

Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* and the Teaching of the Moral Sciences

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Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* is today enjoying a revival of interest among moral philosophers, who presume it to be a work of a moral philosophy of the kind they themselves pursue. Consequently, they consider it quite unproblematic to approach the book with their own problems, seeking ways in which Sidgwick might have contributed to their formulation and resolution. This is something that should sound familiar to historians of economics: as what economists long did to Adam Smith, and still occasionally do. At the time of the bicentenary of *Wealth of Nations* in 1976 this was the dominant tendency: the collection *Essays on Adam Smith* had very few contributions that would today be considered properly historical, and in its second half chapter after chapter places Adam Smith in relation to modern economic ideas.¹ It could be said of this volume that its only historical feature is its status as a monument to a defunct historiography. Ironically, Adam Smith practised moral philosophy too, and so one strand in current commentary is to do to Smith exactly what has been done to Sidgwick: presume that his moral philosophy is an entity continuous with whatever it is modern moral philosophers think they are doing.

In the case of Sidgwick, the moral sciences of which he was a part did turn into a philosophical enterprise of a modern kind. When in 1903 Alfred Marshall took political economy and politics out of the Moral Sciences Tripos and established the Economics Tripos, this left a rump Moral Sciences Tripos now dedicated only to moral philosophy and logic: and so Marshall's efforts also, by default, brought about what then eventually became the Cambridge Philosophy Tripos. In 1883 Sidgwick became Knightbridge Professor and also published his *Principles of Political Economy*; after 1903, these domains would belong to two distinct Triposes. The story of this division has always been told from the point of view of Marshall: dissatisfied with the compromises forced upon him by teaching economics within the Moral Sciences Tripos, he struggled for many years first to enlarge the scope of political economy within the Tripos, and then to create an independent vehicle for the training of economists. His eventual success in creating the first three-year undergraduate degree in economics created much ill-feeling, resulting in the elimination of economics from the teaching of history and moral philosophy in Cambridge. In Oxford, on the other hand, the tide

¹ Andrew S. Skinner, Thomas Wilson (eds.) *Essays on Adam Smith*, Oxford University Press, London 1976; this was a companion volume to the new Glasgow editions of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*.

flowed the other way: in 1920 a PPE degree was created in which economics shared a degree with philosophy and politics. It is also worth noting that when Marshall complained of the ineffectiveness of teaching economics with the Moral Sciences Tripos, all of those men whom he considered his best students, up to and including Pigou, were products of this Tripos.² Not until the 1930s did the Economics Tripos begin producing economists with whose names we might today be familiar.

If we are to properly appreciate how Sidgwick could in 1883 become the Cambridge Professor of Moral Philosophy, and in the same year publish a large and interesting treatise on political economy, we need to establish quite what the moral sciences represented in Cambridge in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And if we are able to do this, then this will shed fresh light on Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* - in effect, the book that made him a candidate for the Knightbridge Chair. My objective, therefore, is to regain a perspective upon *Methods of Ethics* as a product of Cambridge Moral Sciences, and not as a canonical work of modern moral philosophy.³ And to anticipate my conclusion: *Methods of Ethics* is not an enterprise separate from that of his *Principles of Political Economy*, nor even from his *Elements of Politics*: we can read *Methods of Ethics* as a rebuttal of the kind of economic science that Lionel Robbins argued for in the *Nature and Significance of Economic Science*.

My immediate aim is not however to show how Robbins' position had already been anticipated and superseded more than fifty years' earlier, and so recalibrate Sidgwick's relationship to economics. I will instead demonstrate that the construction of *Methods of Ethics* owes a great deal to a book by a predecessor of Sidgwick in the Knightbridge Chair, John Grote⁴ – his posthumous *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy*. When this was published in 1870 Grote had been dead four years; the book was put together by Joseph Mayor,⁵ one-time St. Johns College Lecturer in Moral Sciences, from notes made by Grote in

² Including Nicholson, Foxwell, J. N. Keynes, Chapman, Flux, Macgregor as well as Pigou.

³ Here I should note that by far the best account of Sidgwick's moral philosophy, J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, does recognise the significance of the Tripos, and it opens by acknowledging that the very modernity of Sidgwick's "tone and content" fosters the kind of approach which I criticise above. Schneewind's purpose is to place Sidgwick with respect to the philosophical field of mid-nineteenth century England, which he does very successfully; here I am concerned to suggest that this field was, in Sidgwick's work, inflected by the framework provided by the Moral Sciences Tripos.

⁴ Sometimes confused with his brother George Grote, banker, MP and historian of ancient Greece; see the index entry in Roger Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty. Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015 p. 250. John Grote (1813-1866) entered Trinity College in 1831, taking the Mathematics and Classics Triposes in 1835 and was elected a Fellow of Trinity College in 1837. He was ordained in 1842, and in 1847 given a college living as Vicar of Trumpington. When he succeeded Whewell as Knightbridge Professor in 1855 he gave comprehensive lectures, rather than the annual dozen of Whewell. He founded a dining club in his vicarage, the "Grote Club", where papers were read after dinner, and by all accounts Grote and Sidgwick were its leading lights. One of the members, J. R. Mozley, wrote a long letter to Mayor after Sidgwick's death recalling these discussions between Grote, Sidgwick, Venn, Pearson and Mayor – J. R. Mozley to J. B. Mayor, 21 April 1904, Holly Bank, Headingley, Leeds; Trinity College Library Add. Ms.c 104/66. The club was continued after Grote's death as the Grote Society, presided over by F. D. Maurice, Grote's successor as Knightbridge Professor, and including Alfred Marshall among its members – see Alfred Marshall, "Notes Taken during Discussions at the Grote Club Meetings, February-November 1867", introduced and edited by Tiziano Raffaelli, *Marshall Studies Bulletin* 6 (1996) pp. 49-64. See generally on Grote John R. Gibbins, *John Grote, Cambridge University and the Development of Victorian Thought*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2007.

⁵ Mayor entered St. John's College, Cambridge in 1847 and graduated in 1851 with the second-placed First in Classics. He was the author of "The Moral Sciences" in the first *Student Guide to the University of Cambridge* (Deighton Bell & Co., Cambridge 1862 pp. 140-52), and in 1863 one of the candidates for the chair of political

the early 1860s. This was the time of the “Grote Club”, a discussion group in which Sidgwick and Grote were the leading lights. This also coincides with Stanley Jevons’ move into political economy, with his paper “Brief Account of a General Mathematical Theory of Political Economy” presented at the Section F session of the British Association meeting in Cambridge in the summer of 1862.⁶ The common factor here is the publication, in the autumn and winter of 1861, of John Stuart Mill’s essay on utilitarianism in *Fraser’s Magazine*.

