

ROSSIAN PLURALISM, EGOISM, AND PLEASURE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I register disagreement with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer on three significant issues. First, Sidgwick does not give utilitarianism the advantage over Rossian pluralistic intuitionism. Both views are still very much in the running. Second, his dualism survives their evolutionary argument. The egoist principle is no more or less vulnerable to debunking than the principle of impartial benevolence. Third, though his view on pleasure is not entirely clear, Sidgwick is best understood to be offering a traditional 'feeling-tone' account of pleasure, rather than a view which gives a significant role to the 'apprehension' of the subject.

KEYWORDS

Sidgwick, Henry, utilitarianism, intuitionism, dualism of practical reason, pleasure

Katarzyna De Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (LRS) are sensitive and charitable readers of Sidgwick, and I agree with most of their interpretations and their claims about Sidgwick's contemporary relevance.¹ But I do wish to register disagreement with them on three significant issues. First, Sidgwick does not give utilitarianism the advantage over Rossian pluralistic intuitionism. Both views are still very much in the running. Second, his dualism survives their evolutionary argument. The egoist principle is no more or less vulnerable to debunking than the principle of impartial benevolence. Third, though his view on pleasure is not entirely clear, Sidgwick is best understood to be offering a traditional 'feeling-tone' account of pleasure, rather than a view which gives a significant role to the 'apprehension' of the subject.

¹ See their *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). All unattributed references in the text are to this work.

1. INTUITION

As LRS note (82), W.D. Ross's view is a development of that found in Reid, Price, and Whewell; they focus on Ross, which seems to me the right strategy, since there is no stronger form of deontological pluralism available. Consider this claim by Ross:

If, so far as I can see, I could bring equal amounts of good into being by fulfilling my promise and by helping someone to whom I had made no promise, I should not hesitate to regard the former as my duty [and] normally promise-keeping [...] should come before benevolence.²

Ross's example brings out the inclination many people have to think that breaking a promise has normative weight of its own, independently of utility considerations.

Promising, Sidgwick rightly believes, provides the best case for the deontologist (*ME* 353).³ But, like Sidgwick (*ME* 303-11; 353-4), LRS find the principle that, other things equal, promises should be kept too vague to be plausible (85-6). Consider, for example, cases in which you have promised only because certain important considerations have been concealed, or in which your promise is the result of coercion.

Ross's response to similar objections made by W.A. Pickard-Cambridge is to appeal to the spirit of any promise rather than to its letter.⁴ Most promises, he points out, are made without there being any need to spell out their implied conditions.⁵

But LRS may object that the fact remains: the Rossian view is too vague.

LRS here show the same unwillingness as Sidgwick himself to allow any significant role in ethics for practical judgement in particular cases.⁶ Philosophical ethics, Sidgwick tells us, aims like science to be 'systematic and precise' (*ME* 1). He later says that the assumption that moral rules should be precise 'naturally belongs to the ordinary or jurial view of Ethics as concerned with a moral code' (*ME* 228), and provides an argument for this view based on an apt analogy with law. If a law were vague, we would think it to that extent unreasonable: anyone subject to a legal obligation ought to be in a position to

² W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 18-19.

³ References to *ME* are to Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (London: Macmillan, 1907).

⁴ W.D. Ross, *The Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 87-99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ Some of the following paragraphs adapt material from ch. 1 of my *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015).

know what it is. Similarly, a moral philosophy which left it unclear on some occasion exactly what a person's obligations were would, to that extent, have failed.

A good deal of law is indeed highly precise. The UK Representation of the People Act 1969, for example, leaves no doubt about when a person becomes eligible to vote in a parliamentary election: on their eighteenth birthday. But some law is less precise. Consider, for example, the definition of obscenity in the Obscene Publications Act 1959, still in force in the UK:

For the purposes of this Act an article shall be deemed to be obscene if its effect or (where the article comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.

