

**Edward Westermarck**



***Ethical  
Relativity***

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# ***CHAPTER I***

## **THE SUPPOSED OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS**

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Ethics is generally looked upon as a “normative” science, the object of which is to find and formulate moral principles and rules possessing objective validity. The supposed objectivity of moral values, as understood in this treatise, implies that they have a real existence apart from any reference to a human mind, that what is said to be good or bad, right or wrong, cannot be reduced merely to what people think to be good or bad, right or wrong. It makes morality a matter of truth and falsity, and to say that a judgment is true obviously means something different from the statement that it is thought to be true. The objectivity of moral judgments does not presuppose the infallibility of the individual who pronounces such a judgment, nor even the accuracy of a general consensus of opinion; but if a certain course of conduct is objectively right, it must be thought to be right by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter and cannot, without error, be judged to be wrong.

In spite of the fervour with which the objectivity of moral judgments has been advocated by the exponents of normative ethics there is much diversity of opinion with regard to the principles underlying the various systems. This discord is as old as ethics itself. But while the evolution of other sciences has shown a tendency to increasing

agreement on points of fundamental importance, the same can hardly be said to have been the case in the history of ethics, where the spirit of controversy has been much more conspicuous than the endeavour to add new truths to results already reached. Of course, if moral values are objective, only one of the conflicting theories can possibly be true. Each founder of a new theory hopes that it is he who has discovered the unique jewel of moral truth, and is naturally anxious to show that other theories are only false stones. But he must also by positive reasons make good his claim to the precious find.

These reasons are of great importance in a discussion of the question whether moral judgments really are objective or merely are supposed to be so; for if any one of the theories of normative ethics has been actually proved to be true, the objectivity of those judgments has *eo ipso* been established as an indisputable fact. I shall therefore proceed to an examination of the main evidence that has been produced in favour of the most typical of these theories.

I shall begin with hedonism, according to which actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong in proportion as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. And by happiness is then meant “pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”<sup>1</sup> What is the evidence?

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London, 1895), p. 10.

It has been said that the hedonistic principle requires no proof, because it is simply an analytic proposition, a mere definition. Because acts that are called right generally produce pleasure and acts that are called wrong generally

produce pain, rightness and wrongness have been actually identified with the tendencies of acts to produce pleasure or pain. The following statement of Sir James Stephen is a clearly expressed instance of such an identification:<sup>5</sup> —“Speaking generally, the acts which are called right do promote, or are supposed to promote general happiness, and the acts which are called wrong do diminish, or are supposed to diminish it. I say, therefore, that this is what the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ mean, just as the words ‘up’ and ‘down’ mean that which points from or towards the earth’s centre of gravity, though they are used by millions who have not the least notion of the fact that such is their meaning, and though they were used for centuries and millenniums before any one was or even could be aware of it.”<sup>2</sup> A similar view is expressed by Bentham when he says that words like “ought,” “right,” and “wrong,” have no meaning unless interpreted in accordance with the principle of utility.<sup>3</sup> Now the statement that a certain act has a tendency to promote happiness, or to cause unhappiness, is either true or false; and if rightness and wrongness are only other words for these tendencies, it is therefore obvious that the moral judgments also have objective validity. But it is impossible to doubt that anybody who sees sufficiently carefully into the matter must admit that the identification in question is due to a confusion between the meaning of terms and the use made of them when applied to acts on account of their tendencies to produce certain effects. Bentham himself seems to have felt something of the kind. For although he asserts that the rectitude of the principle of utility has been contested only by those who have not

known what they have been meaning, he raises the question whether it is susceptible of any direct proof. And his answer is as follows:—"It should seem not: for that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved: a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere."<sup>4</sup> The question and the answer suggest that Bentham, after all, hardly looked upon the principle of utility or, as he also calls it, the greatest happiness principle, as strictly speaking a mere definition of rightness.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (London, 1873), p. 338.

