

# Sidgwick vs. Hume on Reasons (20170808)

Alonzo Fyfe

## Introduction

In Book I, Chapter 3, of *Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick attempted to defeat the Humean thesis that reason does not, by itself, motivate us toward or recommend any ends.<sup>1</sup> Instead, according to Hume, reason is "the slave of the passions."<sup>2</sup> That thesis says that our ends are determined by our passions (our desires and sentiments), and reason merely provides information useful in selecting the appropriate means to realizing those ends. For example, most of us have an aversion to our own pain that gives us a reason to avoid states of affairs in which we are in pain. Beliefs and reason discover courses of action that will help the agent to avoid states in which they are in pain. However, reason does not select this or any other goal.

Sidgwick did not think that the Humean account is wrong. He thought that it was incomplete. We seem to experience conflicts between desires and reason – cases where we want more chocolate cake but reason tells us that it is not good for us, or where anger motivates us to lash out against another but reason calls the action unjust. A Humean, Sidgwick told us, would call this a conflict of desires. Sidgwick argued that there can be a genuine conflict between desire and reason.

*The question, then, is whether the account just given of the influence of the intellect on desire and volition is not exhaustive; and whether the experience which is commonly described as a "conflict of desire with reason" is not more properly conceived as merely a conflict among desires and aversions; the sole function of reason being to bring before the mind ideas of actual or possible facts, which modify in the manner above described the resultant force of our various impulses.*

I do not think he succeeded.

## Reasons and Causes

Sidgwick's first objection seemed to call for a type of causal dualism. Sidgwick used Hume's own is/ought distinction (at least in the sense that Hume provided the most widely known expression of this distinction) to argue that reasons must refer to something distinct from desires.

*I hold that this is not the case; that the ordinary moral or prudential judgments which, in the case of all or most minds, have some---though often an inadequate---influence on volition, cannot legitimately be interpreted as judgments respecting the present or future existence of human feelings or any facts of the sensible world; the fundamental notion represented by the word "ought" or "right", which such judgments contain expressly or by implication, being essentially different from all notions representing facts of physical or psychical experience.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, Book I, Chapter 3, Section 1, University of Texas, <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/sidgwick/me/me.b01.c03.s01.htm>, accessed 08/09/2017.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume. *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume 0213 (Kindle Location 6205). Kindle Edition.

I find it necessary to question whether talk of reasons that “cannot legitimately be interpreted as judgments respecting . . . any facts of the sensible world” and “being essentially different from all notions representing facts of physical or psychical experience” can possibly refer to anything real. My first inclination is to dismiss these reasons as imaginary – things that do not exist. Insofar as reasons talk about such things those statements are false.

My worry springs, in part, from the fact that a discussion of these normative reasons seems to require that they have the power to influence the motion of physical matter through space. A person taking money out of his wallet to pay the person he borrowed money from the day before involves the movement of matter through space. The obligation to repay a debt needs to be something that at least has some influence over whether such an action takes place. Otherwise, the explanation that, “I gave him the money to repay what I borrowed from him last week” makes no sense.

Sidgwick seemed to endorse the view that they have causal powers when he wrote that reasons “have some---though often an inadequate---influence on volition.” In talking about things that have causal powers, there are reasons to at least assume that they are made up of the same kind of stuff as what they cause.

This does not require going fully into the idea that normative reasons are causes. It simply implies that whatever reasons are, they have the power to move things in the physical world. The obligation to pay one's debt needs to have some ability to bring it about that a person pulls some money out of his wallet and gives it to the person he borrowed it from the previous day.

Desires provide reasons for intentional action and the power to cause those actions. They seem to be strongly related to the material brain. The aversion to pain can be found in how the brain processes nerve firings. There is no mysterious connection between the pain of being burned and the actions that an agent takes to avoid burn-damage to his skin.

We also have a sensible view about how these desires came about. The aversion to pain, our desire for sex, the preference for a comfortable environment, our basic food tastes, the preferences for the well-being of our offspring, can be explained in terms of dispositions to acquire brain structures that produced behavior that tended to result in genetic replication. In addition, human brains are plastic – they acquire some of their structure as a result of interactions with her environment. Our desires may be more genetically determined than our beliefs, but our capacity to acquire different beliefs based on our interactions with the environment speaks to our ability to acquire different desires as well. These considerations suggest that these ends could have been something other than what they are.<sup>3</sup>

This account suggests that ends have more to do with random genetic mutations and contingent environmental factors than with rationality.

### The Apparent Conflict between Desire and Reason

We still need to account for these apparent conflicts between desires and reasons – instances in which people experiencing conflict between what some take to be a judgment of reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Street, Sharon (2005). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies* 127 (1):109-166.

