preferable to an eternity of agreeable consciousness of a lower kind. These assertions may have been meant as exaggerations and not intended as statements of fact; but in the case of pain, the thoughtful and subtle Edmund Gurney soberly maintained, as something with important practical implications, that 'torture 'so extreme as to be 'incommensurable with moderate pain' is an actual fact of experience. This doesn't fit my own experience, and I don't think it is supported by the common sense of mankind. . . .

[2] Bentham gives four qualities of any pleasure or pain (taken singly) as important in hedonistic calculation: •intensity, •duration, •certainty, •proximity. If we assume that intensity must be commensurable with duration, the influence of the other qualities on the comparative value of pleasures and pains is easy to determine: we are accustomed to estimate the value of chances numerically, and this method enables us to determine. . . .how much the doubtfulness of a pleasure detracts from its value. And proximity is a property that it's reasonable to disregard except in its effect on uncertainty. My feelings next year should be just as important to me as my feelings next minute, if only I could be equally sure of what they will be. This impartial concern for all the ·temporal· parts of one's conscious life is a prominent element in the common notion of the •rational as opposed to the •impulsive pursuit of pleasure.

This implicitly denies the paradox of Epicurus:

> The state of painlessness is equivalent to the highest possible pleasure. If we can obtain absolute freedom from pain, the goal of hedonism is reached; and then we can vary our pleasure but we can't increase it.

This doctrine contradicts common sense and common experience. But it would be equally wrong to regard this neutral feeling—'hedonistic zero', as I have called it—as the normal condition of our consciousness, out of which we occasionally sink into pain and occasionally rise into pleasure. Nature hasn't been as niggardly to man as this. In my experience, as long as health is retained, and pain and burdensome work banished, the mere performance of everyday functions is a frequent source of moderate pleasures, alternating rapidly with states that are nearly or quite indifferent [see Glossary]. Many Greek moralists in the post-Aristotelian period regarded *apatheia* as the ideal state of existence, but they weren't thinking of it as 'without one pleasure and without one pain', but rather as a state of peaceful intellectual contemplation, which might in philosophic minds reach a high degree of pleasure.

2. I haven't yet made the notions of pleasure and pain precise enough for quantitative comparison. In this and in the rest of the discussion of hedonism I shall mostly part speak only of pleasure, assuming that pain can be regarded as the negative quantity of pleasure, so that any statements about pleasure can through obvious verbal changes be applied also to pain.

[Sidgwick now embarks on a long discussion of proposed definitions of 'pleasure' (and analogous ones of 'pain') by his contemporaries Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain. Those definitions both imply that to have pleasure is be in a state that one is disposed actively to protect. Sidgwick points to •pleasures of relaxation ('a warm bath'), •the pleasure of food for a temperate person who never eats to the point of satiety, and other objections; conscientiously suggests ways for Spencer and Bain to cope with his counterexamples; and concludes that *for purposes of measurement* (his italics) this approach won't do: the intensity of pleasure/pain is wildly different from any measure of will to continue/cease. With all that out of the way, he returns to his own investigation.]

Shall we then say that the word 'pleasure' names a measurable quality of feeling that is •independent of its relation to volition and •simple in a way that makes it strictly indefinable?—like the quality of feeling named by 'sweet', which we are also conscious of in varying degrees of intensity. Some writers seem to think so; but when I reflect on the notion of *pleasure*—still using that word to cover the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications as well as the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments—the only common quality that I can find is the relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term 'desirable', in the sense I explained [on page 52]. So I shall define *pleasure*—when we are considering its 'strict value' for purposes of quantitative comparison—as a feeling which, when experienced by thinking beings, is at least implicitly taken to be desirable or (in cases of comparison) preferable.

Now a problem arises. When I said in chapter 1, as a fundamental thesis of hedonism, that it's reasonable •to prefer pleasures in proportion to their intensity and •not to allow this to be outweighed by any merely qualitative difference, I implied that it is actually *possible* to prefer pleasures on the non-quantitative grounds that they are 'higher' or 'nobler'; and it is indeed commonly thought that non-hedonistic preferences happen frequently. But my definition of *pleasure* as the kind of feeling that we take to be desirable or preferable seems to make it a contradiction in terms to say that the less pleasant feeling can ever be

thought preferable to the more pleasant.

Here's how to avoid this contradiction. You'll agree that the pleasantness of a feeling is only directly knowable by the individual who feels it, ·and he knows it only· at the time of feeling it. Now, when an estimate of pleasantness involves comparison with feelings that are only represented in idea (I'll return to this shortly), the estimate is liable to be wrong because the representation may be wrong. But no-one is in a position to controvert someone's preference regarding the quality of his present feeling. Now, when we judge the preferableness of a state of consciousness on the grounds of some quality such as 'elevation' or 'refinement' rather than its pleasantness, we seem to be relying on some common standard that others can apply as well as the sentient individual. This leads me to think that when one kind of pleasure is judged to be qualitatively superior to another, although less pleasant, what is being preferred is not really the feeling itself but something in the mental or physical conditions or relations under which it arises, with these being regarded as things that anyone can know. If I in thought distinguish any feeling from all its conditions and concomitants—and also from all its effects on the subsequent feelings of that person or others—and contemplate it merely as the *passing feeling of a single person*, I can't find in it any preferable quality other than the one we call its pleasantness; and the degree of that is knowable directly only by the person who has the feeling.

If my definition of *pleasure* is accepted, and if 'ultimate good' is taken (as I have proposed) to be equivalent to 'what is ultimately desirable', the fundamental proposition of ethical hedonism has a chiefly negative significance; for the statement that

> 'pleasure is the ultimate good '

will only mean that

> nothing is ultimately desirable except desirable feeling, found to be desirable by the sentient individual at the time of feeling it.

It might be objected that this definition couldn't be accepted by a moralist with a stoical cast of mind who refused to recognise pleasure as in any degree ultimately desirable. But even this moralist ought to admit that •an implied judgment that a feeling is *per se* desirable is inseparably connected with •the recognition of that feeling as pleasure; while holding that sound philosophy shows that such judgments are illusory. This indeed seems to have been substantially the view of the Stoic school.

The preference that pure hedonism regards as ultimately rational should be defined as the preference for a feeling valued merely as feeling, according to the estimate of the sentient individual at the time of feeling it; without regard for the conditions and relations under which it arises. So we can state as the basic assumption of what I have [on page 43] called 'quantitative hedonism'—implied by adopting 'greatest surplus of pleasure over pain' as the ultimate end—that all pleasures and pains have for the sentient individual knowable degrees of desirability, positive or negative. The empirical method of hedonism can be applied only if we assume that these degrees of desirability are definitely given in experience. . . .

NOTE. It is sometimes thought that hedonists have to assume that human beings actually *can* achieve a surplus of pleasure over pain—a proposition that an extreme pessimist would deny. But the conclusion that life is always on the whole painful wouldn't make it unreasonable for a man to aim at *minimising* pain. . . ., though it would make immediate painless suicide the only reasonable course for a perfect egoist, unless he looked forward to another life.

Chapter 3: Empirical hedonism (continued)

1. Let *pleasure* be defined, then, as

> a feeling that the sentient individual at the time of feeling it implicitly or explicitly takes to be desirable—i.e. desirable considered merely as a feeling, and not because of •its objective conditions or consequences or of •any facts that can be known and judged by anyone else.

And let it be provisionally assumed that from this point of view feelings generally can be •compared definitely enough for practical purposes and •empirically known to be more or less pleasant in some definite degree. Then the **empirical-reflective method of egoistic hedonism** will be

- •to represent in advance the different series of feelings that our knowledge of physical and mental causes leads us to expect from the different lines of conduct that are open to us;
- •to judge which of the represented series appears to be over-all preferable, taking all probabilities into account; and
- •to adopt the corresponding line of conduct.

This calculation may seem to be too complex for practice: any complete forecast would involve vastly many contingencies with varying probabilities, and we would never get to the end of calculating the hedonistic value of each of these probabilities of feeling. But perhaps we can reduce the calculation to a manageable size without serious loss of accuracy, by •discarding all obviously imprudent conduct, and •neglecting the less probable and less important contingencies. Such discarding is common practice in some of the arts [see Glossary] that have more definite ends—e.g. military strategy and medicine. If the general in ordering a march, or the physician recommending a change of living conditions, took into consideration *all* the relevant circumstances their calculations would become impracticable; so they confine themselves to the most important, and we can do the same in the hedonistic art of life [Sidgwick's phrase].

Some objections against the hedonistic method go much deeper, and by some writers are taken to the point of rejecting the method altogether. Dealing carefully with these objections will be a convenient way of getting a clear view of the method itself and of the results we can reasonably expect from it.

What I'll be discussing are *intrinsic* objections to egoistic hedonism—i.e. arguments against the possibility of obtaining by it the results it aims at. I shan't consider here •whether it is reasonable to take one's own happiness as one's ultimate end; or •how far the moral output of this system will coincide with current opinions about what is right. I postpone these questions for future consideration—in chapter 5, III/14, and the Concluding Chapter of this work; my only concern here is with objections tending to show that hedonism isn't practicable as a rational method.

[The first three objections are by Sidgwick's contemporary T. H. Green. Sidgwick evidently has little respect for these objections, and nor should we. (That is not a judgment on Green's work in general, merely on the bits that Sidgwick has chosen to discuss.) **(1)** Green says that we have no concept of *pleasure as feeling*, only of pleasure as a component in a package that includes the conditions in which it arises. Sidgwick declares this to be •contrary to common sense, •contrary to assumptions made in empirical psychology, and •in conflict with several things that Green says in other

places. **(2)** Green declares hedonism's phrase 'greatest possible pleasure' to be meaningless. In one place he defends this on the ground that 'pleasant feelings are not quantities that can be added', apparently because 'each is over before the other begins'. The same is true of periods of time, Sidgwick points out, but 'it would be obviously absurd to say that hours etc. are not quantities that can be added'. He notes that Green elsewhere silently drops this •objection to adding pleasures in thought, in favour of an •objection to adding them 'in enjoyment or imagination of enjoyment'. Sidgwick: 'No hedonist ever supposed that the happiness he wanted to maximise was something to be enjoyed all at once, or ever wanted to imagine it as so enjoyed'. He rightly sees that as connected with this: **(3)** Green contends that 'an end that is to serve the purpose of a criterion' must 'enable us to distinguish actions that bring men nearer to it from those that do not'. Sidgwick replies:] This presupposes that 'end' has to mean a goal or consummation which, after gradually drawing nearer to it, we reach all at once. But I don't think this is the sense in which ethical writers ordinarily understand the word 'end'; and certainly all that I mean by it is something that it is reasonable to aim at for itself, whether or not attained in successive parts. And as long as my prospective balance of pleasure over pain can be affected by how I act, there seems to be no reason why 'maximum happiness' shouldn't provide a serviceable criterion of choice for conduct.

2. We get a relevant objection to the method of egoistic hedonism if experience confirms that this is true:

- •The consciousness of how transient pleasure is either •makes it less pleasant at the time or •causes a subsequent pain, and
- •the deliberate and systematic pursuit of pleasure tends to intensify this consciousness.

Green doesn't clearly say this, but it seems to be in his mind when he writes that it is 'impossible that self-satisfaction should be found in any series of pleasures' because 'satisfaction for a self that lasts and contemplates itself as doing so must be at least relatively permanent'. [That sentence's two quoted bits from Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* come from widely separated sections of it.] I suppose the implication is that the disappointment of the hedonist who does't find self-satisfaction where he seeks for it is accompanied by pain or loss of pleasure. If this is so, and if the self-satisfaction thus missed can be obtained by firmly adopting some other principle of action, it seems to follow that the systematic pursuit of pleasure is in danger of defeating itself. So it is important to consider carefully how far this is really the case.

I don't find in my own experience that the mere transientness of pleasures is a serious source of discontent, as long as I have a fair chance of having future pleasures that are as valuable as those in the past, or even as long as my future life has any substantial amount of pleasure to offer. But I don't doubt that for all or most men an important element of happiness comes from the sense of having 'relatively permanent' sources of external pleasure (wealth, social position, family, friends) or internal pleasure (knowledge, culture, strong and lively interest in the well-being of innocently prosperous persons or institutions). But I don't see this as an objection to hedonism. Rather, it seems obvious from the hedonistic point of view that

> 'as soon as intelligence discovers that there are •fixed objects, •permanent sources of pleasure, and •large groups of enduring interests that deliver a variety of recurring enjoyments, the rational will—preferring the greater to the less—will unfailingly devote its energies to the pursuit of these'. [Quoted from *Pessimism* by Sidgwick's younger contemporary James Sully.]