<sup>3</sup> J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford, 1879), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Bentham, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Stuart Mill, also, admits that this principle, like all questions of ultimate ends, is not amenable to direct proof, "in the ordinary and popular meaning of the term." But he says that there is a larger meaning of the word proof: considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine, and this is equivalent to proof.<sup>5</sup> Questions about ends are questions as to what things are desirable. "The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. What ought to be required of this doctrine—what conditions is it requisite that the doctrine should fulfil—to make good its claim to be believed? The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I

apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.”<sup>6</sup> The fallacy of this argument has often been exposed, and is indeed too obvious to be disputed. While the visible means what can be seen and the audible what can be heard, the desirable does not mean what can be desired; and Mill even understands by it what ought to be desired, which gives to the word a more specified meaning than is justified by the ordinary use of it, <sup>7</sup>since something may be held desirable on other than moral grounds. And yet he thinks the mere fact that a thing is desired is a sufficient proof that it is desirable, just as if people never could desire to do anything else than what they ought to desire to do.

<sup>5</sup> Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 6 *sq.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52 *sq.*

Now the utilitarian standard is not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. It may be defined as the rules and precepts for human conduct by the observance of which happiness might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; “and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.”<sup>7</sup> How can this be proved? Mill argues that “no reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all



persons.”<sup>8</sup> But if a person desires his own happiness, and if what he desires is desirable in the sense that he ought to desire it, the standard of general happiness can only mean that each person ought to desire his own happiness. In other words, the premises in Mill’s argument would lead to egoistic hedonism, not to utilitarianism or universalistic hedonism.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 sq.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

But Mill also produces another argument in favour of the utilitarian doctrine: it has the support of the social feelings of mankind. Men have a desire to be in unity with their fellow-creatures, and this desire, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, tends to become stronger from the influences of advancing civilization.<sup>8</sup> The strengthening of social ties gives to each individual a stronger personal interest in consulting the welfare of others; and it also leads him to identify his *feelings* more and more with their good. In the comparatively early state of human advancement in which we now live, a person cannot indeed feel that entireness of sympathy with all others, which would make any real discordance in the general direction of their conduct in life impossible; this feeling is in most individuals much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But the deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feeling and aims and those of his fellow-creatures. And “this conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest-happiness morality.”<sup>9</sup> In

this argument Mill has undoubtedly stated facts which go a long way to explain the origin and wide acceptance of the utilitarian theory, but he has by no means proved its objective validity. Nor has he even, by far, been able to claim for it the support of a consensus of moral opinion.

<sup>9</sup> Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 46 *sqq.*

Another attempt to vindicate the validity of utilitarianism was made by Sidgwick. When examining the evidence presented by Mill, “the most persuasive and probably the most influential among English expositors of utilitarianism,” he found it unsatisfactory. Even if it were granted that what is actually desired may be legitimately inferred to be desirable, in the sense that it ought to be desired, the proposition that the general happiness is desirable would not be established by Mill’s reasoning because, so far as this reasoning goes, there is no actual desire for the general happiness. There is thus a gap in the argument, and <sup>9</sup>this gap, according to Sidgwick, can only be filled by an intuition: an axiom or principle of “rational benevolence” is required as a basis for the utilitarian system.<sup>10</sup> This principle is the maxim, “that each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him.” The proposition, “I ought not to prefer my own lesser good to the greater good of another,” presents itself to Sidgwick as no less self-evident than the mathematical axiom that “if equals be added to equals the wholes are equal.”<sup>11</sup> He also says, “I find that I undoubtedly seem to perceive, as clearly and certainly as I see any axiom in Arithmetic or Geometry,

that it is 'right' and 'reasonable' for me to ... do what I believe to be ultimately conducive to universal Good or Happiness."<sup>12</sup> Thus the utilitarian rule of aiming at the general happiness is seen to "rest on a fundamental moral intuition."

<sup>10</sup> H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London, 1913), p. 387 sq.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382 sq.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

Can this claim be justified? Sidgwick observes that "there seem to be four conditions, the complete fulfilment of which would establish a significant proposition, apparently self-evident, in the highest degree of certainty attainable: and which must be approximately realized by the premises of our reasoning in any inquiry, if that reasoning is to lead us cogently to trustworthy conclusions." These four conditions are:—1. "The terms of the proposition must be clear and precise." 2. "The self-evidence of the proposition must be ascertained by careful reflection." 3. "The propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent." 4. There must be an adequate consensus of opinion in their favour.<sup>13</sup>—Let us see whether Sidgwick's<sup>10</sup> principle of rational benevolence fulfils these conditions.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338 sqq.