If I have written some potentially obscene article, and am considering its publication in the UK, the law will not tell me whether or not it is safe for me to publish it. I have to rely on my judgement about the likely effects of its publication, and whether they might be described as depravation or corruption. Now it might be said that Sidgwick is right that, to this extent, the law is a failure, and legislators should seek further precision. But even if they did – perhaps by spelling out further what is meant by depravation and giving examples of what is and what is not to count as obscene – there will be an ineliminable role for judgement on the part of citizens. A law is not a failure if it is *reasonably* clear, and relies only to a *reasonable* degree on individual judgement. And the same is true of moral principles such as Ross's on promising.

In his discussion of a pluralistic intuitionism that allows for individual judgement, John Rawls says the following:⁷

[T]here is nothing intrinsically irrational about this intuitionist doctrine. Indeed, it may be true. We cannot take for granted that there must be a complete derivation of our judgments ... from recognizably ethical principles. The intuitionist believes to the contrary that the complexity of the moral facts defies our efforts to give a full account of our judgments and necessitates a plurality of competing principles. He contends that attempts to go beyond these principles either reduce to triviality, as when it is said that social justice is to give every man his due, or else lead to falsehood and oversimplification, as when one settles everything by the principle of utility. The only way therefore to dispute intuition-

⁷ Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, rev. edn. (Harvard: Belknap, 1999), 30n18) cites Barry, Brandt, and Rescher as intuitionists, noting that the intuitionism of earlier writers such as Ross included certain epistemological theses concerning self-evidence and necessity. But I presume Rawls would allow that Ross is in agreement with the pluralism of general principles, and the need for judgement between them in individual cases, which Rawls refers to as 'intuitionism'.

ism is to set forth the recognizably ethical criteria that account for the weights which, in our considered judgments, we think appropriate to give to the plurality of principles. A refutation of intuitionism consists in presenting the sort of constructive criteria that are said not to exist. To be sure, the notion of a recognizably ethical principle is vague, although it is easy to give many examples drawn from tradition and common sense. But it is pointless to discuss this matter in the abstract. The intuitionist and his critic will have to settle this question once the latter has put forward his more systematic account.⁸

So the first question we might ask is whether Sidgwick's own utilitarianism is in a better position than Rossian pluralism. Judgement is involved in accepting utilitarianism to start with, but it will also be involved in assessing the implications of the principle in particular cases. Consider some apparently simple case in which I have to decide between two delicious desserts. Sidgwick himself, in his discussion of empirical hedonism in *ME* 2.2-3, brings out how difficult such a decision might be. I shall have to recall earlier experiences with each kind of dessert, analyse the quality of each of those on offer, and then make a judgement based on the evidence before me. It is not clear why such judgements are any easier than trying to decide what to do in the case of the promise and the accident. Judgement is inescapable. What matters is how best to ensure that one's judgements are correct.

Of course, Rossian pluralists should not be against system, and most are not; indeed, systematization is the point of Ross's list of prima facie duties. But we have to remember that, however much systematizing we do, the context of human decision-making is sufficiently complex and unpredictable that any plausible ethical theory has to allow some room for individual judgement about particular cases. How best to acquire that capacity for judgement is a difficult question, and one insufficiently discussed by philosophers (including Aristotle and Ross). But its significance is beyond reasonable doubt.

LRS (87-8) note Ross's *ad hominem* criticism of pluralistic forms of utilitarianism, according to which well-being consists in a number of different goods, that it too must rely on judgement to decide between such goods. Their response is to claim that 'a monistic form of utilitarianism, like hedonistic utilitarianism, is in principle in a better position'. But this is to forget pain. A view which advocates only the maximizing of pleasure is clearly absurd; so even hedonistic utilitarianism turns out to be pluralistic.⁹ There is perhaps a significant difference between genuine monism and pluralism; but the difference be-

⁸ Ibid., 34-5.