It may be replied that if these permanent sources of pleasure are consciously sought merely as a means to the hedonistic end, they won't deliver the happiness they were sought for. To some extent I agree; but if the normal complexity of our impulses is properly taken into account, this statement won't count against the adoption of hedonism but will merely warn the hedonist of a danger that he has to guard against. In a previous chapter [page 24] I followed Butler in stressing the difference between •impulses that are strictly directed towards pleasure and •'extra-regarding' [see Glossary] impulses that don't aim at pleasure—though much and perhaps most of our pleasure consists in the gratification of the latter. . . . I argued there that in many cases the two kinds of impulse are so far incompatible that they do not easily coexist in the same moment of consciousness. I added, however, that in everyday life the incompatibility is only momentary, and doesn't prevent a real harmony from being attained by a sort of 'alternating rhythm of the two kinds of impulse in consciousness'. But this harmony is certainly liable to be disturbed; and while on the one hand

> individuals can and do sacrifice their greatest apparent happiness to the gratification of some imperious particular desire,

on the other hand,

> self-love is liable to absorb the mind enough to block a healthy and vigorous outflow of the 'disinterested' impulses towards particular objects—impulses that we must have if we are to achieve any high degree of the happiness that self-love aims at.

I don't infer from this that the pursuit of pleasure must be self-defeating and futile; but merely that when the principle of egoistic hedonism is applied with a due knowledge of the laws of human nature, it is practically self-limiting—i.e. that a rational method of reaching the desired end requires us to some extent to put it out of sight and not directly aim at it. I have before [page 22] called this the 'fundamental paradox of egoistic hedonism'; but though it looks like a paradox, it doesn't seem to present any practical difficulty once the danger has been clearly seen. We are *very* familiar with cases in which

> a man •lets the original goal of his efforts (whatever they may be) slip out of sight, and •comes to regard his means to this end as ends in themselves, so that eventually he even sacrifices the original end in order to attain what is only derivatively desirable.

If it's that easy and common to •overdo forgetting the end in favour of the means, there's no reason why it should be hard to do this •to the extent that rational egoism prescribes; and in fact this seems to be continually done by ordinary folk with amusements and pastimes of all kinds. . . .

But it is sometimes thought that there's an important class of refined and elevated impulses that are in a special way incompatible with the supremacy of self-love—such as the love of virtue, or personal affection, or the religious impulse to love and obey God. But the common view of these impulses doesn't seem to recognise this difficulty. Of all the moralists who followed Shaftesbury in contending that it is a man's true interest to acquire strictly disinterested social affections *none* have seen these affections as inherently incompatible with the supremacy of rational self-love. And Christian preachers who have commended the religious life as really the happiest haven't thought genuine religion to be irreconcilable with the conviction that each man's own happiness is his primary concern.

But there are others who seem to carry •religious consciousness and •the feeling of human affection to a higher stage of refinement at which a stricter disinterestedness is required. They maintain that the essence of each of •those

feelings in its best form is absolute self-renunciation and self-sacrifice. And these do seem incompatible with self-love, even in a cautiously self-limiting form. A man can't both wish to secure his own happiness and be willing to lose it. But what if willingness to lose it is the true means of securing it? Can self-love not merely reduce indirectly its prominence in consciousness, but directly and unreservedly annihilate itself?

This emotional feat doesn't seem to me possible; so I have to admit that a man who accepts the principle of rational egoism cuts himself off from the special pleasure that comes with this absolute sacrifice and abnegation of self. But however exquisite this pleasure may be, the pitch of emotional exaltation and refinement needed to attain it is comparatively so rare that it has no place in men's common estimate of happiness. So I don't think it's an important objection to rational egoism that it is incompatible with this particular state of consciousness. Nor do I think that the common experience of mankind really confirms that the desire for one's own happiness, if accepted as supreme and regulative, *inevitably* defeats its own aim by lessening and thinning the impulses and emotional capacities that are needed for great happiness; though it certainly shows a serious and subtle danger in this direction.

3. The habit of mind resulting from the continual practice of hedonistic comparison is sometimes thought to be unfavourable to achieving the hedonistic goal because •the habit of reflectively observing and examining pleasure is thought to be incompatible with •the capacity for experiencing pleasure in normal fullness and intensity. And it certainly seems important to consider what effect the continual attention to our pleasures. . . .is likely to have on these feelings themselves. This inquiry seems at first sight to reveal an incurable contradiction in our view of pleasure. ·**On one side**:· Pleasure exists only as it is *felt*, so the more conscious we are of it, the more pleasure we have; and it would seem that the more our attention is directed towards it, the more fully we'll be conscious of it. **On the other hand**, Hamilton's statement that 'knowledge and feeling' (cognition and pleasure or pain) are always 'in a certain inverse proportion to each other' seems at first to square with our common experience, because the purely cognitive element of consciousness seems to be neither pleasurable nor painful, so that the more our consciousness is occupied with cognition the less room there seems to be for feeling.

But this assumes that the total intensity of our consciousness is a constant quantity; so that when one element of it increases, the rest must diminish; and I can't see any empirical evidence for that. Rather, it seems that at certain times in our life intellect and feeling are simultaneously feeble, so that a single mental excitement could intensify both at once.

Still, it does seem that any very powerful feeling—as intense as we are normally capable of—is commonly diminished by a stroke of cognitive effort; so the exact observation of our emotions does face a general difficulty, namely that the observed item seems to shrink and dwindle in proportion as the study of it grows keen and eager. How, then, are we to reconcile this with the proposition that pleasure exists only as we are conscious of it? The answer seems to be this:

> Having a feeling *essentially* involves being conscious of it; so it can't be the case that the mere consciousness of a present feeling diminishes the feeling! But in introspection we go beyond the present feeling, comparing and classifying it with other feelings (remembered or imagined), and the effort of representing and comparing these other feelings tends to decrease the consciousness of the actual pleasure.

My conclusion is this: although there's a real danger of diminishing pleasure by the attempt to observe and estimate it, the danger seems to arise only for very intense pleasures and only if the attempt is made at the time when the pleasure is happening; and since the most delightful periods of life have frequently recurring intervals of nearly neutral feeling in which the pleasures immediately past may be compared and estimated without any such detriment, I don't attach much importance to the objection based on this danger.

4. More serious are the objections urged against the possibility of reliably comparing pleasures and pains in the way that the hedonistic standard requires. Of course we *do* habitually compare pleasures and pains in respect of their intensity—for example, we unhesitatingly declare our present state to be more or less pleasant than the one we have just left, or than a further-back one that we remember; and we declare some pleasant experiences to have been *worth the trouble* it took to obtain them or *worth the pain* that followed them. But despite this it may still be maintained **(1)** that this comparison is ordinarily haphazard and very rough, and that it can't be extended to meet systematic hedonism's demands or applied with any accuracy to all possible states, however differing in quality; and **(2)** that this kind of comparison as commonly practised is liable to illusion; we can't say exactly *how much* illusion, but we are continually forced to recognise that there is *some*. Plato adduced this as a ground for distrusting the apparent affirmation of consciousness in respect of present pleasure. . . .

I agree with critics who say that in estimating present pleasure there's no conceivable appeal from the immediate decision of consciousness—that here the phenomenal is the real. But error can come in, as follows. In any estimate of the intensity of our present pleasure we must be comparing it with some other state. And this other state must generally be a representation, not an actual feeling; for though we can sometimes experience two pleasures at once, we can't often compare them satisfactorily (either because •their causes interfere with one another, so that neither pleasure reaches its normal degree of intensity, or because •the two blend into a single state of pleasant consciousness whose ingredients can't be estimated separately). Now, if one of the compared items must be an imagined pleasure, that opens the door to a possibility of error, because the imagined feeling may not adequately represent the pleasantness of the corresponding actual feeling. And in the comparisons required by egoistic hedonism *all* the compared pleasures are represented rather than actual, for we are trying to choose between two or more *possible* courses of conduct.

Let us then look more closely at how this comparison is ordinarily made, so as to see what positive grounds we have for mistrusting it.

In estimating the values of different pleasures open to us, we trust mostly to our prospective imagination: we project ourselves into the future, and imagine what such and such a pleasure will amount to under hypothetical conditions. The conscious inference involved in this imagination is mainly based on our experience of past pleasures, which we usually recall •generically though sometimes we bring in definitely remembered •particular pleasures; and we are also influenced by the experiences of pleasure of others—sometimes •particular experiences we have been told about, and sometimes traditional •generalisations about the common experience of mankind.

A process such as this isn't likely to be free from error, and no-one claims that it is. In fact there's hardly anything that moralisers have emphasised more than the fact that forecasts of pleasure are continually erroneous. Each of us frequently recognises his own mistakes, and attributes to

others errors that they haven't seen for themselves—errors due to misinterpretation of their own experience or ignorance or neglect of that of others.

How are these errors to be eliminated? The obvious answer is that we must replace •the instinctive, largely implicit inference that I have just described by •a more scientific process of reasoning in which we deduce the probable degree of our future pleasure or pain in any given circumstances from generalisations based on a large enough number of careful observations of our own and others' experience. This raises three questions: **first:** How accurately can each of us estimate his own past experience of pleasures and pains? **second:** How far can this knowledge of the past enable him to make secure forecasts regarding the greatest happiness within his reach in the future? **third:** How much can he know about the past experience of others?

In tackling the **first question**, remember that it's not enough just to know generally that we derive pleasures from these sources and pains from those; we need also to know approximately how much pleasure or pain each source provides. If we can't form some quantitative estimate of them, it is futile to try to achieve our *greatest possible* happiness—at least by an empirical method. Our task with each pleasure as it occurs or is recalled in imagination, to compare it quantitatively with other imagined pleasures. And the question is: how trustworthy can such comparisons be?

When I reflect on my pleasures and pains, and try to compare their intensities, I can't get far in obtaining clear and definite results,. . . .whether the comparison is made •between two states of consciousness recalled in imagination or •between one such state and a pleasure I was having at the time of the comparison. This is true even when I compare feelings of the same kind; and as I move to feelings of different kinds, the vagueness and uncertainty of my results increases proportionately. Let us begin with sensual gratifications, which are thought to be especially definite and graspable. If when enjoying a good dinner I ask myself whether the fish (or the Chablis) gives me more pleasure than the beef (or the claret), sometimes I can decide but very often I can't. ·Another kind of example·: If I have undertaken two kinds of bodily exercise of which one and not the other was markedly pleasant (or tedious), I naturally take note of that difference between them; but I don't naturally go further than this in judging how pleasurable (or painful) each was, and when I try to do so I don't get any clear result. And similarly with intellectual exercises and predominantly emotional states of consciousness: even when the causes and quality of the compared feelings are similar, the hedonistic comparison doesn't yield any definite result except when the differences in pleasantness are enormous. When I try to get a *scale* for pleasures of different kinds, e.g. comparing

- •labour with rest,
- •excitement with tranquility,
- •intellectual exercise with emotional outflow,
- •the pleasure of scientific knowledge with the pleasure of beneficent action,
- •the delight of social expansion with the delight of aesthetic reception,

my judgment wavers and fluctuates far more, and in most cases I can't give any confident decision. And if this is the case with pain-free pleasures (Bentham calls them 'pure'), it's even more true of those commoner states of consciousness in which a predominant pleasure is mixed with a certain amount of pain or discomfort. If it's hard to say which of two states of contentment was the greater pleasure, its harder to compare •a state of placid satisfaction with •one of eager but hopeful suspense, or •triumphant conquest of painful obstacles. And it may be even *more* difficult to compare

pure pleasures with pure pains—to say how much of one we consider to be exactly balanced by a given amount of the other, when they don't occur simultaneously. . . .

5. Further trouble: these judgments aren't clear and definite, and still less are they consistent. . . . Each person's judgment of the comparative value of his own pleasures is apt to change through time, though it relates to the same past experiences; and this variation casts doubt on the validity of any particular comparison.

This variation seems to be caused partly by **(a)** the nature of the represented feeling and partly by **(b)** the general state of the mind at the time when the comparison is made. **(a)** We find that different kinds of past pleasures and pains are not equally revivable in imagination.

> Pains that hook into emotions and ones that somehow *mean* something are more easily revived than pains that are just unpleasant experiences. At this moment I can more easily get back in imagination the discomfort of the sense of 'I'm going to throw up' than the pain of the actual vomiting, although my memory of what I thought at the time tells me that the pain of expectancy was trifling compared with the nastiness of the vomiting.