The terms in which it is stated cannot be said to be "clear and precise." Who is that other individual whose good I am morally bound to regard as much as my own? I presume that Sidgwick means every human individual, whether he be a relative or friend or not, a compatriot or a foreigner, a civilized man or a savage. He says it may be fairly urged

that practically each man ought chiefly to concern himself with promoting the good of a limited number of human beings, and that generally in proportion to the closeness of their connection with him; but he maintains that this may be done “even with a view to universal Good.”<sup>14</sup> But what about animals? When examining the utilitarian principle, Sidgwick considers who the “all” are whose happiness is to be taken into account. He writes:—“Are we to extend our concern to all the beings capable of pleasure and pain whose feelings are affected by our conduct? Or are we to confine our view to human happiness? The former view is the one adopted by Bentham and Mill, and (I believe) by the Utilitarian school generally: and is obviously most in accordance with the universality that is characteristic of their principle. It is the good *Universal*, interpreted and defined as ‘happiness’ or ‘pleasure,’ at which a Utilitarian considers it his duty to aim: and it seems arbitrary and unreasonable to exclude from the end, as so conceived, any pleasure of any sentient being.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, in spite of this definite statement, I cannot conceive that Sidgwick would have regarded it as a self-evident proposition that I ought not to prefer my own lesser good to the greater good of a beast or bird or fish or insect, however “unreasonable” it might be to exclude them from the principle of rational benevolence. I venture to believe that when he formulated this principle he did not bestow on the question of animal happiness that “careful reflection” which is the second condition he requires of a self-evident proposition. And, as will be shown presently, it does not seem to be the only instance in which he has failed to fulfil this condition.



14 Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 414.

As to the third criterion, according to which the propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent, we have to consider the relations between the principle of rational benevolence and the two other principles, likewise regarded as self-evident, which are stated in connection with it. One is the axiom of prudence, or the maxim that "one ought to aim at one's own good on the whole."<sup>16</sup> Whatever else may be said of this principle, it is obvious that it cannot be consistent with that of rational benevolence without an important qualification, namely, that one ought to aim at one's own good on the whole only where it does not collide with the greater good of somebody else.<sup>17</sup> The other principle, called the principle of justice, is the proposition that "it cannot be right for *A* to treat *B* in a manner in which it would be wrong for *B* to treat *A*, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment."<sup>18</sup> This proposition is true, but for the simple reason that it is tautological; and the truth expressed by it applies not only to the rightness of acts, but to all moral concepts. When I pronounce an act to be right or wrong, good or bad, I mean that it is so quite independently of any reference it may have to me personally<sup>12</sup> or to the particular relationship in which I stand to him who is immediately affected by the act and to him who performs it. This is implied in the very meaning of those and all other moral predicates on account

of the disinterestedness and apparent impartiality that characterize the moral emotions, from which all moral concepts are derived.<sup>19</sup> The principle of rational benevolence is certainly not inconsistent with the so-called principle of justice, but it derives absolutely no support from it. According to the latter principle it might very well be right for each person to prefer his own lesser good to the greater good of another, although it could not be right for me and wrong for another similar person in similar circumstances to do so.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. H. Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, i. (Oxford, 1924), p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>19</sup> See *infra*, p. 90 *sqq.*

The fourth criterion is stated in much less definite terms than the previous ones. Sidgwick writes:—“Since it is implied in the very notion of Truth that it is essentially the same for all minds, the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity. And in fact ‘universal’ or ‘general’ consent has often been held to constitute by itself a sufficient evidence of the truth of the most important beliefs; and is practically the only evidence upon which the greater part of mankind can rely. A proposition accepted as true upon this ground alone has, of course, neither self-evidence nor demonstrative evidence for the mind that so accepts it; still, the secure acceptance that we commonly give to the generalizations of the empirical sciences rests—even in the case of experts—largely on the belief that other experts

have seen for themselves the evidence for these generalizations, and do not materially disagree as to its adequacy. And it will be easily seen that the absence of such disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 341 *sq.*