⁹ See Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, 89.

tween a theory with seven prima facie or pro tanto duties, and a theory with two ('maximize pleasure' and 'minimize pain'), seems less important.

This point also throws into some doubt the implication of LRS (92) that common-sense morality (in a Rossian form) is in any worse a position than utilitarianism when it comes to explaining *why* the conduct claimed to be right really is right. There is nothing to prevent a 'dogmatic intuitionist' becoming a philosophical intuitionist, reflecting carefully on the principles she finds self-evident, and concluding with the kind of pluralism we find in Ross. Indeed it seems that this is exactly what Ross himself did.

Is Sidgwick then 'unfair' to the rivals of utilitarianism(144-8)? LRS defend him against the charge by suggesting that the main such rival is dogmatic intuitionism (147), and this view even in its strongest form can amount only to an unsatisfying 'accidental aggregate of precepts' (*ME* 102) which lacks any more fundamental justification. And, they claim, it can offer no such deeper justification, since once its principles are made more precise then it 'collapses like a pricked balloon'.

I presume that the collapse here is meant to result from a failure to meet Sidgwick's fourth condition of 'highest certainty', viz., lack of dissensus with the views of epistemic peers.¹⁰ But, first, there is no reason why the Rossian pluralist must make her principles more precise in the first place, because of the possibility of attaching a '*ceteris paribus*' clause to any principle. Often – indeed usually – there is something to be said against breaking a promise. Second, if precision is required of the Rossian pluralist, then the same is true of the utilitarian, and she will then run into disagreements with utilitarian colleagues about the nature of pleasure and pain, well-being, interpersonal aggregation, and so on. Finally, whether in precise form or not, there is a great deal of disagreement about both utilitarianism and Rossian pluralism, though my own hunch is that empirical research would demonstrate greater disagreement with utilitarianism than with the Rossian view, which incorporates many utilitarian elements but also includes principles forbidding injustice, ingratitude, and so on.

LRS consider the objection that Sidgwick himself admits that his own allegedly self-evident principles do not provide determinate answers in particular cases (*ME* 379), but suggest that the principles do not therefore violate his four conditions, since none of these requires such determinacy. But passages such as that at *ME* 228 which I discussed above make it clear that Sidgwick's first

¹⁰ LRS state this condition as one requiring agreement (144). Sidgwick in fact moved from a consensus condition to a non-dissensus condition in the 7th edn. (compare e.g. 320-1 of the first edition (1874) with *ME* 341-2).

condition requires such determinacy as part of precision. What he is saying at *ME* 379 is that the principles in 3.13 require the addition of a theory of well-being to become practical; and this he provides in 3.14, on an intuitive basis (*ME* 400).¹¹ But, as Sidgwick himself candidly admits (*ME* 150), empirical hedonism is anything but determinate in particular cases. In other words, though Sidgwick provided clearer and more powerful arguments for utilitarianism than any of his predecessors, he did not advance the overall case for that view over its rivals. And he would have seen that had he applied his epistemic principles as strictly to his own ethical view as he applied them to the views of others.

2. EGOISM AND EVOLUTION

In chapter 7 of their book, LRS claim that a Sidgwickian response to certain attempts to use evolutionary theory to debunk moral judgements can itself resolve Sidgwick's own 'dualism of practical reason'. Later (378) they claim that this is the most important revision they make to Sidgwick's position. I am persuaded by the argument against debunking, but I believe the Sidgwickian response can do less than LRS suggest.¹²

LRS begin (175-6) by outlining Sidgwick's arguments against the view that, once we understand the origin of our moral intuitions, we will see them as caused by factors outside our control and hence as unreliable. First, an intuition's being 'self-evident' – that is, such that understanding it is sufficient to justify it – is quite consistent with its being caused. Second, we do not even have to show that the causes in question are likely to lead to true judgements, since this will lead us into a regress of justification. Finally, the causal judgements in question are within the domain of science, and this does not extend to propositions concerning what we ought to do.