·And the nature and context of a pleasure can also affect how, and how easily, it comes to mind later·. That seems to be why past hardships, toils, and anxieties often seem pleasurable when we look back on them later: the excitement, the heightened sense of life that accompanied the painful struggle, would have been pleasurable in itself, and it's *this* that we recall rather than the pain. **(b)** In estimating pleasures, the other cause of variation is more obvious: we're aware that our estimate of them varies with changes in our mental or bodily condition. Everyone knows that we can't adequately estimate the gratifications of appetite when we are in a state of satiety, and that we're apt to exaggerate them when we are very hungry. (I don't deny that a pleasure may be increased by the intensity of the antecedent desire for it; so that in these cases the pleasure doesn't merely *appear*, as Plato thought, but actually *is* greater because of to the strength of the preceding desire. But ·this isn't always the case·: we all know that intensely desired pleasures often turn out to be disappointing.)

There seems to be no analogue for this on the *pain* side of the ledger. . . . But the prospect of certain ·kinds of· pains throws most people into the state of passionate aversion that we call 'fear', leading them to estimate such pains as worse than they would be judged to be in a calmer mood.

Further, in the presence of any kind of pain or uneasiness we seem liable to underrate pains of very different kinds: in •danger we value •repose, overlooking its *ennui* [= 'boringness'], and the tedium of •security makes us imagine the mingled excitement of past •danger as almost purely pleasurable. And when we are absorbed in some pleasant activity, the pleasures of dissimilar activities are apt to be looked down on; they seem coarse or thin, as the case may be; and this is a basic objection to noting the exact degree of a pleasure at the time of experiencing it. [To ensure that Sidgwick's elegantly compressed 'coarse or thin, as the case may be' is understood: while I'm thrilling to a raft-trip down the Colorado, I might think of the pleasure of listening to Schubert as 'thin'; while listening to Schubert, I might think of the pleasure of the river-trip as 'coarse'.] The eager desire that often seems essential to a whole state of pleasurable activity usually involves a similar bias; indeed *any* strong excitement—whether from aversion, fear, hope, or suspense—in which our thought is concentrated on a single result. . . .tends to make us under-rate different pleasures and pains. More generally, at a time when we are incapable of experiencing a certain pleasure we can't imagine it as very

intense—the pleasures of intellectual or bodily exercise at the close of a wearying day, an emotional pleasure when our capacity for it is temporarily exhausted. Many philosophers have thought we could guard against error in this matter by making our estimate in a cool and passionless state, but that is wrong. Many pleasures can be experienced in their full intensity only if they are preceded by desire, and even by enthusiasm and high-pitched excitement; and we're not likely to evaluate these adequately when we're in a state of perfect tranquillity.

6. These considerations make clearer the extent of the assumptions of empirical quantitative hedonism, stated in the preceding chapter [page 60]: **(i)** that each of our pleasures and pains has a definite degree, and **(ii)** that this degree is empirically knowable. **(i)** If pleasure exists only in being felt, the belief that every pleasure and pain has a definite intensive quantity or degree must remain an *a priori* assumption that couldn't be given positive empirical verification. A pleasure can have such-and-such a degree only as compared with other feelings of the same or some different kind; but usually this comparison can be made only in imagination, and the best result it can come up with will be something of this hypothetical form:

> If feelings F_1 and F_2 were felt together precisely as they have been felt separately, one would be found more desirable than the other in ratio R.

If we're asked what grounds we have for *believing* this hypothetical, all we can say is that it is irresistibly suggested by reflection on experience, and at any rate uncontradicted by experience.

(ii) Granting that each of our pleasures and pains really does have a definite degree of intensity, do we have any means of accurately measuring it? Is there any evidence that the mind is ever in a state that makes it a perfectly neutral and colourless medium for imagining all kinds of pleasures? Experience certainly shows that we are often in moods in which we seem to be biased for or against a particular kind of feeling. Isn't it probable that there's *always* some bias of this kind? that we are always more in tune for some pleasures, more sensitive to some pains, than we are to others? There's no getting away from it: exact knowledge of the place of each kind of feeling in a scale of desirability—with its mid-point being a zero of perfect indifference—is at best an ideal, and we can never tell how close we come to it. Still, ·things could be worse·. The variations in our judgments and the disappointment of our expectations give us experience of errors whose causes we can trace and allow for, at least roughly, correcting in thought the defects of imagination. And what we need for practical guidance is only to estimate. . . .the value of a *kind* of pleasure or pain as obtained under certain circumstances or conditions; we can diminish somewhat the chance of error in this estimate by making several observations and imaginative comparisons, at different times and in different moods. To the extent that these agree, we're entitled to more confidence in the result; and to the extent that they differ, we can at least reduce our possible error by taking the average of the estimates. Obviously, though, a method like this can't be expected to do more than roughly approximate to the truth.

7. So we must conclude that our estimate of the hedonistic value of any past pleasure or pain is liable to error and we can't calculate how much, because the represented pleasantness of different feelings fluctuates, varying indefinitely with changes in the condition of the representing mind. And even if we *could* adequately allow for it, this source of error in our comparison of past pleasures is liable to intrude again when we argue from the past to the future. ·This brings

us to the **second question** of the three posed on page 65·. Here are some of the things that could interfere with the past-to-future inference:

- •Our capacity for particular pleasures has changed since the experiences that our calculation is based on.
- •We have reached satiety for some of our past pleasures, or become less susceptible to them because of changes in our constitution.
- •We have become more susceptible to pains connected with these pleasures.
- •Altered conditions of life have given us new desires and aversions, and brought new sources of happiness into prominence.

Or any or all of these changes are likely to occur before the completion of the course of behaviour that we are now deciding on. The hedonistic calculations of youth have to be adjusted as we become older; a careful estimate of a •girl's pleasures. . . .wouldn't be much use to a •young woman.

No-one when trying to estimate the probable effect on his happiness of •new circumstances and influences, •untried rules of conduct and •fashions of life, relies entirely on his own experience; such a person always argues partly from the experience of others. But by including inferences from other men's experience we inevitably introduce a new possibility of error; ·now we confront the difficulty raised in the **third question** of the three posed on page 65·. For any such inference ·from others to oneself· assumes a similarity of nature among human beings, and this is never exactly true. We can't tell exactly know how far short of the truth it falls; but we have enough evidence of the strikingly different feelings produced in different men by similar causes to convince us that the ·similarity-of-nature· assumption would often be wholly misleading.

(That is why Plato's argument that the philosopher's life has more pleasure than the life of the devotee of sensual pleasure is a total failure. He argues:

> The philosopher has tried both kinds of pleasure, sensual and intellectual, and prefers the delights of philosophic life; so the sensualist ought to trust his decision and follow his example.

But—who knows?—the philosopher's constitution may be such as to make his enjoyments of the senses comparatively feeble, while the sensualist's mind may be unable to achieve more than a thin shadow of the philosopher's delight.)

If we are to be guided by someone else's experience, therefore, we need to be convinced •that he is generally accurate in observing, analysing, and comparing his sensations, and •also that his relative susceptibility to the different kinds of pleasure and pain in question coincides with our own. . . . And however accurate he is about the causes of his feelings, there's the question of whether similar causes would produce similar effects in us; and this uncertainty is greater if our adviser has to rely on long-term memory to know about some of the pleasures or pains that are being compared. Thus in the perpetual controversy between Age and Youth, wisdom isn't as clearly on the side of maturer counsels as it seems to be at first sight. When a youth is warned by his senior to abstain from some pleasure because it's not worth the possible pleasures that must be sacrificed for it and the future pains that it will entail, he can't easily know how far the older man—even if he could once •feel the full rapture of the delight that he is asking the younger to renounce—can now •recall it.

And this source of error gets at us in a more extended and more subtle manner than has yet been noticed. Our sympathetic [see Glossary] sense of others' experiences of pleasure and pain has been continually and variously

exercised throughout our life, by actual observation and oral communication with other human beings, and through books, paintings, sculptures and so on, so that we can't tell how far it has unconsciously blended with •our own experience and affected how •it is represented in memory. . . .

Those considerations should seriously reduce our confidence in the 'empirical-reflective method of egoistic hedonism', as I have called it. I don't conclude that we should reject it altogether; I'm aware that despite all the difficulties that I have presented I continue to act on the basis of comparisons that I make between pleasures and pains. But I conclude that if one wants help with the systematic direction of conduct, it would be highly desirable to control and supplement the results of such comparisons by the assistance of some other method—if we can find one that we see any reason to rely on.

Chapter 4: Objective hedonism and common sense

1. Before I examine (in chapter 6) methods of seeking one's own happiness that are further remote from the empirical methods, I want to consider (in this chapter) how far we can escape the difficulties and uncertainties of the method of reflective comparison by relying on *current opinions and accepted estimates* of the value of different objects commonly sought as sources of pleasure.

At least in large-scale planning of their lives men seem to find it natural to seek and estimate •the objective conditions and sources of happiness, rather than •happiness itself; and it's plausible to suggest that by relying on estimates of the former we avoid the difficulties of the introspective method of comparing feelings. What makes this plausible is the thought that common opinions about the value of different sources of pleasure are the net result of the combined experience of mankind down through the generations, in which all the individual differences I have been writing about balance and neutralise one another and thus disappear.

I don't want to undervalue the guidance of common sense in our pursuit of happiness. But when we consider these common opinions as premises for the deductions of systematic egoism we find them to be open to ·at least seven· serious objections.

(i) At best common sense gives us only an estimate that is true for an average or typical human being—and we have already seen that any particular individual will probably diverge somewhat from this type. So each person will have to correct common opinion's estimate by the results of his own experience, in order to get from it trustworthy guidance for his own conduct; and it looks as though this process of correction must be infected by all the difficulties we are trying to escape. **(ii)** The experience of the mass of mankind has too narrow a range for its results to help much in the present inquiry. Most people spend most of their time working to avert starvation and severe bodily discomfort; and their brief periods of leisure, after supplying the bodily needs of food, sleep, etc. is spent in ways determined by impulse, routine, and habit rather than by a deliberate estimate of probable pleasure. So it seems that the 'common sense' we are to appeal to ·in our hedonistic inquiry· can only be

that of a minority of comparatively rich and leisured persons. **(iii)** For all we know to the contrary, the mass of mankind—or some section of it—may be *generally and normally* under the influence of some of the causes of mis-observation that I have discussed. We avoid the 'idols of the cave' by trusting common sense, but what is to guard us against the 'idols of the tribe'? [In his *New Organon* Bacon labels as 'idols of the cave' the sources of error in the individual person, and as 'the idols of the tribe' the sources of error in the human species as a whole.] **(iv)** The common estimate of different sources of happiness seems to involve all the confusion of ideas and points of view that we have worked hard to eliminate in describing the empirical method of hedonism. •It doesn't distinguish objects of natural desire from sources of experienced pleasure. We saw in I/4 that these two don't exactly coincide; indeed we often see men continuing not only to feel but to indulge desires, though they know from experience that they'll bring more pain than pleasure. So the current estimate of the desirability of various goals doesn't express simply men's experience of pleasure and pain; for men are apt to think desirable what they strongly desire, whether or not they have found it conducive to happiness on the whole; and so the common opinion will tend to represent a compromise between the average force of desires and the average experience of the consequences of gratifying them.

(v) We must allow for the intermingling of moral with purely hedonistic preferences in the estimate of common sense. For it often happens that a man chooses a course of conduct because he expects greater happiness from it, but this expectation comes from his thinking that the chosen conduct is the right or more excellent or more noble thing to do. He is here perhaps unconsciously assuming that the morally best action will turn out to be also the one that does most for the agent's happiness. (I'll explore this assumption in chapter 5.) And a similar assumption seems to be made, on no good evidence, regarding merely aesthetic preferences.

(vi) Are we to be guided by the preferences that men say they have, or by those that their actions would lead us to infer? On one hand, we can't doubt that men often, from weakness of character, fail to seek what they sincerely believe will give them most pleasure in the long run; on the other hand, because a genuine preference for virtuous or refined pleasure is a mark of genuine virtue or refined taste, men who don't actually *have* such a preference are (perhaps unconsciously) influenced by a desire to be credited with having it, which affects what they *say* about their estimates of pleasures.

2. **(vii)** Even if we had no doubt on general grounds that common sense would be our best guide in the pursuit of happiness, we would still be in difficulties because its utterances on this topic are so unclear and inconsistent. Quite apart from differences of time and place, serious conflicts and ambiguities are found if we consider only the current common sense of our own age and country. Let us list the sources of happiness that seem to be recommended by an overwhelming consensus of current opinion:

- health,
- wealth,
- friendship and family affections,
- fame and social position,
- power,
- interesting and congenial occupation and amusement, including
- the gratification of the love of knowledge, and of the refined susceptibilities—partly sensual, partly emotional—that we call 'aesthetic'.

