

ARTICLE

## Sidgwick’s Distinction Passage

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### Abstract

I suggest that Sidgwick, in his controversial “distinction passage,” has Schopenhauer in mind as someone who denies egoism on the ground that there are no separate individuals. I then reconstruct Sidgwick’s argument in the passage. I take him to be defending a pre-supposition of the case for choosing egoism over utilitarianism. He is claiming that there are separate individuals. I close by rejecting alternative interpretations, on which Sidgwick is arguing directly for egoism.

Sidgwick writes that:

Prof. v. Gizycki . . . pointed out that I [in earlier editions of the *Methods*] had made no attempt to show the irrationality of the sacrifice of self-interest to duty . . . I quite agree . . . that the missing argument, if demanded, ought to be supplied; and certainly the assumption upon which the rationality of Egoism is based has been denied by philosophers; though the denial seems to Common Sense so absurd that a serious demand for its explicit statement is rather paradoxical. The assumption is simply that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently “I” am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals. If this be admitted, the proposition that this distinction is to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual cannot be disproved; and to me this proposition seems self-evident, although it *prima facie* contradicts the equally self-evident proposition that my own good is no more to be regarded than the good of another. (FC 484)<sup>1</sup>

Sidgwick incorporated a version of this passage in the fourth through final editions of the *Methods*:

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently “I”

<sup>1</sup>References to works by Sidgwick are given by abbreviations, listed in the References.

am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual. (ME 498)

Although the distinction passage is often cited, there are few careful readings of it.

It would help, in understanding the passage, to identify the philosophers who deny that “the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental.” I suggest that Sidgwick has Schopenhauer in mind (I). I then reconstruct Sidgwick’s argument. I take him to be defending a presupposition of the case for choosing egoism over utilitarianism (II–IV). I close by rejecting alternative interpretations, on which Sidgwick is arguing directly for egoism (V).

## I

In his *Outlines*, Sidgwick describes Schopenhauer as holding that

it is One Will that is the innermost essence of every thing and of the totality of things. This Will . . . strives blindly to manifest and objectify itself. . . But as this striving necessarily implies defect and discontent with the present condition, the life which it constitutes and maintains is essentially a suffering life . . . In this unhappy state of things the duty that philosophy points out to man is plainly the negation or denial of will . . . Of such denial there are two stages: the lowest is that attained in ordinary virtue, which is essentially love and sympathy resting on a recognition of the real identity of any one ego with all others; the virtuous man represses and denies the egoism from which all injustice springs, and which is the affirmation of the will in one individual aggressively encroaching on the manifestation of the same will in another. (O 280–81)

Crucial here is the claim that there is “One Will” and a “real identity of any one ego with all others.”

Schopenhauer writes that the virtuous person “*makes less of a distinction than do the rest between himself and others*” (Schopenhauer 1965: 204). To the egoist, “*this distinction . . . is great enough to enable him to make use of much harm to others as a means of obtaining a small advantage for himself*” (205); there is “*a mighty difference, between the ego that is restricted to their own persons and the non-ego embracing the rest of the world*” (205); the egoist “*feels a thick partition between himself and everything outside him*” (211). Schopenhauer grants that this “*conception that underlies egoism is, empirically considered, strictly justified . . . The difference in space that separates me from [another], separates me also from his weal and woe*” (205). It is “*space and time*” that are responsible for “*all the plurality and diversity of beings*” (206). But Kant shows that space and time “*can never be a disposition of things-in-themselves but belong only to the phenomenal appearance of them*” (206). They are “*foreign to the true essence of the world*” (207). Hence, “[c]onsequently, that which shows itself in the countless phenomena of this world of the senses can be only one thing. . . [A]ll plurality is only apparent” (207). Schopenhauer concludes that “*just as we ourselves are in all the persons that appear to us in our dream, so too it is the case when we are awake*” (211).

I take it to be very plausible that Sidgwick has Schopenhauer in mind as a philosopher who denies that “the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental.”