When examining the moral notions that present themselves with a *prima facie* claim to furnish independent and self-evident rules of morality, Sidgwick has in each case found that from such regulation of conduct as the common sense of mankind really supports, “no proposition can be elicited which, when fairly contemplated, even appears to have the characteristic of a scientific axiom.”<sup>21</sup> He expressly points out that the duty of benevolence as recognized by common sense seems to fall somewhat short of the principle of rational benevolence. Yet he thinks “that a ‘plain man’ in a modern civilized society, if his conscience were fairly brought to consider the hypothetical question, whether it would be morally right for him to seek his own happiness on any occasion if it involved a certain sacrifice of the greater happiness of some other human being,—without any counterbalancing gain to any one else,—would answer unhesitatingly in the negative.”<sup>22</sup> Well, in many cases he undoubtedly would, but in other cases he most decidedly would not. Suppose that I endeavour to obtain a good which another person also tries to obtain, and that I do so in spite of my belief that it will be a lesser good to me than it would be to him if he succeeded in achieving it; would common sense condemn my action, even though I could claim no counterbalancing gain to any one else as an excuse for my

behaviour? For example, would it require that I, being a merchant, should abstain from some business if it is likely that another competing merchant would make a larger profit than I could by engaging in the business?<sup>23</sup> Or, again, would common sense agree that he who possesses some good is morally bound to share it with others if their gain thereby outweighs his own loss? Or if I, by sacrificing my own life, could save another person's life, which is a greater good to him or to others, than my life is to me or others, would it be my duty to make such a sacrifice? Can anybody doubt that common sense, without hesitation, would answer these questions in the negative? It seems fairly obvious that Sidgwick has considerably exaggerated even that limited support his principle of rational benevolence could receive from the "plain man."<sup>24</sup> Hutcheson, in whose system benevolence is the very essence of virtue and who was apparently the author of the utilitarian formula that "that action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers,"<sup>25</sup> goes so far as to say that "we do not positively condemn those as evil, who will not sacrifice their private interest to the advancement of the positive good of others, unless the private interest be very small, and the public good very great."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. G. Cohn, *Etik og sociologi* (Kjøbenhavn & Kristiania, 1913), p. 62 *sqq.*

<sup>24</sup> See also *infra*, pp. 208, 209, 227.



<sup>25</sup> F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1753), p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections. With Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (London, 1756), p. 318.

As to the question of experts, on whose consensus we are to rely, Sidgwick does not discuss how we are to ascertain them.<sup>27</sup> In an early letter he writes, “My difficulty is that I cannot give to principles of conduct either the formal certainty that comes from exact science or the practical certainty that comes from a real Consensus 15of Experts”;<sup>28</sup> and he never succeeded in solving this difficulty. Yet his principle of rational benevolence seemed to him to be in substantial agreement with the doctrines of “those moralists who have been most in earnest in seeking among commonly received rules for genuine intuitions of the Practical Reason,” particularly Clarke and Kant.<sup>29</sup> In a subsequent chapter I shall show that he was hardly justified in claiming the authority of Kant in support of it.<sup>30</sup> Among more recent writers on ethics Sidgwick’s principle of rational benevolence has been accepted by some, but rejected by others.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 343 n. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Sidgwick. *A Memoir* by A. S. and E. M. S. (London, 1906), p. 259.

<sup>29</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 384 *sqq.*

<sup>30</sup> *Infra*, p. 281 *sq.*

Altogether, then, it must be admitted that this supposed axiom does not fulfil the conditions which in Sidgwick’s own opinion have to be approximately realized for the establishment of a self-evident proposition. And thus the final attempt to vindicate the objective validity of

utilitarianism has proved to be a failure. By itself alone that principle would in no case have afforded a sufficient intuitional basis for utilitarianism, since the “good” mentioned in it has been left undefined. But in Sidgwick’s eyes it did so when combined with the proposition that “happiness (a term which he used as convertible with pleasure<sup>31</sup>) is the only rational ultimate end of action,” which also appeared to him as an object of intuition.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