What are the relative values of these objects of common pursuit? We seem to get no clear answer from common

sense. A possible exception to that: it would be generally agreed that health ought to be outrank everything else; but even on this point we couldn't infer general agreement from observation of the actual conduct of mankind! Indeed, even as regards the positive [see Glossary] estimate of these sources of happiness, we find on closer examination that the supposed consensus is much less clear than it seemed at first. Not only are there many important groups of dissidents from the current opinions, but their paradoxical views are in a strange and unexpected way welcomed and approved by the very same majority—the same common sense of mankind—that maintains the opinions *from* which they are dissenting. Men show a really startling readiness to admit that •the estimates of happiness that guide them in their ordinary habits and pursuits are wrong and that •sometimes the veil is lifted, so to speak, and the error is displayed. [Sidgwick is being sarcastic here; read on!]

For example, men seem to put great value on the ample gratification of bodily appetites and needs; wealthy people spend a lot of money and forethought on the means of satisfying these appetites in a luxurious manner; and though they do not often deliberately sacrifice health to this gratification—common sense condemns that as irrational—still one may say that they are habitually *courageous* in pushing right up to the edge of this imprudence.

Yet the same people are fond of saying that 'hunger is the best sauce', and that 'temperance and labour will make plain food more delightful than the most exquisite products of the culinary art'. And they often argue with perfect sincerity that as regards these pleasures the rich really have little or no advantage over the comparatively poor, because habit soon makes the rich man's luxurious provision for the satisfaction of his •acquired needs no more pleasant to him than the satisfying of more •primitive appetites is to the poor man. [There is nothing condescending about 'primitive' here; it is contrasted with 'acquired', and means about the same as 'natural'.] And the same line of thought is often extended to all the material comforts wealth can purchase. It is often contended that habit makes us indifferent to these comforts while we have them, and yet we suffer when we have to do without them. . . . And it's only a short step to the conclusion that wealth—

- •in the pursuit of which most men agree in concentrating their efforts,
- •on the attainment of which all congratulate each other,
- •for which so many risk their health, shorten their lives, reduce their enjoyments of domestic life, and sacrifice the more refined pleasures of science and art

—is really a very doubtful gain for most people, for whom the cares and anxieties it involves cancel out the slight advantage of the luxuries that it purchases.[1]

In England social rank and status is an object of passionate pursuit, yet there's an often-expressed and generally accepted view that •it has no intrinsic value as a means of happiness; that •though the process of social ascent is perhaps generally agreeable, and descent is certainly painful, yet life *up there* is no more pleasant than life at the humbler level; that •happiness can be found as easily (if not more easily) in a cottage as in a palace; and so forth.

Even more routine are the commonplaces about the

[1] It is striking to find the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, the founder of a long line of economists who are commonly believed to exalt the material means of happiness above all the rest, declaring that 'wealth and greatness are only trivially useful, mere trinkets', and that 'in ease of body and peace of mind all the different ranks of life are nearly on a level; the beggar sitting in the sun beside the highway *has* the security that kings *fight* for'. Adam Smith, *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* IV/1.

emptiness and vanity of the satisfaction brought by fame and reputation. The case of posthumous fame, indeed, is a striking instance of my general thesis that the commonly accepted ends of action are determined partly by the average force of desires that are *not* directed towards pleasure or shaped by experiences of pleasure. Posthumous fame seems to rank pretty high among the objects that common opinion regards as good or desirable for the individual; and the pursuit of it isn't ordinarily criticised as imprudent, even if it leads a man to sacrifice other important sources of happiness to a result that he doesn't expect to have any consciousness of. Yet the slightest reflection shows such a pursuit to be *prima facie* irrational from an egoistic point of view;[1] and every moraliser has found this an obvious and popular topic. The actual consciousness of present fame is no doubt very delightful to most persons; but the moraliser has no trouble maintaining that even this is accompanied by disadvantages that make its hedonistic value very doubtful.

The current estimate of the desirability of *power* is pretty high, and it may be that

> the more closely and analytically we examine men's actual motives, the more widespread and predominant we'll find the pursuit of power to be;

because many men seem to seek wealth, knowledge, even reputation, as a means to getting power rather than for their own sakes or as a means to other pleasures. And yet men willingly agree when they're told that •the pursuit of power, as of fame, is prompted by an empty ambition that is never satisfied but only made more uneasy by such success as it manages to achieve; that •the anxieties that accompany not only the *pursuit* but also the *possession* of power, and the jealousies and dangers inseparable from power, far outweigh its pleasures. . . .

Moralisers broadly agree that •the exercise of the domestic affections is an important means to happiness; and •this certainly seems to be prominent most people's plan of life. But it may fairly be doubted whether men in general *do* value domestic life very highly, apart from the gratification of sexual passion. Certainly at any time and place where men could freely indulge their sexual urges while avoiding the burden of a family, without any serious fear of social disapproval, the unmarried state has tended to become common; it has even become so common as to arouse the grave anxiety of legislators. And though common sense has always disapproved of such conduct, that seems to have been because it is seen as anti-social rather than because it is seen as imprudent.

Thus we find great instability and uncertainty in the most decisive judgments of common sense concerning the things that common opinion seems most clearly and confidently to recommend as sources of pleasure—bodily comfort and luxury, wealth, fame, power, society. It's true that the pleasures derived from art and the contemplation of the beauties of nature, and the pleasures of scientific curiosity and the exercise of the intellect generally, are highly praised; but it's hard to formulate a 'common opinion' regarding them because the high estimates often given to them seem to express the real experience of only small minorities. These have persuaded leisured people to let culture be regarded as an important source of happiness; they haven't produced any generally accepted opinion as to its importance in comparison with the other sources I have mentioned. . . .

[1] It might be justified on a self-love basis by dwelling on the •pleasures of hope and anticipation that accompany the pursuit. But this is obviously an after-thought. It is not for the sake of •these that posthumous fame is sought by him whom it spurs 'To scorn delights and live laborious days' [quoted from Milton].

(viii) [This carries on from **(vii)** on page 70.] Even if the consensus regarding sources of happiness were far more complete and clear than they seem in fact to be, its value would be greatly lessened by the dissent of important minorities that I haven't so far talked about. For example, many religious folk regard *all* worldly pleasures as mean and trifling; so full of vanity and emptiness [Sidgwick's phrase] that the eager pursuit of them is possible only through ever-renewed illusion, leading to ever-repeated disappointment. And this view is shared by a good many reflective persons who have no religious bias, as you can see from the numerous adherents that pessimism has won in recent times. Indeed a somewhat similar opinion about the value of the ordinary objects of human pursuit has been expressed by many philosophers who weren't pessimists; and considering the fact that it's the philosopher's business to reflect with care and precision on the facts of consciousness we shouldn't rush to let them be *outvoted* by the mass of mankind. On the other hand, the philosopher's capacities of feeling aren't typical of those of humanity in general; so if he erects the results of his individual experience into a universal standard, he is likely to overrate some pleasures and underrate others. Convincing illustrations of this are provided by thinkers such as Epicurus and Hobbes—not of the idealist or transcendental type, but overt hedonists. We can't accept as fair expressions of normal human experience either •Epicurus's identification of painlessness with the highest degree of pleasure, or •Hobbes's assertion that the gratifications of ·scientific· curiosity 'far exceed in intensity all carnal delights'. So here is our problem: the mass of mankind, to whose common opinion we naturally look for universally authoritative beliefs about the conditions of happiness, are not good at or practised in observing and recording their experience; and usually the better a man is at observing ·his conscious processes·, the wider is the gap between the phenomena that he can observe and the ordinary type.

3. We have to accept that the hedonistic method can't be made exact and certain by appealing to what common sense says about the sources of happiness. But I don't want to exaggerate the difficulty of organising common sense into a fairly coherent body of *probable* doctrine that can provide some practical guidance. ·I have two main points to make about this·. **(a)** Commonly commended sources of happiness *can* compete with one another and present themselves as alternatives, but this doesn't happen often, and when it does the competition isn't severe. The pursuit of wealth often leads also to power (in addition to the power that is inherent in wealth) and to reputation; and these objects of desire can usually be best obtained—if we can obtain them at all—by activities that in themselves provide the pleasure that normally comes with the energetic use of one's best faculties; and these congenial activities are not incompatible with •adequate exercise of social and domestic affections. or with •cultivated entertainment (which must be carefully limited if it is to be really entertaining). . . .

(b) As for the philosophical or quasi-philosophical paradoxes regarding the illusoriness of sensual enjoyments, wealth, power, fame, etc., we can explain the widespread acceptance of these by admitting a certain general tendency to exaggeration in the common estimates of such objects of desire, which from time to time causes a reaction and an equally excessive temporary depreciation of them. As I pointed out in chapter 3, it is natural for men to value too highly the pleasures they hope and long for; power and fame, for example, bring anxieties and disgusts that aren't foreseen when they are represented in longing imagination; yet it may still be true that power and fame give most men ·who have them· a clear balance of happiness on the whole. And it

seems clear that luxury adds less to the ordinary enjoyment of life than most impoverished men suppose. . . ., so we can fairly conclude that increase of happiness is very far from keeping pace with increase of wealth. But when we take into account the pleasures and the security that wealth can bring, we can hardly doubt that increase of wealth normally brings some increase of happiness—at least until a man reaches an income beyond that of the great majority in any actual community. So we can reasonably conclude that although it is extravagant to say that happiness is 'equally distributed through all ranks and callings', it *is* distributed more equally than men's external circumstances might suggest, especially given the importance of the pleasures that accompany the exercise of the affections. Also, common sense recognises that •some people with unusual temperaments find the ordinary pleasures of life to be quite trifling compared with more refined enjoyments; and also that •men generally are liable occasionally to fall under the sway of absorbing impulses that take them out of the range within which the judgments of common sense are even broadly and generally valid. No-one expects a lover to care much for anything except the enjoyments of love!. . . .

Common sense, in fact, hardly claims to provide more than rather indefinite general rules that no prudent man should neglect without giving himself a reason for doing so. Such reasons may come from his knowledge of some special features of his own nature, or from the experience of others whom he believes to be more like himself than the average of mankind are. Still, we have seen that there's a considerable risk of error in relying on the special experience of others; and, to cut the story short, it seems that no process of this kind—appealing to the opinion of the many, or of cultivated persons, or of those whom we judge most to resemble ourselves—can solve with precision or certainty the problems of egoistic conduct.

So we still have our question:

> Can we have a general theory about the causes of pleasure and pain that is sufficiently certain and usable to enable us to rise above •the ambiguities and inconsistencies of common or sectarian opinion, and •the shortcomings of the empirical-reflective method, and establish the hedonistic art of life on a thoroughly scientific basis?

I shall consider this question in chapter 6; but first I shall examine a common belief about the way to happiness which, though it doesn't rest on a scientific basis, is thought by its adherents to be more certain than most of the current opinions that we have been examining. This is the belief that a man's *doing his duty* [see Glossary] will bring him the greatest happiness he can have. This means his duty as commonly recognised and prescribed, unless he deviates from this standard in obedience to a truer conception of how to achieve or promote universal good.[1] Because of how important this opinion is to a writer on morals, I give it a chapter of its own.

[1] In chapter 6 I shan't discuss the case where the person's conscience definitely conflicts with the general moral consciousness of his age and country. It is commonly held to be a man's duty always to obey his own conscience, even at the risk of error, but it isn't commonly held that this will always bring him the greatest happiness open to him.