In order to make sense of these relationships we need to reconstruct the early history of the Moral Sciences Tripos, and quite what Grote, Sidgwick and Mayor made of it. This also necessarily involves some reconstruction of how teaching was actually conducted in Cambridge in the mid-nineteenth century, for it was not then organised the way it is today. Central to Oxbridge teaching now is the relationship between University lectures and college supervision/tutorial, in which a reading list defines the scope of material to be covered. However, the weekly supervision or tutorial is a twentieth-century innovation, in Cambridge linked to the reorganisation of the University on a Faculty basis in the 1920s, realigning the functions of University and colleges. For much of the nineteenth century University Professors had lectured very sporadically, if at all; and Henry Fawcett, Marshall’s predecessor as Professor of Political Economy from 1863 to 1884, lectured exclusively to Pass Men until at least 1876; that is, to students pursuing an ordinary degree and more interested in collecting credits than in higher learning. To understand why the Moral Sciences Tripos existed, what it was supposed to do, and what it actually did do, we first need to step back into the Cambridge of the early nineteenth century.

Teaching and Reform before the Moral Sciences Tripos

In the early nineteenth century the University of Cambridge was, as the historian of the University put it, “practically a preserve of the Church of England”.⁷ College fellows, tutors, professors and readers were all obliged to conform to the liturgy of the Church of England and were not permitted to marry, reinforcing the sense of seminary life. To graduate, students had to swear allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Anglican faith printed in the *Book of Common Prayer*; but a significant proportion of students never got as far as this and left college without graduating from the University, suggesting both the centrality of college life and a greater emphasis on sociability than education. Broadly speaking, as the century progressed

economy, alongside Leonard Courtney and Henry Dunning Macleod. In October 1863 the post had been made permanent by the Senate, and it became a paid University appointment; following lobbying by Leslie Stephen, Henry Fawcett, who had also published his *Manual of Political Economy* that year, was appointed. In December 1863 Mayor married Grote’s ward and niece Alexandrina Jessie Grote and so had to surrender his college living. He taught first at Kensington School in London, then being appointed Professor at King’s College, London, first in classical literature and then, from 1879 to 1883, in moral philosophy. John R. Gibbins, “Mayor, Joseph Bickersteth (1828-1916)” ODNB.

⁶ Subsequently published in *Journal of Royal Statistical Society of London* Vol. 29 Issue 2 (June 1866) pp. 282-90. Jevons did not attend the meeting, but his paper was read out.

⁷ D. A. Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, London 1940 p. 82.

emphasis shifted from college society to more systematic teaching and learning; but even in the early 1900s many students left the university without graduating.

When it did come to teaching and examination, the curriculum was dominated by mathematics. This formed the main part, along with some Paley and Locke, of the Senate House Examination, which in time became known as the Mathematics Tripos. While this four to five day written examination was taken by a majority of students, this also meant that very many did not. A distinction emerged between “Pass” or Poll” men, and those competing for honours in an examination aimed not primarily at classification, but a rank ordering of all candidates. Reforms in 1822 introduced a Classical Tripos open only to those who had already gained honours in mathematics; and an elementary examination called the “Previous Examination” was introduced in the fifth term of residence, for which the Gospels or Apostles, Paley’s *Evidences of Christianity*, a Greek or Latin prescribed author formed the subject-matter. By mid-century, with divinity, mechanics and hydrostatics added in 1837, this had become the ordinary degree, for which attendance and examination at one course of Professorial lectures was also required. It was not that usual in the early part of the century for Professors to lecture: in 1809 the Professor of Divinity “broke a well-established tradition of his chair by delivering a course of lectures”, and when Whewell became Knightbridge Professor in 1838 he ended its status as a sinecure by delivering at least twelve lectures annually, apart from the year in which he was Vice Chancellor.⁸

Teaching students was a college matter; as is evident from the description of teaching on the Moral Sciences Tripos in the 1893 edition of the *Student’s Guide*, this was still the case at the end of the century. College lectures were more like school classes, students being called upon to construe a passage or prove orally a mathematical proposition.⁹ Given the broad scope of the ordinary degree colleges sometimes lacked sufficient tutors, and a system of private coaching developed which in turn contributed to a low academic standard, since more rigorous examination would only increase the demand for private tutoring, and encourage cramming.

Reform and the Moral Sciences

The appointment of Prince Albert as Chancellor of the University in 1847 lent a focus to existing arguments in Cambridge for reform. Albert had studied law, philosophy and the history of art during 1837 and 1838 at the University of Bonn,¹⁰ just like Karl Marx, who had studied there the previous academic year. Having been given a list of Cambridge teaching by

⁸ Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge*, pp. 175, 80-81.

⁹ Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge*, p. 179. Winstanley goes on to emphasise that Whewell was not an advocate of University lectures in themselves, but wished to improve the standing of professorial lectures so that they might be linked to subjects for examination, and also reduce the reliance on private tutors.

¹⁰ Albert had studied in Brussels before attending Bonn, and he later corresponded with Quetelet about the latter’s *On the Social System and the Laws which Regulate It* (1848) – David Palfrey, “The Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge University, 1848-1860”, PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge 2002 p. 106 fn. 44.

the Vice Chancellor, Albert concluded that teaching was very incomplete, advocating an extensive broadening of subjects that had some support among Cambridge fellows. However, the fact that teaching was a college matter, and that the colleges were already beholden to an extra-college network of private coaches, something other than a simple extension of college teaching was required. The result was a proposal in February 1848 that all students for the ordinary degree be required to attend for one term at least lectures given by one or more University Professors, and be certified by the appropriate Professor as having passed an examination in the subject of the lectures. Coupled with this, two new Triposes were added, in Natural Sciences and in Moral Sciences. Corresponding to the new function of professorial lectures, the component subjects for the new Moral Sciences Tripos were simply derived from existing chairs: moral philosophy, history, political economy, English law and general jurisprudence. Admission to the Tripos no longer required that a Senate House Examination be sat first, as had been the case when the Classics Tripos was introduced in 1822. Instead, students were admitted only if they had already had an ordinary degree: so it was a one-year, supplementary graduate course. Only in 1860 did it become a three-year honours undergraduate course, when the content was altered, professorial control loosened, and a Moral Sciences Board appointed to oversee it.