In its earlier days utilitarianism was frequently supported by theological considerations. It was widely held that the moral agent could ultimately will only his own happiness, and the question arose how this could lead him to act for the common good. In the natural course of things private and public happiness by no means always coincide; hence a coincidence can be brought about only by “the lively and active belief in an all-seeing and all-powerful God,” who will hereafter make men happy or miserable, “according as they designedly promote or violate the happiness of their fellow-creatures.”<sup>33</sup> “The will of God is the immediate criterion of virtue, and the happiness of mankind the criterion of the will of God.”<sup>34</sup> “God Almighty wills and wishes the happiness of his creatures; and, consequently,... those actions which promote that will and wish, must be agreeable to him; and the contrary.”<sup>35</sup> And the rewards he bestows on those who obey his will and the punishments he inflicts on the disobedient, will naturally suffice to make it always every one’s interest to promote universal happiness to the best of his knowledge; indeed, the penalties and rewards became

so tremendous that selfishness was inevitable. These opinions, which were advocated by a section of eighteenth century utilitarians, subsequently lost their influence. Sidgwick admits that the existence of divine sanctions to the code of social duty as constructed on a utilitarian basis would secure the much needed reconciliation of duty and self-interest and settle the relation of rational self-love to rational benevolence, which he regards as “the profoundest problem of Ethics.”<sup>36</sup> But he cannot find, attainable by mere reflective intuition, any cognition that there actually is a Supreme Being who will adequately reward men for obeying the rules of duty or punish them for violating them.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> J. Brown, *Essays on the Characteristics of the Earl of Shaftesbury* (London, 1751), p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> J. Gay, *Preliminary Dissertation. Concerning the Fundamental Principle of Virtue or Morality*, prefixed to E. Law’s translation of W. King’s *Essay on the Origin of Evil* (London, 1732), p. xxxix.

<sup>35</sup> W. Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, ii. 4 (*Works* [Edinburgh, 1834], p. 14).

<sup>36</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 387 n. 1, 506.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

It may be asked if the so-called “theological utilitarianism” really is utilitarianism, or if it belongs to the doctrine of egoistic hedonism. The answer, of course, depends on the meanings given to these terms, and these meanings are by no means free from ambiguities. Sidgwick uses the term egoistic hedonism to denote “a system which prescribes actions as means to the end of the individual’s happiness or pleasure,”<sup>38</sup> and by utilitarianism he means

“the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct.”<sup>39</sup> Dr. Albee raises the question whether egoistic hedonism is a method of ethics at all, even according to Sidgwick’s “carefully formulated definitions.” There is indeed, he says, no question that many English moralists, from the time of Hobbes down at least to the time of J. S. Mill, held that the motive of the moral agent was necessarily egoistic; and “if, then, all were to be classed as Egoists who held this theory of the moral motive, we should plainly have to include all the English Utilitarians before Mill, with the exception of Cumberland, Hartley, and Hume (*i.e.*, as represented by the second form of his theory).” But he argues that the egoistic theory of the moral motive cannot be what Sidgwick means, when he speaks of egoistic hedonism as constituting a separate method of ethics, that is, as one of “the different methods of obtaining reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done.”<sup>40</sup> For “it may confidently be maintained that not one of the many moralists<sup>18</sup> referred to above, as holding or seeming to hold the egoistic theory of the moral motive, ever so much as suggested that one could obtain ‘reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done’ by merely computing what would bring the most pleasure to one’s self.”<sup>41</sup> This statement I cannot accept.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.