Chapter 5: Happiness and duty

1. The belief that happiness is connected with duty tends to be widely accepted by civilised men, at least after a certain stage in civilisation has been reached. But it doesn't seem likely that we would affirm it as a generalisation from experience, rather as something known from direct divine revelation or by inference from •the belief that the world is governed by a perfectly good and omnipotent being. To examine •that belief thoroughly is one of the most important tasks that human reason can attempt; but because it involves delving into the evidence for natural and revealed religion, I can't include it here. (In my concluding chapter I'll say as much about it as seems desirable.) All I shall discuss here, then, is the coincidence of duty and happiness considered as something that we know about from experience and can expect to show up in our present earthly life. With that restriction the alignment of happiness with duty can hardly be said to be 'currently believed'; indeed the *opposite* belief may seem to be implied by the general admission that the moral government of the world can't be completely exhibited unless there are rewards and punishments in •a future state. But if you think about it you'll see that this implication is not necessary; for one might hold that even •here virtue is always rewarded and vice punished, making the virtuous course of action always the most prudent, while also holding that these ·earthly· rewards and punishments aren't sufficient to satisfy our sense of justice. Admitting that the circumstances of a virtuous man are often so adverse that his life is less happy than that of many less virtuous people, we might still maintain that virtue will give him the most happiness that *can* be had under these circumstances. . . . And this view has certainly been held by •reputable moralists on the evidence of actual experience of human life; and seems often to be confidently asserted on similar evidence by •popular preachers and moralisers. So we should carefully and impartially examine this opinion. In tackling this at this stage in my book, I'll have to use the common concept of *duty* without further definition or analysis; but the people whose view I'm going to discuss usually hold that the moral concepts of ordinary well-meaning folk are at least approximately valid, ·and approximations are all we can have anyway·. We have seen that hedonism's generalisations must be established, if at all, by broad considerations and decisive outweighings, and with a topic like this it's pointless to take account of slight differences, claiming to weigh small portions of happiness in our mental scales.[1]

2. The view I am examining isn't likely to provoke controversy with regard to 'duties towards oneself', because this ordinarily means 'acts that tend to promote one's own happiness'. (I'm here relying on the common division of duties into •self-regarding and •social. Any adjustments that turn out to be needed—see III/2.1 and 7.1—won't invalidate the conclusions of the present chapter.) So we can confine our attention to the social part of duty, and ask: If we obey the moral rules that tell us how to behave towards others, will we always tend to secure the greatest balance of happiness to ourselves?

[1] For a similar reason I shall here treat notions of *duty* and *virtuous action* as practically equivalent. Ordinary usage of the two terms appears to indicate that they diverge somewhat; I'll discuss that in III/2.

I'll adapt Bentham's terminology, and label the pleasures that come from conforming to moral rules, and the pains that come from violating them, the 'sanctions' of these rules. These 'sanctions' can be put into two classes. **External sanctions** are

- •legal sanctions, i.e. penalties inflicted by the authority of the state; and
- •social sanctions, which are either •the pleasures to be expected from the approval and goodwill of our fellow-men and the consequent good they'll be prompted to do for us. . . . or •the trouble and losses that are to be feared from their distrust and dislike.

Internal sanctions consist in

- •the pleasurable emotion that accompanies virtuous action, or •the absence of remorse, or •pleasure resulting indirectly from the effect on the agent's mind of his maintenance of virtuous dispositions and habits.

The main importance of this classification, for our present purpose, is that the systems of rules to which these sanctions are attached may be in conflict. A community's positive [see Glossary] morality *develops*, changing in ways that affect the consciences of the few before they are accepted by the many; so that at any time the rules backed by the strongest social sanctions may fall short of, or even clash with, the ·moral· intuitions of the members of the community who have most moral insight. For similar reasons, law and positive morality may be at variance in details. A law wouldn't last long if everyone thought it would be wrong to obey it; but there could easily be laws commanding conduct that is considered immoral by some fraction of the community, especially by some sect or party that has a public opinion of its own; and a person may be connected with this fraction so much more closely than with the rest of the community that in his case the social sanction practically operates *against* the legal one.

This conflict is of great importance when we are considering whether these sanctions, so far as we can foresee them, are always sufficient to get a rational egoist to perform his social duty; for. . . . we'll have trouble proving that duty coincides with self-interest in the exceptional cases where the sanctions oppose what the agent thinks to be his duty.

But even if we set these cases aside, it still seems clear that morality's external sanctions are not alone always enough to make •immoral conduct •imprudent as well. We must indeed admit •that in an even tolerably well-ordered society—i.e. in an ordinary civilised community in its normal condition—all serious open violation of law is imprudent unless it's a part of a successful violent revolution; and further •that violent revolutions would seldom if ever be made by people who were all perfectly under the control of enlightened self-love—because such disturbances always bring general and widespread destruction of security and of other means of happiness. Still, so long as actual human beings are not all rational egoists, such times of disorder will be liable to occur; and we can't say that rational self-love clearly directs everyone to 'seek peace and live in peace' [1 *Peter* 3:11]; because disturbing the political order may present openings to wealth, fame, and power for a cool and skillful person who knows how to fish in troubled waters—openings far wider than anything he could hope for in peaceful times. In short: though an organised society composed entirely of rational egoists would tend to be stable and orderly, it doesn't follow that any individual rational egoist will always be on the side of order in any existing community.[1]

[1] What about revolutionaries aiming sincerely at general well-being? The morality of such revolutions will generally be so dubious that these cases can't provide any clear argument on either side of the question here discussed.

Anyway, in the most orderly societies that we know the administration of law and justice is never so perfect as to make secret crimes *always* acts of folly because of the legal penalties attached to them. However much these penalties may outweigh the advantages of crime, there are bound to be cases where the risk of discovery is so small that on a sober calculation •the almost certain gain will more than compensate for •the slight chance of the penalty. And, finally, in no community is the law so perfect that *no* kinds of flagrantly anti-social conduct slip through its meshes and escape legal penalties altogether or incur only penalties that are outweighed by the profit of law-breaking.

3. Well, then, how far does the •social sanction in such cases make up for the defects of the •legal sanction? No doubt

- •the hope of praise and liking and services from one's fellow-men, and
- •the fear of forfeiting these and incurring instead aversion, refusal of aid, and social exclusion,

are often large enough to lead the rational egoist to lawfulness, even in the absence of adequate legal penalties. But where •legal penalties are defective, that's exactly where ·social· sanctions are liable to fail also: social penalties no less than legal ones are evaded by secret crimes; and in cases of criminal revolutionary violence, the social sanction is apt to be seriously weakened by the party spirit enlisted on the side of the criminal. The force of •the social sanction diminishes very rapidly in proportion to the number of dissidents from the common opinion that awards •it. Disapproval that is intense and truly universal would be a penalty severe enough, perhaps, to outweigh any imaginable advantages; for a human being couldn't live happily, whatever goods he enjoyed, if he wasn't looked on in a friendly way by some of his fellows; so the conventional portrait of a tyrant as necessarily suspicious of those nearest him, even of the members of his own family, makes us think that such a life must be extremely unhappy. But when we look at *actual* tyrannical usurpers—

- •wicked statesmen,
- •successful leaders of unjustified rebellions,
- •all the great criminals who have put themselves out of the reach of legal penalties

—it seems that in an egoistic calculation of the gain and loss from their conduct the moral odium they lie under needn't count for much. This lack of esteem is expressed by only a portion of the community, and is often drowned in the loud-voiced applause of the multitude, whose admiration is largely independent of moral considerations. And there's no shortage of philosophers and historians whose judgment shows a similar independence!

So we can't say that the external sanctions of men's legal duties will always make duty coincide with ·self·-interest. Still less can we say this about moral duties that aren't covered by the law. I'm well aware of the force of what we might call 'the principle of reciprocity', through which some utilitarians have tried to prove that each person's social duties coincide with his individual interests. It goes like this: Virtues are either •useful to others or •directly agreeable to others; so they either increase the market value of the virtuous man's services, causing others to purchase them at a higher price by giving him more dignified and interesting functions; or they dispose men to please him, out of gratitude and also in order to enjoy the pleasures of his society in return. And the display of these qualities naturally spreads to others through the mere influence of example (man is an imitative animal). I'm sure that the prospect of these advantages is an adequate motive for developing many virtues and avoiding much vice. For this reason a rational egoist will generally

- •be strict and punctual in fulfilling all his engagements,
- •be truthful in his assertions, in order to win the confidence of others,
- •be zealous and industrious in his work, in order to win promotion to more honourable and lucrative jobs,
- •control any of his passions and appetites that might interfere with his efficiency;
- •not exhibit violent anger or use unnecessary harshness even towards servants and subordinates; and
- •be polite and accepting and good-humoured towards his equals and superiors in rank, showing them kindness of the sort that costs little in proportion to the pleasure it gives.

But the conduct recommended by this line of reasoning doesn't really coincide with moral duty. **(a)** Social success requires us to *appear* to be useful to others; so this motive won't restrain one from doing secret harm to others, or even from acting openly in a way that really is harmful though it isn't seen to be so. **(b)** A man may be useful to others not through his virtue but rather through his vice—or through his good and useful qualities with some unscrupulousness mixed in. **(c)** Morality tells us to do our duty towards everyone, and to do our best not to harm anyone; but the principle of reciprocity tells us to exhibit our useful qualities chiefly towards the rich and powerful, and abstain from harming those who can retaliate. It leaves us free to omit our duties to •the poor and weak if we find a material advantage in doing so, unless •they can arouse the sympathy of persons who can harm us. **(d)** Some vices—e.g. some sensuality and extravagant luxury—don't harm anyone immediately or obviously, though they tend in the long run to impair the general happiness; so few persons are strongly motivated to check or punish this kind of mischief.

In cases **(b)**–**(d)** the mere disrepute attaching to open immorality is an important consideration. But this wouldn't always be enough to turn the scales of prudence against vice; if you think it would, perhaps you haven't properly analysed the muddy and fluctuating streams of social opinion on which the reputation of individuals mainly depends, and considered the conflicting and divergent elements that they contain. Many moralists have remarked on the discrepancy in modern Europe between •the law of honour (i.e. the more important rules maintained by the social sanction of well-bred persons) and •the morality professed in society at large. But this isn't the only example of a special code diverging from the moral rules generally accepted in the community where it exists. Most religious sects and parties, and probably the majority of trades and professions, show something of this sort. I don't mean merely that special rules of *behaviour* are imposed on members of each profession, corresponding to their special social functions and relations; I mean that a special moral *opinion* is apt to grow up, conflicting somewhat with the opinion of the general public. The most striking part of this divergence consists in the approval or allowing of practices that the current morality disapprove of—

- •wild behaviour by soldiers,
- •bribery among politicians in certain times and places,
- •untruthfulness of various degrees among priests and lawyers,
- •fraud in different forms among tradesmen,

—and so on. In such cases there are strong natural inducements to disobey the stricter rule (in fact the continual pressure of these inducements seems to be what relaxed the rule in the first place); while the social sanction is weakened to such an extent that it is sometimes hard to say whether it outweighs a similar force on the other side. When

a member of one of these groups conforms to the stricter rule, if he doesn't meet with outright contempt and aversion from the other members, is at least liable to be called eccentric and fantastic, especially if by such conformity he loses advantages not only to himself but to his relatives or friends or party. This professional or sectarian allowing of immorality is often not so clear and explicit as to amount to the establishing of a rule that conflicts with •the generally received rule, but even then it is sufficient to weaken the social sanction in favour of •the latter. And in addition to these special divergences, most civilised societies have *two* degrees of positive morality, each maintained somewhat by common consent: a stricter code that is publicly taught and avowed, and a laxer set of rules that is privately accepted as the only code that can be strongly supported by social sanctions. In most cases, a man can refuse to conform to the stricter code without being

- •excluded from social intercourse,
- •seriously hindered in professional advancement, or
- •seriously disliked by any of those whose society he will most naturally seek;

and in that case the mere loss of a certain amount of reputation isn't likely to be felt as a very grave evil, except by someone who is especially sensitive to the pleasures and pains of reputation. And there seem to be many men whose happiness doesn't depend on the approval of the moralist—and of people who support the moralist—to such an extent that it would be prudent for them to purchase this praise by any great sacrifice of other goods.

4. Thus, if the conduct prescribed to an individual by the openly accepted morality of his community coincides with what rational self-love would prompt, this must often be solely or chiefly because of the *internal* sanctions. In considering these I shall set aside the pleasures and pains involved in the anticipation of rewards and punishments in a future life: my topic is the calculations of rational egoism as performed without taking into account any feelings that are beyond the range of experience, and it will be more consistent with that to exclude also the pleasurable or painful anticipations of such feelings.