The “Moral Sciences Tripos” as originally constituted therefore simply brought together a number of existing Professorial domains; but what were the “Moral Sciences”? The idea of a moral science can be dated back at least to Adam Ferguson’s *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792), in which he describes his aim as:

In treating of him [man] as a subject of moral science, we endeavour to understand what he ought to be; without being limited, in our conception, to the measurement of attainment or failure, exhibited in the case of any particular person or society of men.¹¹

This then is a consideration of the human person as a being first of all distinct from other animals, possessed of mental faculties that permit him to reason, able to discern the difference between pleasure and pain, beauty and deformity, prosperity and adversity, subject to rules of morality regarding external actions and also to legal statutes, characterised by definite virtues, and living in society with other human persons. And when the Institut national des sciences et des arts was established in 1795, it was divided into three classes: “Physical and Mathematical Sciences”; “Moral and Political Sciences”; and “Literature and the Fine Arts”. The second class was divided into several sections: for “The Analysis of Sensations and Ideas”; “Morals”; “Social Science and Legislation”; “Political Economy”; “History”; and “Geography and Statistics”.¹² David Palfrey draws attention to the fact that when John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic* (1843) was translated into German the “moral sciences” discussed in

¹¹ Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* Vol. I, A. Strahan & T. Cadell, London 1792 p. 2.

¹² Richard Whatmore, *Republicanism and the French Revolution. An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say’s Political Economy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000 p. 112.

Book VI were translated by “Geisteswissenschaften”, emphasising the mental rather than the social (political) aspect.¹³ Mill doubted whether

The phenomena with which this science [of human nature] is conversant being the thoughts, feelings and actions of human beings, it would have attained the ideal perfection of a science if it enabled us to foretell how an individual would think, feel, or act, throughout life, with the same certainty with which astronomy enables us to predict the places and the occultations of the heavenly bodies. It needs scarcely be stated that nothing approaching this can be done. The actions of individuals could not be predicted with scientific accuracy, were it only because we cannot foresee the whole of the circumstances in which those individuals will be placed.

No precise and universally true statement can be made regarding human action, he argued; but this was not because an individual's modes of thinking and acting do not depend on causes, rather that causal factors were varied in their combination, such that in the aggregate no two actions were quite alike.¹⁴ We might conclude that, by the later 1840s, the “moral sciences” were understood to include all phenomena related to human society and sociability, from the philosophical (moral philosophy) through language to the more strictly social, including an understanding of social actions and the the formation of enduring human society.

Whewell's version of this sought to integrate law, history and political economy through a Christian moral philosophy, and within a fortnight of the new Tripos being approved he announced a course of 24 lectures on the history of moral philosophy from Plato to Paley, Dugald Stewart, Bentham and Mackintosh.¹⁵ James Stephen presented his first lecture course on History three times a week in Trinity Hall during the Easter Term of 1850, running from Roman Gaul to the establishment of absolute monarchy under Louis XIV, although he did digress into a critique of Comte as discussed by Mill and Grote. Pryme had of course begun lecturing on political economy in March 1816, and in 1828 he had been elected Professor of Political Economy, albeit unpaid and only lecturing for one term every other year.

While we might in this way enumerate activities that had a bearing on the Moral Sciences, a more significant feature was the very small number of students who actually attempted the Tripos from 1851 to 1860: there were only 66 in total. In 1860 no students at all sat for the Tripos.¹⁶ This did not mean that no students attended the professorial lectures related to the Moral Sciences that year, since there were also undergraduates studying for the ordinary degree and seeking professorial certificates, such that from 1851 to 1860 political

¹³ Palfrey, “The Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge University”, p. 124.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill Vol.7 in 2 pts. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973 pp. 846-7.

¹⁵ He later published *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy in England*, John W. Parker, London 1852, which ran roughly from Hobbes to Bentham in eighteen lectures.

¹⁶ Palfrey, “The Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge University”, p. 364 Table 9.1.

economy averaged 20.8 students per year, civil law 27.8 – but moral philosophy 4.7. In 1858-59 there were 62 students attending political economy lectures, 22 for civil law, and 9 for moral philosophy; the following year 46, 6 and 2 respectively.¹⁷ During the 1850s external pressure on the University to reform both curriculum and the organisation of teaching continued, followed in the 1860s by a number of private members' bills in Parliament aimed at the removal of all religious tests. When Grote was appointed Knightbridge Professor in 1855 he allied himself with this pressure for reform, seeking to remedy the limitations of the Moral Sciences Tripos as a one-year course that could only admit students who had already graduated with an ordinary degree.

And there was also a whispering campaign against the Tripos: that distinction could be gained with just a small amount of cramming. In his Senate flysheet on reform Joseph Mayor denied that this was a general problem, but did concede that "It is possible also that there may be some slight foundation in fact for the stories told of distinction gained by a single night's reading."¹⁸ He attributed this to the breadth of the course, students having to cover so many different subjects that their knowledge of any one was necessarily shallow. His solution was to purge the Tripos of English Law, and add Logic and Mental Philosophy, making the Tripos more homogeneous; and he would also have preferred to see the removal of Jurisprudence and the conversion of Modern History into Political Philosophy. This would indeed soon come to pass, but we can point up here what is happening: a new Tripos called the Moral Sciences Tripos whose content was originally defined purely by the existence of a number of Professorial chairs not obviously entirely irrelevant to the moral sciences, which Professors would now actually deliver lectures in their field because of changes to the ordinary BA, is taking shape in terms of what properly belongs to the Moral Sciences. It is shifting towards a grouping of subjects dictated not by who might happen to be available to lecture, but by an understanding of the Moral Sciences increasingly distanced from Whewell's Christian theology: even though both Mayor and Grote were, like Whewell, ordained clergymen.

In any case, Mayor went on in his flysheet, were the Moral Sciences so easy? If one took a Senior Wrangler or a Senior Classicist unacquainted with these matters, and got them to study Plato's *Republic*, or Aristotle's *Ethics*, or J. S. Mill's *Logic* or *Political Economy*, they might study it for a year and still fail to produce a good paper on it.

For in truth such a paper as I allude to, involving the reproduction, illustration, application, and criticism of arguments, as opposed to a mere repetition of opinions, could only be floored by one who had a complete mastery of the principles of the sciences of which they treat.¹⁹

¹⁷ Palfrey, "The Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge University", pp. 366-7.

¹⁸ Joseph B. Mayor, "Remarks on the Proposal to Grant the Degree of BA to Persons who have obtained Honours in the Moral Sciences Course", Cambridge 1860 pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ Mayor, *Remarks*, p. 8.