<sup>41</sup> E. Albee, *A History of English Utilitarianism* (London, 1902), p. 382 *sq.*

The “theological utilitarians” looked upon self-love as the ground for accepting the will of God as our rule. Gay says: —“Obligation is the necessity of doing or omitting any action in order to be happy.... So that obligation is evidently founded upon the prospect of happiness, and arises from the necessary influence which any action has upon present or future happiness or misery.... How can the good of mankind be any obligation to *me*, when perhaps in particular cases, such as laying down my life, or the like, it is contrary to my happiness?”<sup>42</sup> Paley defines virtue as “the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness.”<sup>43</sup> Are not these “reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done,” which fall within the scope of Sidgwick’s definition of egoistic hedonism? Indeed, he speaks himself of Paley’s egoistic hedonism as something which seems to the latter self-evident as a fundamental principle of rational conduct.<sup>44</sup> And what may be said of Dr. Albee’s indictment that Sidgwick “has unconsciously developed, in what he terms Egoism, the conception of a form of hedonistic theory which in reality has never existed in modern Ethics,”<sup>45</sup> when we read the following reasoned argument in Waterland’s “Sermon on Self-Love”?<sup>19</sup> “The wisest course for any man to take is to secure an interest in the life to come.... There can be no excess of fondness, or self-indulgence, in respect of eternal happiness. This is loving himself in the best manner, and to the best purposes. All virtue and piety are thus resolvable into a principle of self-love.... It is with reference to ourselves, and for our own sakes, that we love even God himself.”<sup>46</sup>

42 Gay, in *op. cit.*, pp. xxxvii., lxi.

43 Paley, *op. cit.*, i. 7 (*Works*, p. 9).

44 Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 121 *sq.*

45 Albee, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

46 D. Waterland, "Sermon on Self-Love," in *The English Preacher*, i. (London, 1773), p. 101 *sq.*

At the same time, while the so-called "theological utilitarianism" perfectly agrees with the definition of egoistic hedonism, it also agrees with the definition of utilitarianism, in which no reference is made to motives or the ultimate end of acts. Sidgwick expressly mentions Bentham's psychological doctrine, that every human being always does aim at his own greatest apparent happiness, and yet classifies him as a utilitarian.<sup>47</sup> He speaks of the "obvious and glaring" difference between the egoistic proposition that "each ought to seek his own happiness," and the utilitarian proposition that "each ought to seek the happiness of all";<sup>48</sup> but then he does not take account of the fact that a person may aim at his own happiness as his ultimate end and at the same time aim at the happiness of all as a means to that end. If utilitarianism required the happiness of all as the ultimate end, not only Bentham, but Mill and others would have to be excluded from its followers. Mill observes that "utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent."<sup>49</sup> A utilitarian may consequently very well seek the general happiness as a means of securing his own happiness. He may be an egoistic hedonist, and an egoistic hedonist may be a utilitarian. Egoistic and

universalistic hedonism, as defined by the author of these terms, are different, but not *eo ipso* conflicting doctrines.

<sup>47</sup> Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 84, 87 *sq.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411 *sq.*

<sup>49</sup> Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

If egoistic hedonism is taken to imply that each *ought* to seek his own happiness as the end of his actions, I doubt whether it is really found in its genuineness anywhere outside the scope of theological hedonism,<sup>50</sup> and there, of course, only on the understanding that by happiness is meant everlasting happiness. As to its objective validity I have therefore nothing more to say than what will be found in the discussion of the claim to validity made by theological ethics in general.

<sup>50</sup> See *infra*, p. 221 *sqq.*

Nearly related to utilitarianism is the evolutionary theory of Herbert Spencer. In a well-known letter to Stuart Mill he repudiated the title anti-utilitarian, which had been applied to him, and endeavoured to make clear their difference of opinion. He wrote:—"The view for which I contend is, that Morality properly so-called—the science of right conduct—has for its object to determine *how* and *why* certain modes of conduct are detrimental, and certain other modes beneficial. These good and bad results cannot be accidental, but must be necessary consequences of the constitution of things; and I conceive it to be the business of Moral Science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness. Having