Sidgwick distinguishes this form of general scepticism about moral intuitions from more limited claims about particular ethical beliefs. Using this distinction, LRS go on to examine the general argument in more detail, and especially that form of it developed by Sharon Street (179-85). According to Street, moral realists, once they recognize that our evaluative attitudes have

¹¹ *Pace* LRS 146, though they themselves later quote Sidgwick's appeal to the 'intuitive judgement' of the reader (LRS 210).

¹² The following paragraphs adapt some material from my critical précis of the paper in *Ethics* by LRS that became ch. 7 of their book (<http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2012/12/ethics-discussions-at-pea-soup-katarzyna-de-lazari-radek-and-peter-singer-the-objectivity-of-ethics-1.html>).

evolved, face an awkward dilemma. On the first horn, they accept that evolutionary forces have no tendency to select beings with objectively true evaluative attitudes, and so must draw the unpalatable conclusion that most of our evaluative judgements are unjustified. On the second, they claim that these forces were likely to select those able to grasp objective moral truths; but this claim goes against the most plausible scientific understanding of evolution, which sees it as heading in the direction of survival rather than truth.

Street suggests that, had we evolved to be more like, say, lions, we would have been readier to accept the killing of others' offspring than we are. LRS note the echo here of Darwin's suggestion that, were we like bees, we would think it a duty of a mother to kill her fertile daughter. Sidgwick responded that such arguments do not touch the abstract principle of utilitarianism, which allows for much variation in the rules of common morality. This, LRS plausibly claim, suggests that a modern Sidgwick, more informed that the real Sidgwick about the influence of evolution on morality, might readily impale himself on the first horn of Street's dilemma, allowing that *many* of the rules of common-sense morality are not based on objective truth. (It is worth noting that reference to evolution might also enable the modern Sidgwick to avoid the somewhat implausible notion that the utility of common-sense morality suggests that human beings have been 'unconscious utilitarians' (*ME* 454).)

But, Street might object, if the principle of benevolence is objectively true, isn't our arriving at it without any steer from evolution just a huge coincidence? LRS rightly point out that Sidgwick can offer a plausible explanation of how we understand such principles: we use our reason. And at this point he can embrace the second horn of Street's dilemma. A rational capacity would advance success in reproduction, and it might do that most effectively in a general, 'untargeted' form, which would allow us to enquire into the foundations of mathematics or physics as well as to recognize self-evident moral truths.

LRS then turn from the general to the particular form of the sceptical argument (185-96). They cite Sidgwick's claim that no theory of the origin of our ethical intuitions has been offered that might throw his own abstract principles into doubt, as arising from sources which were likely to make them false. LRS suggest that this is still the case as far as universal benevolence is concerned, since the kinds of judgement most consistent with reproductive success will recommend helping one's own children rather than complete strangers. Since LRS are going to use Sidgwick's arguments about evolution in an attempt to resolve his dualism, it is worth noting that egoism is in as strong a position as universal benevolence in this context to resist debunking evolutionary argu-

ments. What we would expect to evolve would be something like kin altruism, which is neither egoistic nor impartially benevolent.

It is true, of course, that *some* concern for self might be expected to arise through evolutionary development, and LRS later (190) approvingly cite Folke Tersman's attempt to use this point to debunk my own defence of a principle of self-interest, according to which each of us has *a* reason (not necessarily overriding) to advance her own good. So it might be claimed that egoism is just a development of that bias towards the self, a development tainted by its source in non-rational evolutionary processes. I myself am not persuaded by Tersman's argument, and would want to appeal to some of the very Sidgwickian counters to debunking arguments which LRS state earlier in their paper. Egoism, or the principle of self-interest, are justified by appeal to self-evidence; and the conclusions of reflection upon them, though it must be fully informed by an impartial grasp of evolutionary development, need not be overturned by that grasp. If it is pointed out to me that the reason I think that $7 + 5 = 12$ is that my hunter-gatherer ancestors needed to develop some system for sharing out food at the end of the day, my belief will be unshaken. But note also that if Tersman's point has any force, it applies equally to the principle of universal benevolence. We would expect evolution to produce *some* concern for others, and universal benevolence can be seen as an extension of that concern in the impartial direction in just the way that egoism might be taken to be an extension of concern for oneself in the direction of partiality.