Mayor had a clear view of how the Moral Sciences Tripos should develop, and was able to articulate it in a way that Grote could not. Grote had also contributed a flysheet to the discussion, but while he and Mayor were clearly in agreement, his own flysheet was scrappy and brief, failing to develop a coherent argument either against criticism of the Moral Sciences Tripos, or in favour of it, in the way that Mayor had. He did generally argue that the University was falling short if all it had to offer was Mathematics and two ancient languages;²⁰ while he followed Mayor's arguments, he did so with much less clarity of expression.²¹ He recommended that Pass with Honours would qualify for a BA; the establishment of a Moral Sciences Board to oversee the Tripos; and the dropping of the Laws of England in favour of Mental Philosophy. These were all approved in February 1860. Then, in 1867, the Moral Sciences Board recommended that History and Jurisprudence should be excluded, and political philosophy, previously grouped with History, be grouped with Moral Philosophy in the Moral Sciences Tripos. This now became four subjects: Moral and Political Philosophy; Mental Philosophy; Logic; and Political Economy. A further change in regulations in 1883 divided the degree into two parts. This then was now the Moral Sciences Tripos of which Sidgwick was the titular head.

Before turning to the way in which Sidgwick comes into this story I should perhaps summarise where I have got to. At mid-century a series of reforms created new honours courses that would enable the University of Cambridge to make the transition from seminary to modern university. In this it was a follower: of German universities, of the University of London, of the Scottish universities, of the new English municipal colleges, and ultimately of the new American universities such as Johns Hopkins and Chicago, from where in the 1920s it adopted postgraduate study and the PhD. The Moral Sciences Tripos was one of these new courses, but when originally founded it was simply an additional one-year course organised around existing Professorial positions, the novelty here being that Professors would for the first time be required to deliver courses of lectures and certify students attending these lectures. Through the 1850s and early 1860s, while Grote was Knightbridge Professor, the content of the Moral Sciences Tripos became focussed on the moral sciences as such, rather than a somewhat random grouping of professorial domains. At the same time it became a three-year honours degree course, with its own governing Board of Studies. The actual teaching was still conducted within colleges, hence the title of "College Lecturer"; this was a position held first by Alfred Marshall in St. Johns, and Henry Sidgwick in Trinity. As is plain from the way that Mayor defended the intellectual demands of the Moral Sciences Tripos in 1860, the course became defined primarily by the study of key texts. Those teaching on the Tripos therefore employed these texts to define its subject matter: Sidgwick wrote his *Methods of Ethics* (1874), then a *Principles of Political Economy* in 1883 because Fawcett's own *Manual of Political Economy* was unsuitable for honours teaching. When Alfred Marshall

²⁰ John Grote, "To Members of the Senate", 22 February 1860 p. 3.

²¹ And this observation is significant, for it will have a bearing on the composition of the 1870 *Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy*.

was appointed Fawcett's successor in 1884 he went on to publish his own *Principles of Economics* (1891), together with its catechism, *Elements of Economics of Industry* (1892). Neville Keynes published his *Formal Logic* (1884);²² Sidgwick his *Elements of Politics* (1891). The Moral Sciences Tripos had, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, shifted from the somewhat accidental concatenation of subjects it had been in the 1850s to an honours degree defined in terms of central texts written by those who taught on it. The principle texts with which their names are associated were not simply an expression of their individual specialist scholarly interests; they were linked to a particular programme of study in the University of Cambridge, whose nature and prospective function can be read out of its organisation and texts. After the death of Grote in 1866 the Knightbridge Chair was held first by F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), and then by T. R. Birks (1810-1883). Marshall's reports of Maurice at the Grote Society suggest that he was by the later 1860s aged and detached; Birks seems to have made very little impression, since this was also the period when Sidgwick and Marshall were involved in promoting women's education in Cambridge. When Maurice died, Sidgwick had not yet published *Methods of Ethics*, and his relatively junior status (he was 34) meant that the post went to Birks. But in 1883 *Methods of Ethics* was already in a second edition, and it would be consistently revised and supplemented through to a posthumous sixth edition in 1901.²³

Henry Sidgwick's Path to the Knightbridge Chair²⁴

Henry Sidgwick had entered Trinity College in the autumn of 1855 at the age of 17, and graduated in 1859 with firsts in both the Classics and the Mathematics Triposes. However, since he had no independent means, he accepted a college Assistant Tutorship in classics in 1859, also giving private tuition for the first two years to supplement his college income. He thus entered college life at a significant turning point that would have a great deal to do with the path that he took. For several years Sidgwick divided his interests between philosophy and theology; but also "...under Mill's influence I was also strongly led as a matter of duty to study political economy thoroughly, and give no little thought to practical questions, social and political."²⁵ Prompted in 1862 by his reading of Renan's *Études d'histoire religieuse*, Sidgwick determined to study Hebrew and Arabic to understand Christianity as a "historical religion". This study was continued until about 1865, not least because there were two chairs for Arabic in Cambridge, and only one for Moral Philosophy. However, by the mid-1860s he began to realise that it would take too much of his time to develop the specialist knowledge of Arabic

²² See the discussion of this in Phyllis Deane, *The Life and Times of J. Neville Keynes. A Beacon in the Tempest*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham 2001 pp. 115-19.

²³ The revisions to *Methods of Ethics* were extensive, Sidgwick producing a supplement to the first edition in 1878, to the second edition in 1884, the sixth edition of 1901 including further revisions. Schneewind works with the seventh edition, taking account of the effect of previous revisions; I work with the first edition, since I presume that it is here that the any filiation to the work of Grote will be more obvious.

²⁴ The following material is for the sake of convenience cannibalised from my paper "Henry Sidgwick, Moral Order, and Utilitarianism" (forthcoming, *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*).

²⁵ loc. cit.

that candidacy for a chair in the subject would require. In 1865 he examined on the Moral Sciences Tripos for the first time, and in 1867 began lecturing on “Mental and Moral Philosophy”. In 1874 he went on to add political philosophy to his teaching, and in 1879 political economy.

In 1869 Sidgwick resigned the Assistant Tutorship he had held since 1859,²⁶ and in a letter to his mother stated that he also intended to resign from the College Fellowship to which he had been elected in the same year, remarking that the College might be prepared to re-appoint him to a College Lectureship in Moral Sciences, which was in fact then confirmed in mid-June. This Lectureship was a new post; hitherto all teaching in the colleges had been done by the Assistant Tutors, but they had become increasingly overburdened by the increase in demand for tuition in all subjects. In the later 1860s colleges had begun to appoint College Lecturers, and eventually these superseded the tutors as the prime teaching appointment. And so Sidgwick’s move from an Assistant Tutorship in Classics to a College Lecturer in Moral Sciences was part of a general change in the organisation of teaching – St. John’s College had appointed Alfred Marshall to an equivalent post in 1868.