done this, its deductions are to be recognized as laws of conduct; and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery.”<sup>51</sup> Hence “the utilitarianism which recognizes only the principles of conduct reached by induction, is but preparatory to the utilitarianism which deduces these principles from the processes of life as carried on under established conditions of existence.”<sup>52</sup> Acts are called good or bad, according as they are well or ill adjusted to ends, and as conduct evolves there is a greater adjustment of acts to ends. “Ethics has for its subject-matter that form which universal conduct assumes during the last stages of its evolution”; and under its ethical aspects conduct is considered good or right if its acts are conducive to life in self or others, and bad or wrong if they directly or indirectly tend towards death, special or general. But an extremely important assumption underlies all such moral estimates, namely, the belief that life brings more happiness than misery. Our ideas of the moral goodness and badness of acts really originate from our consciousness of the certainty or probability that their aggregate results will be pleasurable or painful to self or others or both;<sup>53</sup> and the reason for this is that “there exists a primordial connection between pleasure-giving acts and continuance or increase of life, and, by implication, between pain-giving acts and decrease or loss of life.” It thus lies in the very nature of sentient existence that it is “no more possible to frame ethical conceptions from which the consciousness of pleasure, of some kind, at some time, to some being, is absent, than it is possible to frame the

conception of an object from which the consciousness of space is absent.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> H. Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics*, i. (London, 1897), p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, i. ch. ii. *sq.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 82 *sq.*

It is obvious that Spencer, like the utilitarians, attributes to the moral concept objective validity. When he regards that conduct as good which “conduces to life in each and all” he maintains that he has the support of “the true moral consciousness,” or “moral consciousness proper,” which, whether in harmony or in conflict with the “pro-ethical” sentiment, is vaguely or distinctly recognized as the rightful ruler.<sup>55</sup> He started as a believer in a moral sense, but subsequently changed his view. He writes, “Though, as shown in my first work, *Social Statics*, I once espoused the doctrine of the intuitive moralists (at the outset in full, and in later chapters with some implied qualifications), yet it has gradually become clear to me that the qualifications required practically obliterate the doctrine as enunciated by them.”<sup>56</sup> He still, however, speaks of moral intuitions. Thus, when saying that pleasure is an inexpugnable element of the conception of the ultimate moral aim, he adds, “It is as much a necessary form of moral intuition as space is a necessary form of intellectual intuition.”<sup>57</sup> While rejecting the doctrine that “moral perceptions are innate in the original sense,” he believes in the existence of “moral intuitions” acquired by racial experience. He quotes the following passage from the previously mentioned letter to

Mill:—"Corresponding to the fundamental propositions of a developed Moral Science, there have been, and still are, developing in the race, certain fundamental moral intuitions; and ..., though these moral intuitions are the results of accumulated experiences of Utility, gradually organized and inherited, they have come to be quite independent of conscious experience. Just in the same way<sup>23</sup> that I believe the intuition of space, possessed by any living individual, to have arisen from organized and consolidated experiences of all antecedent individuals who bequeathed to him their slowly-developed nervous organizations—just as I believe that this intuition, requiring only to be made definite and complete by personal experiences, has practically become a form of thought, apparently quite independent of experience; so do I believe that the experiences of utility organized and consolidated through all past generations of the human race, have been producing corresponding nervous modifications, which, by continued transmission and accumulation, have become in us certain faculties of moral intuition—certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct, which have no apparent basis in the individual experiences of utility. I also hold that just as the space-intuition responds to the exact demonstrations of Geometry, and has its rough conclusions interpreted and verified by them; so will moral intuitions respond to the demonstrations of Moral Science, and will have their rough conclusions interpreted and verified by them."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Spencer, *op. cit.*, i. 337 *sq.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 470.



57 *Ibid.*, i. 46. In a footnote he remarks that he ought to have said “that happiness is *more* truly a form of moral intuition than space is a form of intellectual intuition: being, as we see, a universal form of it.”

58 *Ibid.*, i. 123.

This theory of the development of “moral intuitions” through the inheritance of the effects of the accumulated experiences of the race is based upon a huge assumption, which Spencer regarded as a scientifically demonstrated truth, namely, the belief that acquired characters may be transmitted from parent to offspring. But the heredity of “acquired characters” is nowadays emphatically disputed by a large school of biologists, and can certainly not be taken for granted. Yet even if Spencer’s theory were correct, it would only explain the origin of certain instincts through earlier generations’ continued experience. What he calls “moral intuitions” is, to use his own words, simply “certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct,” or “preferences and aversions ... rendered organic by inheritance of the effects of pleasurable and painful experiences in progenitors.”<sup>59</sup> And an emotion “corresponding to,” or caused by, a certain course of conduct cannot possibly make that course of conduct objectively right or wrong. Spencer’s theory might at most be a contribution to the history of the growth of moral ideas, but could have no bearing whatever on the question of their validity.