Let us start with the satisfaction that accompanies the performance of duty—meaning duty *as such*, leaving out any consequences—and the pain that follows on its violation. After the discussions of chapters 3 and 4 you won't expect me to try to weigh these pleasures and pains *exactly* against others; but ·inexactness can get us somewhere·. I see no empirical evidence that such feelings are always intense enough to turn the balance of prospective happiness in favour of morality. This will hardly be denied in application to isolated acts of duty. . . . The call of duty has often impelled a soldier or other public servant, or the adherent of a persecuted religion, to face certain and painful death under circumstances where it could be avoided with little if any loss of reputation. To prove this is reasonable from an egoistic point of view, we have to assume that in any such case the evasion of duty would bring so much pain[1] that the rest of the person's life would be hedonistically worthless. That assumption would be paradoxical and extravagant. Nothing

[1] I am here including in moral pain (pleasure) all pain (pleasure) that is due to sympathy [see Glossary] with the feelings of others. This is not the place for me to discuss fully the relation of sympathy to moral sensibility; but I am sure •on the one hand that these two emotional susceptibilities are actually distinct in most minds, whatever they may have been originally; and •on the other hand that sympathetic and strictly moral feelings are almost inextricably blended together in the ordinary moral consciousness; so that my present argument doesn't need to draw the line between them. But I shall look into sympathy, as the internal sanction that utilitarians specially emphasize, in the concluding chapter of this treatise [page 243.]

that we know about most people in any society suggests that their moral feelings taken alone form such a weighty element in their happiness. And a similar conclusion seems irresistible even in less extreme cases, where it's not •life but •a considerable share of ordinary sources of happiness that a man is called on to give up for virtue's sake. Can we say that all men—or even most men—are so constituted that

- •the satisfactions of a good conscience would certainly repay them for such sacrifices, or that
- •the pain and loss involved in them would certainly be outweighed by the remorse that would follow the refusal to make them?[1]

Few if any writers, however, have explicitly gone as far as this. What Plato in his *Republic* and other writers on his side have tried to prove is not •that for each person at each moment duty will produce more happiness than any alternative, but rather •that it's in each person's over-all interests to choose the life of the virtuous man. But it's hard to make this ·much weaker thesis· even probable. To see this, look at the lines of reasoning by which it is commonly supported.

Plato represents the soul of the virtuous man as a well-ordered polity—·i.e. an as-it-were-political structure·—of impulses, in which every passion and appetite obeys the rightful sovereignty of reason and operates only within the limits that reason lays down. He contrasts the tranquil peace of such a mind with the disorder of one where a series of lower impulses or a single ruling passion lords it over reason; and he asks which is the happier, even apart from external rewards and punishments. Well, we can grant all that Plato claims here and yet be no nearer answering the question before us. For the issue we are studying isn't

reason versus passion

but rather, in Butler's terminology,

conscience versus rational self-love.

We're supposing the egoist to have all his impulses under control, and are only asking how this control is to be exercised. We have seen that the way of life best calculated to achieve the end of self-interest appears *prima facie* to diverge at certain points from what men are prompted to by a sense of duty. To maintain Plato's position we would have to show that this appearance is false, and that a way of life which under certain circumstances leads us to pain, loss, and death is still what self-interest requires. Is our nature such that this anti-egoistic kind of regulation is the only one possible for us—i.e. that we have to choose between this and no regulation at all? Of course not! It is easy to imagine a rational egoist strictly controlling his passions and impulses, including his social sentiments, within such limits that indulging them doesn't involve the sacrifice of something that would please him more; and we seem to have encountered many people who approximate to this type at least as closely as anyone else approximates to the ideal of the orthodox moralist. Hence if the rules of conscience are to be demonstrably the best means to the individual's happiness, it must be because the over-all way of life maintained by self-love involves an over-all sacrifice of pleasure, as compared with the way of life maintained by

[1] A striking confirmation of this comes from Christian writers of the 18th century who treat the *moral* unbeliever as a fool who sacrifices his happiness both here and hereafter. Most of these writers were earnestly engaged in the practice of virtue, yet this practice hadn't made them love virtue so much that they would prefer it, even under ordinary circumstances, to the sensual and other enjoyments that it excludes. It seems absurd, then, to suppose that for people who *haven't* developed and strengthened their virtuous impulses by virtuous habits the pain that might afterwards result from resisting the call of duty would always be enough to neutralise all other sources of pleasure.

conscience. And if that is how things stand, it can only be because of the special emotional pleasure that comes with satisfying the moral sentiments or the special pain or loss of happiness that results from repressing and violating them.

By now you have probably noticed a fundamental difficulty:

> If a man thinks it reasonable to seek his own interest, he clearly can't disapprove of any conduct that comes under this principle, or approve any that goes against it. So the pleasures and pains of conscience •can't enter into the calculation of whether a certain line of behaviour is in accordance with rational egoism, because they •can't attach themselves in the egoist's mind to any way of behaving that hasn't already been decided, on other grounds, to be reasonable or the reverse.

There is some truth in this, but we must here recur to the distinction drawn in I/3.1 between •the general impulse to do what we believe to be reasonable and •special likings or aversions for special kinds of conduct independent of their reasonableness. In the moral sentiments of ordinary men these two kinds of feeling are blended together, because people generally think that the rules to which the common moral sentiments are attached are somehow reasonable. But we can conceive of the two as separated; and we actually observe such a separation when a man is led by a process of thought to a moral standpoint different from the one he has been trained in; for his mind will retain some quasi-moral likings and aversions that are no longer sustained by his deliberate judgment of right and wrong. So there's every reason to believe that most men, however firmly they might adopt the *principles* of egoistic hedonism, would still have *feelings* prompting them to perform duties commonly recognised in their society, without believing that the actions prompted by such feelings were reasonable and right. For such sentiments would always be powerfully supported by the sympathy of others, and their expressions of praise and blame, liking and aversion; and since it is agreed that the conduct commonly recognised as virtuous generally coincides with what enlightened self-love would dictate, a rational egoist's habits of conduct will naturally foster these (for him) 'quasi-moral' feelings. So our question is not: 'Should the egoist cherish and indulge these sentiments up to a certain point?', because everyone will answer Yes to that. Our question is this: 'Can the egoist consistently encourage these 'quasi-moral' sentiments to grow so much that they'll always prevail over the strongest opposing considerations—i.e. does prudence require him to give them their heads, letting them carry him where they will? We have already seen evidence that rational self-love will best achieve its end by limiting its conscious operation and allowing free play to disinterested impulses; can we accept the further paradox that it is reasonable for it to abdicate altogether its supremacy over some of these impulses?

When you think about it, I think you'll see that this abdication of self-love is not something that could happen in the mind of a sane person who still regards his own interest as the reasonable ultimate end of his actions. Such a man may decide to devote himself unreservedly to the practice of virtue, with no detailed thoughts about what seems to be in his interests; and by living up to this decision he may gradually acquire strong habitual tendencies to acts in that way. But these habits of virtue can't ever become strong enough to gain irresistible control over a sane and reasonable will. When virtue demands from such a man an extreme sacrifice—one that is too imprudent for him to ignore—he must always be able to move out of his habit of virtue and deliberate afresh, controlling his will in a way that

doesn't bring in his past actions. You may think:

> Although an egoist retaining his belief in rational egoism can't thus *abandon* his will to the sway of moral enthusiasm, it remains the case that if he were to change his conviction and *prefer* duty to interest he would find that this preference brings him an over-all gain in happiness. •The pleasurable emotions that accompany the kinds of virtuous or quasi-virtuous habits that are compatible with sticking to egoistic principles are so inferior to •the raptures that accompany the unreserved and passionate surrender of the soul to virtue—speaking only of raptures in this life, leaving the after-life out of this—that it really is in a man's interests to obtain, if he can, the convictions that make this surrender possible, even though it might sometimes lead him to act in a manner that is in itself undoubtedly imprudent.

[In other words: There is a rational-egoist case for living always virtuously, even if it would be psychologically impossible for a rational egoist to make the case and act on its conclusion.] This is certainly tenable, and I am quite disposed to think it true of persons with specially refined moral sensibilities. And I can't conclusively prove that it isn't true of everyone (the hedonistic calculus isn't good enough for that); but I do say that it seems to be opposed to the broad results of nearly everyone's experience. Observation convinces me that most men are so constituted as to feel the pleasures (and pains) arising from conscience far less keenly that pleasures and pains from some other sources—gratifications of the senses, the possession of power and fame, strong human affections, the pursuit of science, art, etc.—so that in many cases not even early training could have given the moral feelings the required predominance. . . .

To sum up; although the performance of duties towards others and the exercise of social virtue seem to be *generally* the best means to the individual's happiness, and it is easy to exhibit this alignment of virtue with happiness in speeches to a crowd, when we carefully analyse and estimate the consequences of virtue to the virtuous agent, it appears improbable that this alignment is complete and universal. We can *conceive* of its becoming perfect in a Utopia where men agreed as much on moral questions as they do now on mathematical questions, where law was in perfect harmony with moral opinion, and all offences were discovered and duly punished; or we can conceive achieving the same result by intensifying the moral feelings of all members of the community, without any external changes. . . . But just in proportion as existing societies and existing men fall short of this ideal, rules of conduct based on the principles of egoistic hedonism seem liable to diverge from those that most men are accustomed to recognise as prescribed by duty and virtue.

Chapter 6: Deductive hedonism

1. In chapter 5 we saw reason to conclude that although obedience to recognised rules of duty ordinarily tends to promote the agent's happiness, there's no good empirical evidence that the performance of duty is a universal or an infallible means to happiness. Even if this weren't so—even if it were demonstrably reasonable for the egoist to choose duty at all costs under all circumstances—the systematic attempt to act according to this principle, understanding 'duty' in terms of common notions of morality, would still bump into our problem of finding the right way to seek happiness. That is because common morality allows us to seek our own happiness (within limits) and even seems to regard it as morally prescribed;[1] and still more emphatically tells us to promote the happiness of others with whom we are in various ways specially connected; so that our questions about how to fix and measure the elements of happiness would still require some kind of answer. [In short: part of our duty involves seeking happiness. How are we to go about seeking happiness? The answer 'Seek it by doing your duty' is unhelpfully circular.]

The remaining question: How far can a scientific investigation of the causes of pleasure and pain help us to deal with this practical problem?

To decide on hedonistic grounds how to act, we obviously need not only to measure pains and pleasures but also to know how to produce or avert them. In most important prudential decisions, complex chains of consequences are expected to intervene between our initial volition and the feelings that we are ultimately aiming to produce; and how accurately we can predict each link in these chains obviously depends on what we know (implicitly or explicitly) about cause-effect relations among various natural phenomena. But the details of how to produce specific kinds of pleasure don't belong in a general treatise on the method of ethics; rather, they'll have to come from this or that special art [see Glossary] subordinate to the general art of conduct. Some of these subordinate arts have a more or less scientific basis, while others are still at the merely empirical stage [here = 'haven't gone beyond the accumulation of anecdotal data']; a detailed plan for seeking *health* belongs to the systematic art of hygiene, based on physiological science; but if we are aiming at *power* or *wealth* or *domestic happiness* the help we get from the experience of others will mainly be unsystematic—advice relative to our own special circumstances, or accounts of success and failure in situations like ours. Either way, the exposition of such special arts doesn't seem to come within the scope of the present treatise, and it couldn't help us in dealing with the measurement difficulties that we have considered in previous chapters.

You may think that a knowledge of the causes of pleasure and pain could carry us beyond the determination of the means of gaining particular kinds of pleasure and avoiding particular kinds of pain, and replace the empirical-reflective method whose defects we have been studying by some deductive method of evaluating the elements of happiness.[2]

[1] 'It would seem that an appropriate concern about our own interest or happiness and a reasonable attempt to secure and promote it. . . is virtuous, and the contrary behaviour faulty and blameworthy.' Butler (in 'The Nature of Virtue', appended to *The Analogy of Religion*).

[2] This view is suggested by Spencer's statement in a letter to Mill. . . .that 'it is the business of moral science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of actions necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness', and that when it has

A hedonistic method that entirely does without direct estimates of the pleasurable and painful consequences of actions? That is hardly more conceivable than a method of astronomy that does without observations of the stars! But it is conceivable that by induction from cases where empirical measurement is easy we may obtain generalisations that will give us more trustworthy guidance than such measurement can do in complicated cases; we may be able to discover some general mental or physical concomitant or antecedent of pleasure and pain—one that is easier to recognise, foresee, measure, and produce or avert than pleasure and pain themselves are in such cases. I'm willing to hope that this escape from the empirical hedonism's difficulties may one day be open to us; but I can't see that it is available yet. We don't have *now* any satisfactorily established general theory of the causes of pleasure and pain; and the theories that have gained some acceptance—as partly true or as probable—are manifestly not right for our present needs.