Since self-evidence can withstand reflection on the origins of beliefs, even kin altruism can resist debunking. LRS cite (189) – without questioning it – Sidgwick's somewhat remarkable claim that it is '*certainly* not' [my italics; LRS paraphrase as 'not at all'] 'self-evident that we owe more to our own children than to others whose happiness equally depends on our exertions' (*ME* 346). I have little doubt that, were people to reflect properly on this conception of extreme impartiality, the vast majority would reject it. But that of course is not the issue, as LRS point out: 'This is not to say that the judgment that we have greater obligation to help our own children than to help strangers cannot be justified, but rather that if it is to be justified, it needs a form of justification that does not start from the idea that because we strongly feel that it is right, it must be true'. This is hard to deny; but it is a point that applies as much to universal benevolence, and indeed egoism, as it does to kin altruism.

In support of the principle of universal benevolence, LRS claim that it results from 'a process of careful reflection that leads us to take, as Sidgwick puts it, "the point of view of the universe"' (193). This idea, they suggest, has been converged on by leading thinkers in various traditions, including Judaism,

Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Nor is there any plausible evolutionary debunking argument against it. There are, then, three elements to establishing that an intuition has the greatest degree of reliability: (1) reflection; (2) agreement among careful thinkers; (3) lack of any debunking argument.

By the point of view of the universe, LRS seem to mean something considerably less rigorous than Sidgwick's own utilitarian conception of pure impartiality, seeing it in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, for example, as the Golden Rule. And if the egoist is permitted the same degree of latitude, she can claim that her view meets each of these three conditions as effectively as the principle of universal benevolence. The Golden Rule itself seems to imply that it is no less rational to have concern for oneself as for others, and self-love can plausibly be claimed to play an important role in the other three traditions mentioned by LRS, as well, of course, as the ancient western philosophical tradition, where if anything egoism rather than universal benevolence plays the more important role. And there has been no more careful thinker on these matters than Sidgwick himself! Further, as we have seen, the mere fact that some principle is partial is not enough to debunk it, even if – as with kin altruism, and *not* with egoism – it lines up with evolutionary expectations.

LRS's conclusion, then, is that, because impartial universal benevolence withstands evolutionary debunking arguments, whereas partial principles such as egoism do not, Sidgwick's dualism can be resolved in favour of benevolence. I have suggested that egoism, and indeed kin altruism, can withstand reflection as effectively as the principle of universal benevolence. I agree with LRS in rejecting appeal to reflective equilibrium in ethics (something I remember Joseph Raz's pointedly describing as 'unreflective equilibrium'). What is required is just the kind of rational, informed, impartial reflection on ultimate ethical principles advocated, and often (though not always) engaged in by Sidgwick. LRS are right too that Street's evolutionary arguments are misdirected against moral realism. Such arguments might often be useful in debunking certain, unreflective, spontaneous moral responses, such as a visceral disgust at incest or homosexuality. But, at least as far as current evolutionary theory is concerned, they are largely irrelevant to first-order normative ethics (which philosophers do you know campaigning against incest or homosexuality?), as indeed is the neurological evidence based on fMRI scans used elsewhere by Singer, Greene, and others to support the principle of universal benevolence (put Frances Kamm or Judith Thomson in a scanner, and their brains will – I'm willing to bet – light up in the same way as Singer's or

Greene's when they're asked to state their fundamental ethical principles). There are no quick fixes here.