59 Spencer, *op. cit.*, i. 123 sq.

Another representative of what has been called evolutionary hedonism or utilitarianism is Leslie Stephen. He criticizes the utilitarian conception of society as a mere aggregate of individuals. The true unit is not the individual

but society, which may be regarded as an aggregate organism; and morality is “the sum of the preservative instincts of a society.”<sup>60</sup> “The moral law is a statement of certain essential conditions of the vitality of the society”;<sup>61</sup> healthy development implies an efficient moral code and social degeneration implies the reverse.<sup>62</sup> There is this difference between the utilitarian and the evolutionist criterion of morality—that the former is happiness and the latter the health of the society.<sup>63</sup> But at the same time the two criteria “are not really divergent; on the contrary, they necessarily tend to coincide.” There is a correlation between the pernicious and the painful on the one hand, and on the other between the beneficial and the agreeable; the “useful,” in the sense of pleasure-giving, must approximately coincide with the “useful” in the sense of life-preserving.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> L. Stephen, *The Science of Ethics* (London, 1882), p. 217.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353 *sqq.*

25But why is the health of the society the criterion of morality? Stephen writes, “Our moral judgment must condemn instincts and modes of conduct which are pernicious to the social vitality, and must approve the opposite; but it does not necessarily follow that it must condemn or approve them because they are perceived to be pernicious or beneficial.”<sup>65</sup> And in another place:—“Moral approval is the name of the sentiment developed through

the social medium which modifies a man's character in such a way as to fit him to be an efficient member of the social 'tissue.' It is the spiritual pressure which generates and maintains morality."<sup>66</sup> These statements, however, can only be answers to the question why we have moral sentiments and pronounce moral judgments, but tell us nothing about that objective validity which Stephen evidently attributes to his criterion of morality. He says that it is "a simple 'objective' fact that a man acts rightly or wrongly in a given case, and a fact which may be proved to him.... If I can prove drunkenness to be socially mischievous, I shall certainly prove it to be wicked."<sup>67</sup> But surely he cannot prove it to be wicked simply by proving that it is socially mischievous. Of the validity of his fundamental proposition Stephen has given us no proof at all.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271 *sq.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 443, 453.

Many ethical writers agree with the hedonists in regarding pleasure as a good, but disagree with the contention that pleasure alone is good as an end. It has often been argued that Mill himself was not a consistent exponent of utilitarianism owing to his admission that "some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others," and his reference to the "sense of dignity" as the ground of the preference that is given to some pleasures over others.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, in Mill's famous formula that "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied," Paulsen finds the implication that the moral value lies, not in pleasure as such, but in pleasurable

functions; and he consequently observes that there is no radical difference between Mill's utilitarianism and the doctrine of "energism,"<sup>69</sup> according to which the highest good is not the feeling of pleasure, but an "objective content of life," namely, the perfect development and exercise of life,<sup>70</sup> or, as he also calls it, "welfare."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Mill, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 13.

<sup>69</sup> F. Paulsen, *System der Ethik*, i. (Stuttgart & Berlin, 1913), p. 275. In my account of Paulsen's theory I have availed myself of some expressions used in F. Thilly's English edition of his work (London, 1899).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 223.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 224.

As hedonism is based on the proposition that each person desires his own happiness, so energism is based on the proposition that each person desires to live a human life and all that is implied in it, the goal at which the will of every living creature aims being the normal exercise of the vital functions that constitute its nature.<sup>72</sup> And as hedonism has been divided into egoistic and universalistic hedonism, so energism has been divided into egoistic and universalistic energism. According to the former kind of energism, the highest good, or principle of morality, is the welfare of individual life; according to the latter, it is the welfare of the race.<sup>73</sup> Paulsen's energism is universalistic. Every man desires to live, but he also desires to help others to live; all human beings are both egoistic and altruistic, although in very different degrees. Indeed, in the motives of actions it is impossible to draw any sharp limit between the interests of self and the interests of others. It is a mistake to suppose that every act has but one motive: many