*Every one, I suppose, has had experience of what is meant by the conflict of non-rational or irrational desires with reason: most of us (e.g.) occasionally feel bodily appetite prompting us to indulgences which we judge to be imprudent, and anger prompting us to acts which we disapprove as unjust or unkind.*

Let us imagine a community made up of people with an aversion to pain. Let us also allow that brains are malleable such that people can learn new ends based on their interaction with their environment.

We should also imagine that each person is a member of other people's environment.

An individual with such an aversion to pain has a reason to give others new ends that would tend to reduce the chance that they will behave in ways that would put the individual in a state of pain. For example, the agent could cause others to have an aversion to causing pain for others, or an aversion to the state in which others are in pain. Such an aversion would motivate them to avoid creating states of affairs in which others are in pain, just as their own aversion to their own pain motivates them to avoid states they find painful.<sup>4</sup>

This is an aversion that every pain-averse being has reason to bring about in others – and that others have reason to bring about in them. However, these reasons are still the Humean reasons of determining the best means for the realization of certain (natural) ends.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, people generally end up with two ends – their natural aversion to their own pain, and a manufactured aversion to others being in pain.<sup>6</sup>

These different ends allow us to distinguish between two different types of actions. There are those actions that serve natural ends (hunger, thirst, comfort, aversion to pain) and those manufactured ends that there are few if any reasons to promote universally. There are also actions that serve those ends that people generally have reasons to promote universally (e.g., aversions to deceiving others, aversions to taking property without consent). Of course, most actions will serve both types of interests to varying degrees.

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<sup>4</sup> We can further imagine that the ways in which an individual causes others to adopt certain ends is by the use of praise and condemnation – where praise creates and reinforces certain desires and condemnation creates and reinforces certain aversions. This addition would explain the use of praise and condemnation in morality, but does not play an essential role in this argument.

<sup>5</sup> We can create a similar story with respect to aversions to lying, breaking promises, theft, vandalism, assault, rape, and murder – as well as desires to help those in desperate need, repay debts, or to make a contribution in terms of community service or scientific research. These, too, can be defended as manufactured ends, supported by reason.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that manufactured ends and natural ends are mutually exclusive. A parent may have a natural inclination to be concerned with her children which we may, in turn, reinforce through the use of social tools such as praise and condemnation. This will make the end, in part, natural and, in part, manufactured. Nor should this be taken as saying that all manufactured ends have to do with these types of moral concerns. Many of our personal interests – from stamp collecting to studying philosophy – are manufactured ends. The ends that are relevant here are those that people generally have reasons to bring about universally. Or, to turn a Kantian phrase, they are those ends that people generally would be rational to turn into universal law – though they are rational in the Humean sense.

There will be times when the manufactured ends will come into conflict with the natural ends – when, for example, the aversion that others be in pain comes into conflict with the aversion to one’s own pain. When this happens, we can see something very much like the conflict between desire and reason that Sidgwick wrote about.

*But in ordinary thought we clearly distinguish cognitions or judgments of duty from cognitions or judgments as to what “is right” or “ought to be done” in view of the agent’s private interest or happiness and the depth of the distinction will not, I think, be diminished by the closer examination of these judgments on which we are now to enter.*

In ordinary thought, we can distinguish between the judgment of actions that serve manufactured ends that people generally have reason to promote universally using its tools of praise and condemnation from actions that serve the natural and manufactured ends that people generally do not have reason to promote, but which cannot be ignored. The manufactured ends are rational, in a sense – and they are ends promoted using the instruments of praise and condemnation so closely associated with the performance or violations of duty.

## Conclusion

The question to ask at this point is whether this account of the two types of ends leaves anything out of what Sidgwick wants to cover in his distinction between rational and arational ends.

I find this hard to determine, since Sidgwick does not seem to consider the possibility of manufactured ends that people generally have reason to promote universally. In a summary of his position, he states:

*I am aware that some persons will be disposed to answer all the preceding argument by a simple denial that they can find in their consciousness any such unconditional or categorical imperative as I have been trying to exhibit.*

That would be the case here. There are no categorical imperatives. There are ends selected by nature, and ends learned by interaction with the environment.

However, Sidgwick then comments:

*If this is really the final result of self-examination in any case, there is no more to be said. I, at least, do not know how to impart the notion of moral obligation to any one who is entirely devoid of it.*

Wait. The first claim does not imply that one is “devoid” of “the notion of moral obligation”. It says that one’s notion of obligation is attached to manufactured ends that people have reasons to promote universally. Those reasons are, at least at the start, the biological reasons created through natural selection.

To make certain that we know where Sidgwick is coming from, he is saying that “moral obligation”

*The obligation is not indeed “unconditional”, but it does not depend on the existence of any non-rational desires or aversions.*

The reasons being recommended here do depend on the existence of non-rational desires. Yet, they are still ends that, given those desires, people generally have reasons to promote universally. And there is a distinction between the actions that instantiate these types of manufactured ends and the natural and manufactured ends that people generally have no reason to promote universally, and may have reason to discourage.