In response to an earlier presentation of my argument here (193-4), LRS claim that my map of the three positions under discussion – egoism, impartial benevolence, and kin altruism – is misleading, since kin altruism is 'much closer, from an evolutionary perspective' to egoism than to impartial benevolence. They mean 'behaviourally closer', in the sense that the behaviour we would expect to result from the application of kin altruism would overlap a great deal with that resulting from egoism, while following the principle of impartial benevolence would diverge greatly from both.

It may be true that many of us, conditioned as we are by the kin-altruistic sentiments evolution has produced in us, see our own self-interest as closely bound up with the well-being of our children. But the question is whether, had our ancestors had entirely egoistic sentiments, they would have acted in accordance with kin altruism. It seems to me not at all clear that they would. If all they cared about was their own personal well-being, why would they put themselves through the pains and efforts of child-birth and child-rearing? And if all had followed an entirely egoistic strategy, the result would have been a war of all against all that would have brought our species to an end. So if anything impartial benevolence would have had greater survival value than egoism, and hence would have been closer to kin altruism (especially since those our ancestors were most able to benefit would most of the time have been their own children). It is indeed true, as LRS point out, that universal benevolence requires altruism to distant members of our species and even members of other species, and it is not clear how this evolution can explain it. But egoism requires lack of concern for our own children (if we even have any), and a complete unreadiness to sacrifice anything, even something trivial in a case where it might prevent great suffering or death to those children. I don't see how evolution can explain that either.

It is somewhat remarkable that, having concluded the *Methods* in a state of such internal incoherence, Sidgwick appears to have done little to try to resolve it. It was the same with disagreement with others: like LRS, when stating his own first-order view he largely ignored its implications and focused on agreement, though his own discussion of intuitionism demonstrates a clear awareness of the threat to self-evidence posed by disagreement with epistemic peers. What is needed now in normative ethics is a general facing up to the existence of such interpersonal disagreement, and a non-dogmatic and cooperative attempt to make progress towards greater convergence. Indeed this

may be an area in which evolutionary theory (along with neuroscience, history, anthropology, psychology ...) turns out to have real purchase.

Perhaps partly because he does not allow room for practical judgement in individual cases between potentially conflicting principles, Sidgwick fails to consider a dualistic view according to which the principles of both egoism and of benevolence are pro tanto, such that in certain particular cases one principle is outweighed by the other. LRS object, in a discussion of Parfit's sufficient-reasons version of the dualism, that the dualism 'undermines morality' (162-4). This is because it allows that in certain cases one may act wrongly, but not irrationally (since one's action is justified by the egoist principle). According to LRS, if we want morality to be 'truly important' then we must show that we always have a decisive reason to act morally. This suggestion, however, sounds suspiciously like a case of the 'no true Scotsman' fallacy. Consider a version of the dualism in which the principle of universal benevolence outweighs the principle of egoism in every case except those in which, if the agent is to produce the greatest good, she must produce a trivial amount of good for very many people who are already much better off than she is at huge cost to herself. Since such a version would require the same sacrifices of most of us most of the time as the principle of universal benevolence, it is hard to see why it can be said to 'undermine' morality. It makes morality *less* important, of course, since any form of Sidgwickian dualism must recognize a non-moral normative principle. But this is not to undermine it.

3. PLEASURE

Sidgwick offers various accounts of pleasure, and it is not easy to say which, if any, we should view as canonical.¹³ LRS see his 'fullest and most precise definition' as:

feeling which the sentient individual at the time of feeling it implicitly or explicitly apprehends to be desirable; – desirable, that is, when considered merely as feeling, and not in respect of its objective conditions or consequences, or of any facts that come directly within the cognisance and judgment of others besides the sentient individual. (*ME* 131)

Let me call this the *apprehension account*. Shortly earlier, Sidgwick has said:

¹³ Some of the following paragraphs adapt material from ch. 3 of my *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015).