When in the early 1860s Sidgwick had turned his attention to questions of philosophy and theology he was a leading member of the Grote Society – indeed, one of those attending later recollected that the Society amounted to an extended conversation between Grote and Sidgwick.²⁷ Mayor later recalled that the Grote Society had originated in 1861, when he was College Lecturer in Moral Sciences at St. Johns and he had consulted with Grote in order to co-ordinate his lectures with him. Grote had suggested it would be a good thing to have a periodic meeting for discussion amongst those with an interest in philosophy, and the first meeting took place in Mayor’s rooms, when Grote read an introductory paper. The next meeting was in Grote’s own rooms in Trinity, after which Mayor “fell into the habit of going to dine with him at Trumpington”, with discussion afterwards that “took the form of papers exchanged between G. and S.”²⁸

As Simon Cook has suggested, Grote sought “to fashion a philosophy conducive to both theology and science,”²⁹ and he was hostile to “Positivism”, “which mistook phenomena for the whole of reality.”³⁰ On his early death in 1866 Grote left behind some occasional essays and the first part of a treatise on these issues.³¹ However, when John Stuart Mill had in the

²⁶ This was in relation to the Anglican conditions placed upon him, linked to the ongoing efforts to remove religious disabilities from fellows already mentioned; I discuss the circumstances related to this in my forthcoming EJHET paper, and they have no direct bearing on my argument here.

²⁷ Implied by Mayor in his letter to Eleanor Sidgwick, 28 April 1904 Queensgate House, Kingston Hill (Trinity College Library Add Ms. C 1104/68).

²⁸ Letter of J. B. Mayor to Eleanor Sidgwick, 28 April 1904 op. cit.

²⁹ Simon Cook, *The Intellectual Foundations of Alfred Marshall’s Economic Science. A Rounded Globe of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009 p. 103.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John Grote, *Exploratio Philosophica. Rough Notes on Modern Intellectual Science Part I*, Deighton, Bell, and Co., Cambridge 1865.

autumn and early winter of 1861 published a critique of utilitarianism in *Fraser's Magazine*³² Grote had begun to draft a response, assembling a mass of notes that were then edited by Mayor and published posthumously in 1870 as *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy*. Moreover, with the encouragement of a number of Oxford philosophers Mayor later put together a second part for *Exploratio Philosophica*, in the preface acknowledging the assistance of Sidgwick in reading the proofs.³³ This should remind us that the period in which Grote had originally drafted his critique of Mill on utilitarianism coincided with that period in the Grote Society when Sidgwick and Grote were reported as being so closely engaged in discussion. Even without engaging in any detailed examination, there are clear filiations between Grote's critique of utilitarianism and Sidgwick's own *Methods of Ethics* of 1874. And if we are prepared to allow this possibility, then our approach to Sidgwick runs through argument about moral action and moral order in the early 1860s: Grote's extended evaluation of Mill's philosophy and of the manner in which the study of society and ideals for its betterment might be reconciled with a belief in a Christian God. We need therefore to begin with Mill.

Mill's Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill's first extended published comments on utilitarianism are "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy", originally printed as Appendix B of Edward Lytton Bulwer's *England and the English* (1833). He began with Bentham's principle that happiness (defined as pleasure and exemption from pain) is the only end desirable in itself, and that all other things are desirable only as means to that end; and that the "production ... of the greatest possible happiness, is the only fit purpose of all human thought and action, and consequently of all morality and government...".³⁴ No argument for the superiority or even viability of this proposition is advanced by Bentham; and it can by contrast be equally argued that moral sentiments are "as much part of the original constitution of man's nature as the desire of happiness and the fear of suffering". Resolving this was not something of which Bentham was capable; for "even when he was most completely in the right, [it has] been reserved for others to *prove* him so."³⁵ That Bentham devoted the greater part of his efforts to legislation rather than morals was an advantage, for the consistent consequentialism he adopted there served him better. According to Mill, the great fault of Bentham as a moral philosopher was to have

...practically, to a very great extent, confounded the principle of Utility with the principle of specific consequences, and has habitually made up his estimate of the approbation or blame due to a particular kind of action, from a

³² Republished in book form as *Utilitarianism* in 1863.

³³ J. B. Mayor, "Preface" to John Grote, *Exploratio Philosophica. Part II*, ed. Joseph Bickersteth Mayor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1900 p. xii.

³⁴ John Stuart Mill, "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy", *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* Vol. X, ed. J. M. Robson, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1969 p. 5.

³⁵ Mill, "Remarks", p. 6.

calculation solely of the consequences to which that very action, if practised generally, would itself lead.³⁶

Furthermore, from the principles of pleasure and pain as the sole springs to action Bentham derives a motive, an interest, such that our actions are governed by our interest, by a balancing of motives. Mill then points out that Bentham simply presupposes that the spring of present action is future pleasure or pain as a consequence; neglecting altogether that “the pain or pleasure which determines our conduct is as frequently one which precedes the moment of action as one which follows it.” The implication is that interest conveys the idea of an end for which the conduct selected is the means; but this presumes deliberation, and it is just as possible that conduct is impulsive.³⁷

And it is much the same with Bentham's theory of government: he envisages man in society without a government, and comes to the conclusion that the best kind of government would be representative democracy.

Whatever may be the value of this conclusion, the mode in which it is arrived at appears to me to be fallacious; for it assumes that mankind are alike in all times and all places, that they have the same wants and are exposed to the same evils, and that if the same institutions do not suit them, it is only because in the more backwards stages of improvement they have not wisdom to see what institutions are most for their good.³⁸

Bentham neglects the human qualities of habit and imagination; and elevates only one part of human motivations to action, supposing men and women to be “much cooler and more thoughtful calculators than they really are.”³⁹

In the 1838 memorial for Bentham that Mill published in the *London and Westminster Review* Bentham's method is singled out for praise, rather than his opinion: his way of “treating whole things by separating them into their parts ... and by breaking every question into pieces before attempting to solve it.”⁴⁰ His knowledge of human nature was limited; no one,

probably, who, in a highly instructed age, ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should* be, influenced.⁴¹

During the later 1850s Mill came back to these ideas, publishing in three parts in *Fraser's Magazine* five chapters that were then published together in 1863 as *Utilitarianism*. This

³⁶ Mill, “Remarks”, p. 8.