It's easy to explain why it is hard to find an all-purpose theory of the causes of pleasures and pains. Like other mental facts, pleasures and pains presumably occur along with certain cerebral nerve-processes, the details of which we don't know. So we can look for their causes either in prior physical or prior mental facts. But in one important class of cases the main knowable antecedents are obviously physical, while in another they are obviously mental; and the problem is to establish a theory that applies equally to both classes. . . . In the case of pleasures and pains—especially pains—connected with sensation, the most important knowable antecedents are clearly physical. . . . Under ordinary conditions the pains of sensation—probably the most intense in the experience of most persons—invade and interrupt our mental life from outside us; it would be idle to look for the main causes of their intensity or quality among antecedent mental facts. This is not so true of the most prominent pleasures of sense, because antecedent desire, if not absolutely required for such pleasures, seems to be required for them to reach a high degree of intensity. Still the main causes of these desires themselves are clearly physical states and processes—not merely neural ones—in the organism of the sentient individual; and this is also true of a more indefinite kind of pleasure that is an important element in ordinary human happiness, namely the 'well-feeling' that accompanies and is a sign of physical well-being.

But when we investigate the causes of •the pleasures and pains that belong to intellectual activities or the play of personal affections, or of •the pleasures (and to some extent pains) that belong to the contemplation of beauty (or ugliness) in art or nature, no physiological theory can take us far because we don't know what the neural processes are that accompany or precede these feelings.

That is my general conclusion, and I'll further illustrate and explain the grounds for it in the rest of this chapter. As for an exhaustive discussion of either psychological or physiological theories of the causes of pleasure and pain—I can't even *attempt* anything like that. I shall confine myself to certain leading generalisations that seem to have a special interest for students of ethics, either •because ethical

done this 'its deductions are to be recognised as laws of conduct that are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimate of happiness or misery'. [Sidgwick goes on to say that Spencer says he meant this only for 'an ideal society'; that he (Sidgwick) will consider such ideals in IV/4; and that at present he is] only concerned with the question how far any deductive ethics could furnish practical guidance to an individual seeking his own greatest happiness here and now.

motives help to cause their acceptance or •because though inadequately grounded as general theories they appear to have a partial and limited value for practical guidance.

[This chapter will refer to Sir William Hamilton—*not* the Irish Sir William Hamilton (1805–65), a distinguished physicist, astronomer and mathematician, but the Scottish Sir William Hamilton (1788–1856), an undistinguished philosopher. (Of a logical controversy that he got into with Augustus De Morgan, C. S. Peirce wrote that 'the reckless Hamilton flew like a dor-bug into the brilliant light of De Morgan's mind'.)]

2. Let us begin by considering a theory, primarily psychological, which. . . .is derived from Aristotle,[1] and is still current in one form or another. [Sidgwick cites two French writers, as well as G. F. Stout, 'to whom I will refer later'.] It's the thesis expressed by Sir William Hamilton (·in no. 42 of his *Lectures in Metaphysics*·) in the following propositions:

- •'pleasure is the reflex of the spontaneous and unimpeded exercise of a power of whose energy we are conscious;
- •pain is a reflex of the over-strained or repressed exercise of such a power'.

The phrases suggest active as distinct from passive states; but Hamilton explains that 'energy' and similar terms 'are to be understood to refer to *all* the conscious processes of our higher and lower life', because consciousness itself implies more than a mere passivity of the subject. But the theory is pretty clearly constructed primarily to fit the pleasures and pains of the intellectual life as such, and has to be *stretched* to cover an important class of the pleasures and pains of man's animal life. Hamilton explains his term **(a)** 'spontaneous' as implying the absence of 'forcible repression' or 'forcible stimulation' of the power that is exercised; and explains **(b)** 'unimpeded' in terms of the absence of obstacles or hindrances in the object that the faculty is dealing with. But these terms seem to have no clear mental import in application to organic sensations that are in the ordinary sense 'passive'. The feelings and vague representations of bodily processes that constitute consciousness of a toothache are as free from conscious repression or stimulation as those that constitute the consciousness that accompanies a warm bath. . . .

Indeed, the theory's one-sidedness seems to be exactly what gives it ethical interest and value. It tends to correct a commonplace error in the estimate of pleasure, by focusing on a class of pleasures that ordinary pleasure-seeking probably undervalues—the ones that especially belong to a life filled with strenuous activity, whether purely intellectual or practical and partly physical.[2] In the same way it effectively clears up the popular blunder of regarding labour as normally painful •because some labour is so and •because the pleasures of relief from toil are in most people's experience more striking than the pleasures of strenuous activity. But even if we limit the theory to the pleasures and pains immediately connected with voluntary activity—intellectual or physical—it strikes me as lacking in •definite guidance and in •adequate theoretical precision. It seems to imply that the exercise of our powers is always

[1] Aristotle's own theory is, briefly, •that every normal sense-perception or rational activity has its corresponding pleasure, the most perfect being the most pleasant; and •that the most perfect for any faculty is the exercise of the faculty in good condition on the best object. The pleasure follows the activity immediately, giving it a kind of finish, 'like the bloom of youth'. Pleasures vary in kind, as the activities that constitute life vary; the best pleasures are those of the philosophic life.

[2] In Aristotle's exposition of this theory—which for him is only a theory of pleasure—the ethical motive of exhibiting the philosophic life as preferable (in the pleasures it provides) to that of the sensualist is unmistakable.

made less pleasant by the presence of obstacles; but this is obviously not true either of mainly intellectual activities or of mainly physical ones. Some obstacles undeniably *increase* pleasure by inviting force and skill to overcome them, as is clearly shown in the case of games and sports. [Sidgwick discusses possible ways of making Hamilton's theory safer, less vulnerable to refutation, and faults them for reasons having to do with the fact that whether an impediment to my activity causes me pain depends on whether the impediment is stopping me from achieving my goal. He sums up:] It is a fundamental defect in Hamilton's theory, even in its more limited application, that it ignores the teleological [= 'goal-seeking'] character of normal human activity.

This defect is avoided in a variant on the theory that a recent writer has adopted. In his *Analytic Psychology* xii/2 Stout writes:

> 'The antithesis between pleasure and pain coincides with the antithesis between free and impeded progress towards an end. Unimpeded progress is pleasant in proportion to the intensity and complexity of mental excitement. An activity that is. . . thwarted and retarded. . . is painful in proportion to its intensity and complexity and to the degree of the hindrance.'

He admits that it is hard to apply this to the pleasures and pains of the senses; and unlike Hamilton he explicitly recognises that 'a struggle with difficulties that is not too prolonged or too intense may enhance the pleasure of success out of all proportion to its own painfulness'. But this admission makes the theory unimportant from our present practical point of view, whatever may be its theoretical value. Also, I think Stout should have recognised more explicitly the way in which •what pleasures and pains accompanied your activity depend on •what you wanted to achieve by them. When desire is strong, hopeful effort to overcome obstacles to success tends to be correspondingly pleasurable—apart from actual success—while disappointment or the fear of it tends to be painful; but when desire is not strong, the shock of thwarted activity and unfulfilled expectation may be actually agreeable. When I take a walk for pleasure, intending to reach a neighbouring village, and find an unexpected flood crossing my road, if I have no strong motive for reaching the village the surprise and consequent re-routing of my walk will probably be on the whole a pleasurable incident.

The importance of eager desire as a condition of pleasure is ethically significant, because it provides the psychological basis for •the familiar advice to repress desires for ends that are unattainable or incompatible with the course of life that prudence marks out; and for •the somewhat less trite advice to encourage and develop desires that push in the same direction as rational choice.

. . . .Spencer maintains that pains are the mental concomitants of •excessive or •deficient actions of organs, while pleasures are the concomitants of activities that are neither excessive nor deficient [*Psychology* ix/128]. In considering this theory I'll take pains and pleasures separately, because the theory is obviously based primarily on experiences of pain, especially of the pains of sense, which Hamilton's theory seemed obviously wrong about. We encounter many cases where pain is obviously caused by excessive stimulation of nerves: if we gradually increase the intensity of sensible heat, pressure, muscular effort, at some point we encounter pain; 'deafening' sounds are highly disagreeable; and to confront a tropical sun with unprotected eyeballs would soon become torture. And, as Spencer points out, some pains come from the excessive actions of organs whose normal actions don't produce any feelings—e.g. when the digestive system is overloaded. But in none of these cases is it clear that pain comes from a mere intensification in *degree* of the

action of the organ in question; and not rather through some change in the *kind* of action—some shapeless disintegration or disorganisation. Think for example of the pains due to wounds and diseases, and even of the digestive discomforts that arise from an improper kind rather than an improper quantity of food. [Sidgwick says that hunger as such isn't painful, and that when it is accompanied by pain one has a strong sense that something is not merely *too intense* but *wrong, disordered*. Also:] In the case of emotional pains and pleasures, the notion of *quantitative* difference between the corresponding cerebral nerve-processes seems entirely out of place. The pains of shame, disappointed ambition, wounded love, don't seem to be distinguishable from the pleasures of fame, success, reciprocated affection, by any difference of intensity in the impressions or ideas accompanied by the pleasures and pains respectively.

Anyway, empirical evidence supports 'excessive action' of an organ as a cause of pain far more clearly than 'deficient action'. This evidence, has led Wilhelm Wundt and some other psychologists to the view that

> no kind of sensation is absolutely pleasant or unpleasant; when a sensation of *any* kind grows in intensity it reaches a point at which it becomes pleasurable, and then further up the intensity scale it becomes painful (having rapidly passed through a neither-pleasurable-nor-painful stage).

My experience doesn't support this generalisation. I agree with Gurney [*Power of Sound* I/2] that 'of many tastes and odours the faintest possible suggestion is disagreeable', while other feelings resulting from stimulation of sense-organs appear to remain highly pleasurable at the highest possible degree of stimulation.

[Sidgwick remarks that neither of the two theories of pain—•that it comes from neural excess, •that it comes from neural disorder—gives us any useful practical guidance because we don't have the neurological facts. Also:] No-one doubts that wounds and diseases are to be avoided under all ordinary circumstances; and in an exceptional case where we have to choose them as the least of several evils, our choice wouldn't be helped knowledge of exactly *how* they cause pain.

Turning from pain to pleasure, you might think this:

> The generalisation that we have been considering at least gives us a psycho-physical basis for the ancient maxim that we should 'avoid excess' in the pursuit of pleasure.

Sidgwick's next sentence: But we have to observe that the practical need of this maxim is largely due to the qualifications which the psycho-physical generalisation requires to make it true.

apparently meaning: The cases where the 'avoid excess' maxim is needed are mostly ones where the psycho-physical generalisation is not true *as it stands*.

Thus the 'avoid excess' maxim is especially needed in the important cases where over-stimulation is followed by pain not •at once but •after an interval of varying length. For many people drinking alcohol remains pleasurable right up to the point of excess, where the brain can no longer do its job; it's on 'the morning after' that the pain comes; and perhaps with 'well-seasoned' drinkers it comes only after many years of habitual excess. And another point: when excess leads from pleasure to pain, the organ involved in the pain isn't always the one that first gave the pleasure. When we are tempted to eat too much, the seductive pleasure is mainly due to the nerves of taste, which are not over-worked; the pains come from the organs of digestion, whose faint, vague pleasures weren't enough on their own to tempt the high-living person

to over-eat. In the case of dangerous *mental* excitements the penalty for excess is usually even more indirect.

Let's grant that pleasure like virtue resides somewhere in the middle, this proposition gives no practical directions for getting pleasure. Granted that •excessive and •deficient activities of organs cause pain, the question still remains: In any given case, what fixes the lower and higher limits between which action is pleasurable? I'll come to Spencer's answer to this shortly, but first I want to discuss a question—equally obvious, though Spencer doesn't explicitly mention it— namely:

> Why is it that among the normal activities of our physical organs that have counterparts in consciousness, only some are pleasurable in any appreciable degree, while many if not most are nearly or quite indifferent [see Glossary].

It seems undeniable, for example, that while tastes and smells are mostly either agreeable or disagreeable, most sensations of touch and many of sight and sound are not appreciably[1] either, and that in the daily routine of healthy life, eating and drinking are ordinarily pleasant whereas dressing and undressing, walking and muscular movements generally, are practically indifferent.

Stout has suggested that the explanation is to be found in the operation of habit, but this seems to me wrong. Actions do through frequent repetition tend to become automatic and lose their conscious counterparts; and hedonic indifference certainly seems in some cases to be a stage through which such actions pass on the way to unconsciousness. A business walk in a strange town is normally pleasant because of the novelty of the sights; a similar walk in one's home-town is usually indifferent, or nearly so; and if one's attention is strongly absorbed by the business, the walk may be performed to a great extent unconsciously. But the operations of habit often have the opposite effect of making pleasant activities that were at first indifferent or even disagreeable—as with acquired tastes, physical or intellectual. . . . Spencer, indeed, regards such experiences as so important that he infers from them that 'pleasure will eventually accompany every mode of action demanded by social conditions'. This seems unduly optimistic, however, because of the cases I have mentioned where habit produces hedonic indifference, and also because a third effect of habit, which is to make gradually more irksome actions that were at first indifferent or even pleasant. Our intellect gradually wearies of monotonous activities, and the boredom may sometimes become intense; and the taste of a kind of food that was at first agreeable may become disgusting through monotony.