the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term ‘desirable’, in the sense previously explained. I propose therefore to define Pleasure – when we are considering its ‘strict value’ for purposes of quantitative comparison – as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or – in cases of comparison – preferable. (*ME* 127; cited in part by LRS at 243)

What is meant by ‘implicit’ apprehension? The contrast is most probably with cases in which the subject self-consciously recognizes and makes explicit to herself, or to others, that the feeling in question is desirable. To insist on explicit apprehension would be patently absurd, since such self-conscious recognition is so rare. But note also Sidgwick’s restriction to the experience of intelligent beings. This suggests that it may well not be his view that what *makes* an experience pleasant is its actually being apprehended (perhaps only implicitly) as desirable. That would have the obviously implausible implication that non-intelligent beings could not experience pleasure.¹⁴ But of course his avoiding that implication will leave him with the question of just what it is that makes an experience pleasant.

To which notion of ‘desirable’ is Sidgwick here referring? Sidgwick is presumably referring back to *ME* 1.9, where his final view is that the desirable is what ‘I should practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason’ (*ME* 112) – in other words, what I *ought* to desire. On this view, then, pleasures are such that, if experienced by an intelligent being, they would – perhaps only implicitly – be apprehended as good.

But questions arise here about *why* that being would take the view in question were there not some important phenomenological property of her experience that might justify her desiring it, a property independent of the experience’s actually being desired by her or its being such that it would be desired by her. Further, Sidgwick seems to be assuming that any informed and intelligent being must accept that pleasure is good. On the face of it, we can fairly easily imagine some intelligent and informed ascetic, who believes that all that matters in life is self-realization, contemplating some enjoyable experience and finding it worthless. Sidgwick’s response at *ME* 129 to a similar difficulty is to suggest that the ascetic must accept that the judgement that a feeling is desirable is implied in its recognition as pleasure, but can go on to claim that philosophy shows such a judgement to be mistaken. But it is not clear why the ascetic

¹⁴ At *ME* 129, Sidgwick removes the reference to intelligent beings entirely, defining pleasure as ‘desirable feeling, apprehended as desirable by the sentient individual at the time of feeling it. See also the passage from *ME* 131 quoted in the text above. LRS do not discuss the removal of this reference.

cannot deny this outright, seeking a purely non-evaluative, phenomenological account of pleasure, on the value of which a judgement can subsequently be made.

Such an account faces an old objection, stated by Sidgwick himself just before the passage above from *ME* 127:

Shall we then say that there is a measurable quality of feeling expressed by the word ‘pleasure’, which is independent of its relation to volition, and strictly undefinable from its simplicity? – like the quality of feeling expressed by ‘sweet’, of which also we are conscious in varying degrees of intensity. This seems to be the view of some writers: but, for my own part, when I reflect on the notion of pleasure, – using the term in the comprehensive sense which I have adopted, to include the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments, – the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term ‘desirable’ [...] (*ME* 127; partly quoted by LRS at 240-1)

LRS speak approvingly of this *heterogeneity objection*:

Sidgwick is on firm ground when he says that there is no quality of feeling that is common to everything that we call pleasure. I may get pleasure from feeling the warmth of the sun on my back as I lie on the grass on a fine summer’s day, and I may get pleasure from following an ingenious argument in a philosophy paper, but it is hard to see anything that these two feelings have in common. (244)

I am surprised at how successful this objection to traditional hedonism has been. What these feelings have in common is that they both ‘feel good’, enjoyable, pleasurable, and we find little difficulty in merely comparing them in these terms: ‘which did you enjoy more – lying in the sun, or reading the philosophy?’. (Of course, as Sidgwick pointed out so well, coming up with an answer to such questions can be very difficult, but that is another matter.)

LRS also claim (244) that recent work in neuroscience supports the heterogeneity objection, citing the following claim by Kent Berridge and Morten Kringelbach: ‘Pleasure is never merely a sensation ... Instead, it always requires the activity of hedonic brain systems to paint an additional ‘hedonic gloss’ onto a sensation to make it ‘liked’.’