³⁷ Mill, “Remarks”, pp. 12, 13.

³⁸ Mill, “Remarks”, p. 16.

³⁹ Mill, “Remarks”, p. 17.

⁴⁰ John Stuart Mill, “Bentham”, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* Vol. X p. 83.

⁴¹ John Stuart Mill, “Bentham”, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* Vol. X pp. 83, 93.

would represent to Grote and Sidgwick what Mill thought about human motivation and action in the early 1860s; it formed the basis for the critique that Grote drafted in 1862, and which his friend Mayor edited into *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy* of 1870.

Mill starts from the age-old problem of right action. Our reason supplies the general principles only for moral judgements, abstract doctrines that cannot be perceived empirically. Both the intuitive and the inductive school of ethics hold to the necessity of general laws; but conclude whether actions are right or wrong *a priori* in the first instance, and *a posteriori* in the second. All of these tendencies are, openly or tacitly, indebted to the precept of utility, for in one way or another action is in all moral argument linked to happiness.⁴² Turning after this first introductory chapter to “what utilitarianism is”, Mill first clears away the popular idea that utility is opposed to pleasure; for utility, properly understood, is pleasure itself:

The Greatest Happiness Principle ... holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.⁴³

There is of course much more to be said, but the gist of this approach is to maintain that pleasure and freedom from pain are the sole desirable ends; and that all desirable things are desirable either for their inherent pleasure, or as means for the increase of pleasure and diminution of pain. There is in addition to this the issue of assessing the quality and the quantity of pleasures – of ranking them. This can only be achieved by subjective estimation, and this in turn introduces the capacity for pleasure and for its satisfaction – for if such capacities are low, then that person can easily be satisfied.

Linked to this is the issue of ease of attainment: the closer in space or in time a pleasure is, then the greater the temptation to opt for the lesser rather than the greater:

Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying.⁴⁴

However, this is to consider only individual agency; and this is to neglect the larger principle of the greatest happiness. Rather than deal with this directly, Mill turns to arguments about “happiness” and its consistency in one person, suggesting that the main constituents of a satisfied life are tranquillity and excitement; with a great deal of the former many can find themselves content with very little pleasure; with a great deal of the latter many can be reconciled to a great deal of pain.

⁴² John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism”, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* Vol. X pp. 206-7.

⁴³ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 210.

⁴⁴ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 213.

When Mill then comes back to this reconciliation of the agent with the collectivity, he proposes that utilitarianism requires the individual to be “as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator ... as between his own happiness and that of others.”⁴⁵ “Laws and social arrangements” should constrain an alignment of the happiness of one with that of all; while “education and opinion” should use its power over human character to encourage the sense in every individual of the association of individual with collective happiness. It is however but rarely that an individual need directly consider public utility; “...in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.”⁴⁶

The third chapter considers the existence of any sanction, any source of an obligation to conform to a moral standard. This, Mill states, is ultimately a subjective state, not an external condition. Alignment of private and public good comes from the strengthening of social ties, so that a concern for the common good itself becomes a natural part of the social state. The fourth chapter discusses arguments about proof; that a thing is desirable can only be demonstrated by people desiring it. No ultimate argument can otherwise establish such a proof. Virtue itself becomes something that is desirable; being virtuous, a means to happiness, and an end in itself.

The final chapter considers the relation of justice and utility, and Mill itemises consideration of justice under six headings: the legal rights of the individual; the moral rights of an individual; the conception of just deserts, what an individual deserves; the injustice of bad faith, of not honouring undertakings given; that justice cannot be partial, preferring one over another; and the related idea of equality, although this is mitigated by the idea that “Each person maintains that equality is the dictate of justice, except where he thinks that expediency requires inequality.”⁴⁷ Here Mill moves away from the strict terms of utilitarian argument to the varied constructions of moral rules, and the balance that has to be struck between justice and expediency. This, he suggests in conclusion, is the only real difficulty in the utilitarian theory of morals.⁴⁸

Mill set the baseline for what utilitarianism meant in the mid-nineteenth century. From the above summary several important points emerge. In his first evaluation of Bentham, Mill lists the three principal theses of Bentham:

1. Happiness = pleasure and is the sole end in itself
2. Other things desirable insofar as they contribute to the realisation of this end
3. The production of happiness is the only fit purpose of human action and government

He points out that Bentham merely asserts these, but in 1861 concedes that (individual)

⁴⁵ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 218.

⁴⁶ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 220.

⁴⁷ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 243.

⁴⁸ Mill, “Utilitarianism”, p. 259.

happiness is indeed the core of all moral argument. The criticisms of Bentham that Mill first raises are twofold:

1. Bentham confounds utility with specific consequences – in effect, that whatever eventuates is the product of a utilitarian calculation since
2. Bentham impute an interest to action such that present interest linked to future action, although present action can be either the outcome of prior circumstance or of impulse.

Only in 1861 does Mill raise the problem inherent in the Greatest Happiness principle: given that the utilitarian calculation is made by an individual, how does the Greatest Happiness result besides through simple aggregation? What is the linkage between private utility and public utility? This is addressed most coherently in the final chapter, where it is asserted that this balance between justice and expediency – the contribution or not of individual action to the greater good – is the sole real difficulty. However, he had previously identified the problem that individuals can have different capacities for happiness – and so how can one sum across individuals whose capacities differ?

By outlining Mill's arguments in some detail here it becomes possible to judge how radically reduced Jevons' version of them was in 1862. It was this version of Mill's appraisal of the utilitarian calculus that re-emerged in his *Theory of Political Economy* (1871), was developed by Edgeworth in *Mathematical Psychics* (1881), informed Wicksteed's *Common Sense of Political Economy* (1910), which in turn founded Robbins' thinking in 1932. And indeed, Jevons' conception of "final utility" played an important part in Sidgwick's *Principles of Political Economy*, albeit deployed to demonstrate that different capacities to realise the means to satisfy ends led into a distributive problem. This was however the outcome of an alternative path along which Mill's arguments passed into propositions about economic action: from Grote to Sidgwick to Pigou. In conclusion here I will examine some of Grote's objections to Mill, and suggest that in comparing these to the arguments advanced by Sidgwick we can form a rather broader understanding of resources for forming propositions about right action.

And Grote's Critique

Grote's *Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy* was drafted and even set up in type and partially printed in 1863 before Grote decided against publication. How extensive Mayor's editorial work was we can only surmise, but comparison of the two 1860 flysheets suggests that Mayor was a far more fluent expositor than Grote, and leads us to suspect that much of the coherence and impact of the *Examination* is owed to Mayor's editorial work. The book is more a series of essays than continuous argument; Sidgwick would later complain that Grote lacked system, but Grote himself made a virtue of this.

Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy opens with the statement that

The purpose of the following pages is to show that, though virtue or right

action is the great source of human happiness, still the fact that it is so does not of itself constitute its virtue, or explain what we mean when we use that term. The doctrine here controverted may, roughly speaking, be called Utilitarianism. Against this doctrine, or in qualification of it, I have endeavoured to show what in my view is the manner in which we ought to regard the fact that virtue or right action is promotive of human happiness, and what other considerations or elements of moral value ought to be taken into account of in conjunction with it.⁴⁹

And although, he went on, we might say that mankind has in the course of history passed along a path of real improvement, we are not able to determine the existence of this “improvement” merely from the fact that this is the path that has been followed; we must be able to give reasons for calling it improvement.

That is to say, we must have the *idea* of improvement: an idea of what *ought to be*, or what it is desirable *should be*, as well as a power of observing, recording, and analyzing what *is*.⁵⁰

A system of morals cannot therefore be built from observation and experience alone. Positivism would have us believe that this is indeed the path followed by other sciences, a path that moral science ought to emulate; but experience and observation is not sufficient basis for any form of moral science. Utilitarianism has adopted a position between positivism and idealism; in “happiness” it sees something that humans not only seek to gain, but which it assumes it is desirable they should. All moral science

...must begin with assuming that there is something imperative upon us to do, or desirable for us to do; must begin, that is, with an ideal: if it does not make this assumption, its real course is the exceedingly unphilosophical one of beginning with describing what man *does* do, and then, by degrees and unauthorizably, altering its language and speaking of this as what he *should* do or *ought* to do.⁵¹

Comparing Mill's utilitarianism with earlier versions, Grote lists the series of objections to utilitarianism that Mill believed to be chiefly founded upon misapprehension, and suggests that Mill creates a “neo-utilitarian” position that mingles older doctrines with new ones of his own; and that the objections that Mill lists relate not to his own position, but to something rather different. By answering objections to utilitarianism from a new perspective that has already incorporated the objection, Grote charges that this neo-utilitarianism was formed as a consequence of this objection, and hence admits its validity.

⁴⁹ John Grote, *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy*, Deighton, Bell, and Co., Cambridge 1870, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Grote, *An Examination*, pp. 1-2.

⁵¹ Grote, *An Examination*, pp. 3-4.

The second chapter addresses the issue of happiness, what it is, whether it is attainable, whether it can be described in such a way as to be an object of an action. Of course, the difficulty of determining what happiness might be is no reason to dismiss its existence; and so this line of reasoning cannot be used to rebut utilitarianism. There are instead a number of objections that can be raised, such as that

1. happiness is different for different people;
2. we know very little of how a person can bring about their own happiness;
3. of how far, for example, their happiness might be the result of their own constitution and temper;
4. we have have no means of deciding whether we should try to be happy under existing circumstances, or whether we should seek to change the circumstances;
5. nor of deciding, if there are different qualities or degrees of happiness, whether we should settle for a lower, or strive for a higher.⁵²

As for the first, while all may agree that all action is aimed at happiness, this does not mean we can proceed to set down on paper what happiness is so that we may have “an easy or ready way of directing our action” in the best manner.⁵³ The chief objection to utilitarianism arises then from the difficulty of determining what happiness consists in, not from its apparent difficulty of attainment; and of comparing happiness of one person with that of another.

Turning then in the third chapter to the quality of pleasure, Grote points out that differences of quality are not measurable:

...the utilitarian is led astray by his language, talking as he does about pleasures as if they were separate entities, independent of the mind of the enjoyer of them: the pleasures are always mixed with something from themselves, which prevents us from speaking, with any philosophically good result, of this sort of independent comparability among them.⁵⁴

The mind itself subject to change, there is no “permanent touchstone, no currency to be the medium of the comparison.”⁵⁵

I cannot understand a general scale of pleasures, in which so many marks will be given to drunkenness, so many to love of the fine arts, so many to something else, according to the experiences of those who have tried more than one of them. The experience and the comparison is I am aware a fact, and a fact for moral philosophy to use: but it but one fact, and its application and use but limited.⁵⁶

⁵² Grote, *An Examination*, p. 28.

⁵³ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ Grote, *An Examination*, pp. 53-4.

⁵⁵ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 55.

Examining in the fourth chapter Mill's proof of utilitarianism, Grote argues that Mill conflates what is desired with the desirable; that what is desired must ipso facto be desirable. This is therefore merely a truism; the idea that the *summum bonum* is the ultimate question of morality merely an assumption, such that Mill's proof is merely circular.

...Mr. Mill seems to consider that he has proved that, in the same natural manner in which a man's happiness is an end to him, the aggregate happiness is an end to *each individual* of the aggregate.⁵⁷

Grote returns to this issue at the opening of the fifth chapter:

It is the individual who feels and acts; it is he who seeks for the *summum bonum*: it is his *summum bonum* or ideal welfare which is sought for: it is he also who, as a matter of fact, desires that which is pleasant, that namely which is pleasant to *him*. This, as an idea or notion, is not the same as the abstractly, or as the generally, desirable. We cannot practically speak about happiness without considering *whose* happiness it is we mean.⁵⁸

He then reminds the reader of Mill's utilitarian formula – that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong as they do the reverse. But, he points out, Mill fails to make clear *whose* happiness at stake. While it is the action of the agent that realises the conjunction of ends and means, it is the happiness of all that is the prime concern:

We have got to consider therefore not only the direction of our action to the production of happiness, but the distribution of our action among the different happinesses or susceptibilities of pleasure towards which it may be directed.⁵⁹

This issue of distribution between ourselves and others is avoided by Mill:

In some respects, society, whether moral or political, may be considered an aggregation of similar units; but in far more important respects it is an organization of dissimilar members. The general happiness, as a fact, is the sum of the happiness of the individuals; but as an object to be aimed at, it is not this, but it is to be attained by the acting of each according to the relations in which he is placed in the society.⁶⁰

Grote makes further important arguments against Mill, but for our purposes here we can identify three points:

1. There appears to be an inherent circularity in the utilitarian calculation, such that any consequence is presumed to be a desired outcome, "happiness";

⁵⁷ Grote, *An Examination*, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁸ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 85.

⁵⁹ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 88.

⁶⁰ Grote, *An Examination*, p. 95.

2. how private utility is supposed to translate into public utility remains obscure;
3. there is no “common currency” by which we can measure happiness, and through which we might compare or sum individual perceptions of happiness.