So we have to look for some quite different explanation for the varying degrees in which pleasure accompanies normal activities. [Sidgwick reports a theory according to which pleasure is greater if the relevant nerves are acting faster than they usually do. He has little trouble shooting it down, and proceeds to look elsewhere.]

Of the various theories that have been offered to explain the fact we are trying to explain, none has acquired anything like general acceptance as covering the whole ground. I select for discussion one of them that has special ethical interest. (It is in Stout, *Analytic Psychology* xii.4.)

According to this hypothesis, the organic process accompanied by pleasure is a 'restoration of equilibrium' after 'disturbance'; so that when certain normal activities aren't accompanied by appreciable pleasure, that is because there

[1] I say 'appreciably' because there's controversy among psychologists about whether any states of consciousness are *strictly* neutral or indifferent. The issue seems to me unimportant from a practical point of view.

was no prior disturbance. This is obviously right for the pleasure of relief after physical pain or after the strain of great anxiety, and the pleasure of rest after unusual exertions, intellectual or muscular. But these cases, though by no means rare, are not central in a normal life. When we try to apply this theory to sense-related pleasures generally, we are faced with the indefiniteness of the notion of *equilibrium*, as applied to the processes of a living organism. Our physical life consists of a series of changes most of which recur (with slight variations) at short intervals; and it's hard to see why we should attach the idea of *disturbance* or *restoration of equilibrium* to any one of these normal processes rather than any other—e.g. why the condition of •having expended energy should be regarded as a departure from equilibrium any more than the condition of •having just eaten food. The fact is that this hypothesis doesn't *at all* fit normal pleasures of sense unless we pass from the physiological to the psychological point of view, and bring into the story the mental state of *desire* as a consciously *unrestful* condition, the essence of which is a felt impulse to move from this state towards the attainment of the desired object. Our hypothesis can then take this unrestful consciousness as a sign of what from a physiological point of view is 'disturbance of equilibrium'; and the satisfaction of desire can be taken to be, physiologically, a restoration of equilibrium. On this interpretation of it, the hypothesis becomes clearly true of the gratifications of sensual appetite that form the most prominent element of the pleasures of the senses, as the man in the street thinks of them.

I have already noted that through a wide-spread confusion of thought desire has often been regarded as a sort of pain. In line with that. the theory we are now considering was originally launched with an ethical motive, namely to down-play the commonly overvalued pleasures of satisfied bodily appetite by emphasising their inseparable connection with antecedent pain. The attempt fails, however, because the appetite that must precede pleasure is, though unrestful, not appreciably painful.

In any case, even if we admit that the physical counterpart of conscious desire either •is or •comes from a 'disturbance of equilibrium', this theory obviously doesn't cover the whole range of the pleasures of sense. The simple pleasures of the special senses *don't* have to be preceded by conscious desire; normally no sense of want has preceded the experience of pleasant sights, sounds, odours, flavours, or of the more important pleasures. . . .that we call aesthetic. [In some special cases, Sidgwick adds, aesthetic pleasures may be preceded by a strong desire for them or sense of being deprived of them; you could call these 'disturbances'; but there's no basis for extending this special pattern to] the ordinary cases where pleasures of this kind are experienced without any antecedent consciousness of desire or deprivation.

I may have said enough to support my general conclusion that psychophysical theories about the causes of pleasure and pain don't give us a basis for a deductive method of practical hedonism. I'll just add that the difficulties facing any such theory seem especially great for the complex pleasures that we call 'aesthetic'. [High-level aesthetic pleasure, Sidgwick says, does involve a very 'complex state of consciousness', but no-one would accept that the complexity is enough for the pleasure. However subtly we describe the objective relations of elements in a delightful work of art, we must always feel that there could be something •answering exactly to that description while •providing no aesthetic delight. The 'touch' that leads to delight is an instinctive *sense* of how the elements work together in the art-work; it can't be replaced by an *inference* from a premise

describing the complexity to a conclusion about aesthetic value (and thereby about pleasure). Sidgwick adds:] This is true even is we set aside the wide divergences among the aesthetic sensibilities of individuals. So there is even less need to argue that for an individual seeking his own greatest happiness the only way to estimate aesthetic pleasures is by a mainly inductive and empirical method.

3. From discussing a •psychophysical theory of pleasures and pains I now turn to one that is •biological: still concerned with organic states or events that accompany or immediately precede pleasures and pains, it focuses not on •the actual present characteristics of those states and events but on •their relations to the life of the organism as a whole. I mean the theory that 'pains are the correlatives of events that are ·potentially· *destructive* of the life of the organism, while pleasures are the correlatives of events that are *preservative* of its welfare'. [Spencer starts little differently, but Sidgwick says that 'destructive' and 'preservative' adequately express what Spencer ends up with.]

Spencer's argument is as follows (in his own words):

> If we substitute for 'pleasure' the equivalent phrase 'feeling that we seek to bring into consciousness and retain there', and substitute for 'pain' the equivalent phrase 'feeling that we seek to get out of consciousness and to keep out', we see at once that
>
> > if the states of consciousness that a creature tries to maintain are the correlatives of injurious actions, and if the states of consciousness that it tries to expel are the correlatives of beneficial actions, the creature must quickly disappear because of its persistence in doing what harms it and avoiding what helps.
>
> In other words, the only species that can have survived are ones in which, on the average, agreeable or desired feelings generally accompanied activities conducive to the maintenance of life, while disagreeable and habitually-avoided feelings accompanied activities directly or indirectly destructive of life; and other things being equal there must always have been the most numerous and long-continued survivals by species in which these adjustments of feelings to actions were the best, tending ever to bring about perfect adjustment. [All quotations from Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* and *Data of Ethics*.]

This summary deduction may well have value for certain purposes; but it's easy to show that substituting 'preservation' for 'pleasure' as the end directly aimed at it doesn't provide an adequate basis for a deductive method of seeking maximum happiness for the individual. For one thing, Spencer only affirms the conclusion to be true, as he rather vaguely says, 'on the average'; and it's obvious that though •the tendency to find harmful acts pleasant or preservative acts painful must be a disadvantage to any species in the struggle for existence, if •it exists only to a limited extent it may be outweighed by advantages, so that the organism that has it may survive in spite of it. It is obvious *a priori* that this *can* happen, and we know from common experience that it often *does*, as Spencer admits. [He quotes Spencer to this effect and remarks:] This seems to be a sufficient objection to basing a deductive method of hedonism on Spencer's general conclusion. It's a notorious fact that civilised men take pleasure in various forms of unhealthy conduct and find conformity to the rules of health irritating. . . . And this it is easy to explain this on [he must mean: reconcile this with] the 'evolution hypothesis', because that hypothesis doesn't rule out the possibility that

> the development of the nervous system in human beings brings with it intense susceptibilities

> to pleasure from non-preservative processes, if the preservation of the individuals who have the susceptibilities is otherwise adequately provided for.

This latter condition is obviously satisfied for leisured people in civilised society, whose needs for food, clothing, shelter, etc. are abundantly supplied through the. . . .institution of private property; and I don't know any empirical evidence that •a cultivated man's keen and varied pleasures enable him to live longer than •a man who goes through a comparatively dull round of monotonous routine activity, interspersed by slightly pleasurable intervals of rest and play.

4. If the individual isn't likely to obtain a maximum of pleasure by aiming merely at preservation, perhaps he will do better by aiming at 'quantity of life'. [That odd phrase has only two occurrences in this work, both in the present section. What Sidgwick means by it has to be gathered from his uses of it.] It is of course true of neural events accompanied by conscious pleasure that the more of them there are the happier we'll be. But even if we assume that the more intense and full life is 'on the average' the happier, it doesn't follow that we'll get maximum pleasure by aiming merely at intensity of conscious states; for we experience intense pains even more indubitably than intense pleasures; and in the 'full tides of soul' in which we seem to be most alive, pain can be mixed in with pleasure in almost any proportion. Also, we often experience very intense excitement that isn't clearly pleasurable or painful—e.g. in laboriously struggling with difficulties and perplexing conflicts of which the issue is doubtful.

It may be replied that 'quantity of life' should imply not merely •intensity of consciousness but •multiplicity and variety—a harmonious and many-sided development of human nature. Experience does support the view that men lose happiness by allowing some of their faculties or capacities to wither and shrink from disuse, thus not leaving themselves sufficient variety of feelings or activities; and we know that due exercise of most—if not all—of the bodily organs is indispensable for the health of the organism, and that the health maintained by this balance of functions is a better source of happiness than the unhealthy over-exercise of any one organ can be. Still, the harmony of functions needed for health seems to be very elastic, allowing for a wide margin of variation, as far as the organs under voluntary control are concerned. For example, a man who exercises only his brain will probably be ill in consequence; but he can exercise his brain much and his legs little, or vice versa, without any unhealthy results. Also, if the proposition that *a varied and many-sided life is the happiest* were to serve as a basis for deductive hedonism, we would have to make it precise, which we can't. That's because there is also truth on the other side: the more we exercise any faculty with sustained and prolonged concentration, the more pleasure we derive from such exercise, up to the point where it becomes wearisome or turns into a semi-mechanical routine that makes the mind dull and slack. It is certainly important for our happiness that we keep within this limit; but we can't fix it precisely in any particular case without experience of that individual; especially as there seems always to be some weariness and tedium to be resisted and overcome on the way to our bringing our faculties into full play and having the full enjoyment of our labour. Similarly with passive emotional consciousness: if too much sameness of feeling results in slackness, too much variety inevitably involves shallowness. The point where concentration ought to stop, and where dissipation begins, varies from man to man, and has to be decided by the specific experience of individuals.

There's another and simpler way of understanding the maxim of 'giving free development to one's nature' [Sidgwick

writes as though he had already introduced that phrase, but he hasn't]. We could take it to mean yielding to spontaneous impulses rather than trying to govern them by elaborate forecasts of consequences. The injunction to do this gets scientific justification from the theory that spontaneous or instinctive impulses are really effects of previous experiences of pleasure and pain on the organism in which they appear or its ancestors. This has led to the thesis that in complicated problems of conduct experience will 'enable •the constitution to estimate the respective amounts of pleasure and pain consequent on each alternative', where it is 'impossible for •the intellect' to do this; and 'will further cause the organism instinctively to avoid the conduct that produces on the whole most suffering'.[1] There is an important element of truth in this; but nothing that we know or can plausibly conjecture regarding biological evolution supports any broad conclusion that non-rational inclination is a better guide than reason to individual happiness. Natural selection fosters impulses favouring the preservation of the species rather than the pleasure of the individual, but I'll set that aside. Granting that every sentient organism tends to adapt itself to its environment in such a way as to acquire instincts that help to guide it to pleasure and away from pain, it doesn't follow from this that in the human organism the kind of adaptation that **(a)** involves the unconscious development of instinct is to be preferred to the kind of adaptation that **(b)** comes from conscious comparison and inference. [Sidgwick goes on to say that an empirical comparison of the success-rates of **(a)** and **(b)** wouldn't show **(a)** as a clear winner.] However true it may be that in certain cases instinct is on the whole a safer guide than prudential calculation, it seems that the only way we can discover which cases these are is by careful reflection on experience; we can't determine the limits to which prudential calculation may prudently be carried, except by this very calculation!

We seem, then, forced to conclude that there is no scientific short-cut to the ascertainment of the right means to the individual's happiness; every attempt to find a 'high priori road' to this goal brings us back to the empirical method ['high priori' is a joking form of *a priori*; it was coined by the poet Alexander Pope]. Rather than a clear and universally valid principle, the best we get is a vague and general rule, based on considerations that shouldn't be overlooked but can't be evaluated except by careful observation and comparison of individual experience. Any uncertainty in these processes then carries through to all our reasonings about happiness. I don't want to exaggerate •these uncertainties, feeling that we should all continue to seek happiness for ourselves and for others, however much we have to grope for it in the dark; but there is nothing gained by underrating •them, and it is idle to argue as if •they did not exist.

[1] The quotations are from Spencer's *Social Statics* chapter 4. In the passage from which I have quoted he is not writing from the point of view of egoistic hedonism.