What Berridge and Kringelbach mean here is that pleasure is never merely a sensation such as that of being warmed by the sun. The hedonic gloss they

speak of can *itself* be spoken of as a sensation, or at least as a single type of feeling.¹⁵ Consider what Berridge says elsewhere:

[F]rom what we know so far, many of the same cortical and subcortical substrates participate in pleasures as diverse as food, drugs, sex, parental, romantic and social interaction, money, music, and various cultural rewards. Of course, individual pleasures might also have their own pockets of unique neural substrate within the brain. Yet even if sweet-unique, sex-unique, or other pleasure-unique pockets exist, the general rule for mediation of sensory pleasures seems likely to be brain overlap and a neural common currency. ... It is ... conceivable that some few higher pleasures might turn out to be entirely separate from sensory pleasures, involving no overlap at all. But in the end my bet is on substantial overlap for nearly all pleasures.¹⁶

In certain passages other than those we have already discussed, Sidgwick drops not only the reference to intelligent beings, but also that to the very idea of apprehension, speaking merely of ‘desirable consciousness’ (*ME* 397; 398; 402; 404). Such passages suggest that apprehension may have been introduced as part of an attempt by Sidgwick to capture the epistemological point he wishes to make about the privileged access individuals have to the quality of their own feelings considered merely as feelings, which itself is what he appeals to in excluding non-hedonistic evaluations of experience (see e.g. *ME* 128). At *ME* 398, Sidgwick defines the ultimate good as desirable consciousness and continues with a reference back to 2.2:

According to the view taken in a previous chapter, in affirming Ultimate Good to be Happiness or Pleasure, we imply (1) that nothing is desirable except desirable feelings, and (2) that the desirability of each feeling is only directly cognisable by the sentient individual at the time of feeling it, and that therefore this particular judgment of the sentient individual must be taken as final on the question how far each element of feeling has the quality of Ultimate Good.

Here there is no reference to any special sense of ‘desirable’, so I presume that we should take it in its usual sense – that is, as equivalent to ‘good’. Once again, however, we – like the ascetic – may wish to object that the project of explaining the nature of pleasure is quite different from that of evaluating it. Further, the definition again raises the issue of exactly what it is about these feelings that *makes* them desirable. Sidgwick may be able to sidestep the objec-

¹⁵ At 246, LRS recognize that Berridge and Kringelbach see motivation as neurologically independent of pleasure. Presumably these neuroscientists would say the same about pleasure and those parts of the brain involved in cognition, including cognition of desirability.

¹⁶ ‘Fundamental Pleasure Questions’, in Morten Kringelbach and Kent Berridge (ed.), *Pleasures of the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7-23, at 17-18.

tion that we, like the ascetic, may make judgements about feelings based on non-hedonic properties (*ME* 127-8). But when it comes to the hedonistic judgement, Sidgwick appears to commit himself to the idea of pleasantness understood independently of its being merely desirable:

If I in thought distinguish any feeling from all its conditions and concomitants – and also from all its effects on the subsequent feelings of the same individual or of others – and contemplate it merely as the transient feeling of a single subject; it seems to me impossible to find in it any other preferable quality than that which we call its pleasantness, the degree of which is only cognisable directly by the sentient individual (*ME* 128; see 94; 398-9; 400-401).

In the absence of any reference to an external state such as a desire, attitude, or cognition, it is tempting to read Sidgwick as here reverting to what amounts to a feeling-tone position, according to which what pleasurable experiences have in common, and what makes them valuable, is their having the special quality of feeling pleasant. I suggest, then, that Sidgwick at heart accepts the feeling-tone view of pleasure, but is misled by the heterogeneity argument into developing various forms of externalist account which are open to objection but in the end disappear from his theory.