Do these points recur in Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*?

The First Edition of Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*

Methods of Ethics opens with the statement that ethics can be defined as the science of conduct, seeking to determine not the actual, but the ideal: “what ought to exist, not what does exist.”⁶¹ He immediately raises the question of the use of “science” here, since this presumes some particular subject matter. The Moral Sciences, for example, deal with what exists: psychology as inquiry into the laws of the formation of character; and sociology as the “physiology of Society”. While it is the object of these studies to explain individual and social phenomena, there is almost always a desire to improve or to regulate, applying “good” and “bad”, “right” or “wrong” to the conduct or institutions described; thus passing, “sometimes half unconsciously, from the point of view of Psychology or Sociology to the point of view of Ethics or Politics.”⁶² While our view of what ought to be is derived from our apprehension of what is, the ideal at which we aim lies outside “all investigation of the actual.” The aim of this book is therefore to focus resolutely on the ideal. There are two rational ends, Perfection and Happiness, and this book is directed to the investigation of three methods of ethics: Egoism, Intuitionism, and Utilitarianism. While it will turn out that Grote's position is associated with what is here treated as Intuitionism, we might also note that the way in which utilitarianism entered into strictly economic argument conflated Egoism and Utilitarianism. At the end of Book I Ch. VI Sidgwick notes this common confusion between the two kinds of Hedonism, the Egoistic and the Universalistic; his efforts to separate these two should repay attention. It might also be noted here that Sidgwick later describes Adam Smith as “one of the most penetrating and ingenious of English moralists”,⁶³ an endorsement of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* at a time when the work had long been neglected as quite outdated.

The distributive problem of “Happiness” is identified by Sidgwick in the same way as Grote. While appearing to be a reasonable end, there is a problem, for

...when we ask *whose* Happiness, a controversy emerges: for to some it seems that the agent ought to seek his own happiness, and that this is what each individual's reason must necessarily prescribe to him: while other think that the view if reason is essentially universal, and that it cannot be reasonable to aim ultimately at the happiness of any one individual rather than that of any other equally deserving and susceptible of it. There are

⁶¹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Macmillan, London 1874, p. 1.

⁶² Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 2.

⁶³ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 431.

therefore two views and methods in which Happiness is regarded as the ultimate and rational end of actions: in the one it is the agent's happiness which is so regarded, in the other the happiness of all men, or all sentient beings.⁶⁴

This issue is addressed in Book I, devoted to Egoism, empirical hedonism presuming that all pleasures and pains are commensurable,

Or perhaps we should say that we are forced to assume all pleasures and pains to have definite quantitative relations to each other: for otherwise they cannot be conceived as possible elements of a total of which we are to seek the maximum.at any rate, the common opinion would seem to be, that all the pleasures that man can experience bear a finite ratio to each other in respect of pleasantness: and so that they can all be arranged in a certain scale as greater or lesser in some finite degree.⁶⁵

Consideration here of the four qualities identified by Bentham in hedonistic calculation – intensity, duration, certainty and proximity – leads to two problem: how does one person compare among sensations, and how can we compare the sensations of two or more persons?

I do not now mean that one man's estimate of the value of any kind of pleasures differs from another's: for each sentient individual must be the final judge of the pleasantness and painfulness of his own feelings, and therefore this kind of discrepancy does not affect the validity of the judgments, and creates no difficulty until any one tries to appropriate the experience of others. But I mean that each individual's judgment of the comparative value of his own pleasures is apt to be different at different times: and that this variation is a legitimate ground for distrusting the validity of any particular comparison.⁶⁶

And from a strictly common sense perspective, the hedonic calculus has a rather circumscribed application:

The majority of human beings spend most of their time in labouring to avert starvation and severe bodily discomfort: and the brief leisure that remains to them, after supplying the bodily needs of food, sleep, &c., is spent in ways determined rather by impulse, routine, and habit, than by a deliberate estimate of probable pleasure. It would seem, then, that the common sense to which we here refer is only that of a minority of comparatively rich and

⁶⁴ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 112. This corresponds to pp. 123-4 in the 7th edition (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1981), but there these different ideas are there split up and the impact considerably weakened by Sidgwick's revisions.

⁶⁶ Sidgwick, *Methods*, pp. 123-4.

leisured persons.⁶⁷

All the same, this reveals a further problem, for should we be guided by the preferences that persons themselves state, or by those that can be inferred from their actions? Sidgwick continues on to examine the linkage made between happiness and duty, concluding that any egoistic method of the Hedonical calculus appears to suffer from major difficulties.

Book III is the longest of the four, devoted to Intuitionism, but this can here be left to one side since this bears more on the position from which Grote criticised Mill; as we can see from the above, many of the objections that Sidgwick raises against the Hedonic calculus are continuous with those of Grote. The final Book IV is devoted to Utilitarianism, and here we need to consider exactly how this is distinguished from Egoism. In particular, it is the problem of distribution (likewise raised by Grote) that requires attention. He begins with a clear association of Utilitarianism with Bentham:

By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, first distinctly formulated by Bentham, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is externally or objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness to all whose interests are affected: or more preciselythe conduct which will produce "the greatest possible happiness to the greatest possible number."⁶⁸

But this this Universalistic Hedonism is quite distinct from Egoistic Hedonism; that between the proposition that each ought to seek his or her own happiness and that each ought to seek the happiness of all being "so obvious and glaring, that instead of dwelling upon it we seem rather to be called upon to explain how the two ever came to be confounded..."⁶⁹

In fact, the greater part of Book IV is devoted to reconciling Utilitarianism with Common Sense, pursuing a proof of utilitarianism and neglecting the distributional issue so well identified here. When Sidgwick returns to this issue he acknowledges its identification by Grote explicitly, but then suggests that the argument against Bentham proposes inequality in the distribution of services, simply asserting that the reason why "each individual should distribute his beneficence in the channels marked out by commonly recognised ties and claims, are tolerably obvious."⁷⁰

There is, then, no resolution at all here of the identification of public good with private choice that enables Bentham to maintain, simultaneously, that the individual agent acts to select means to a given end, and that the sum of all such actions is the Greatest Happiness. This would be trivially true as a simple aggregation, but Mill had already seen that public utility

⁶⁷ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 381.

⁶⁹ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 382.

⁷⁰ Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 404.

was more than the sum of private utility. The real difficulty in Mill was his argument that commitment to common social purposes would of itself bring about the creation of the public good; a problem that Sidgwick clearly recognised, but did not in *Methods of Ethics* resolve.