Alternatively, Derek Parfit, David Brink and Robert Shaver suggest that Sidgwick has in mind Humean views of personal identity as denying that individuals are distinct (Parfit 1984: 138–39; Brink 1992: 208, 221; Shaver 1999: 84–85). This is possible. Sidgwick does, earlier, argue that Humean views, on which “the permanent identical ‘I’ is not a fact but a fiction,” underwrite its being sensible to ask the egoist “why . . . should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?” (ME 419). But it is not clear that Sidgwick takes the Humean to deny that individuals are distinct. His (Parfitian) point seems to be rather that if what makes me a distinct individual is my consisting of one “series of feelings,” that is insufficient to ground special concern for myself (see Brink 1992: 221–22). Perhaps more importantly, the appearance of the distinction passage in “Fundamental Controversies” is not accompanied by any mention of Humean views. Nor, to my knowledge, are there any philosophers Sidgwick could have had in mind who deny that individuals are distinct based on Humean views of personal identity.<sup>2</sup>

## II

Sidgwick writes of “the assumption upon which the rationality of Egoism is based.” “Based” is not so clear. He might mean that there is an assumption from which the rationality of egoism can be derived. Or he might mean that there is an assumption presupposed by the rationality of egoism. The latter is more plausible. It is obscure how from “You are a different individual from me” one could derive egoism (especially if it is “the” assumption, rather than one of several premises).<sup>3</sup> Neither Sidgwick nor Schopenhauer give such a derivation. Sidgwick seems to deny that there is such a derivation (see IV below). But it is clear how any case for the rationality of egoism – in the sense of choosing egoism over utilitarianism for guidance in actual cases – presupposes that we are different individuals. If we are not, there is only one individual, and egoism and utilitarianism agree in their recommendations. If we are not, we cannot state the characteristic application of egoism, where one “make[s] use of much harm to others as a means of obtaining a small advantage for himself” (Schopenhauer 1965: 205) or one “seek[s] his own happiness . . . if it involved a certain sacrifice of the greater happiness of some other human being” (ME 382). I take Sidgwick and Schopenhauer to agree that the case for egoism presupposes that there is more than one individual present. They disagree on the truth of the presupposition.

(A clarification: it is possible to argue for egoism over utilitarianism even if there is only one individual. The egoist might say (and the utilitarian deny) that what makes it

<sup>2</sup>Butler argues that Locke’s view of personal identity makes responsibility and prudence problematic, but he does not take it to show that individuals are not distinct. He takes it to show that there would be far more distinct individuals than we think, found in each temporal slice (Butler 1873: Of Personal Identity, para. 7).

<sup>3</sup>Like me, Brink suggests that Sidgwick is relying on the claim that individuals are distinct (Brink 1992: 208, 224; see also Parfit 1984: 138, 2011: 133). He thinks this supports egoism when conjoined with the principle that sacrifice is rational only when compensated. The problem is that any argument for egoism that presupposes the principle is unpromising. The principle is what needs defence. Brink thinks the distinction passage *itself* “assert[s] or suggest[s]” that “because we are separate persons. . . it is unreasonable to demand uncompensated sacrifices” (Brink 1992: 209). I agree that Sidgwick holds (in places) that sacrifice is rational only when compensated, but I do not think that this is what the distinction passage claims.

right for the single individual to promote its happiness would also make it true that, if there were more than one individual, each individual ought to promote its own happiness. For example, perhaps what makes it right for the single individual to promote its happiness is not merely that happiness is good, but also that the happiness is felt by that individual. I suspect that Sidgwick does not pursue thinking about arguments for egoism given the hypothesis that there is a single individual because he is interested in egoism and utilitarianism as giving contrary recommendations for actual rather than merely possible cases. Similarly, he thinks showing the “moral government of the world” would show that there is not “an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct” (ME 508). As many have noted, the moral government of the world would not show that egoism and utilitarianism pick out the same right-making properties or recommend the same actions in counterfactual circumstances. The “contradictions” that worry Sidgwick are contradictory recommendations about actual cases.<sup>4</sup>)

On my reading, when Sidgwick writes that the “assumption is simply that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently ‘I am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals,” the assumption in question is that you and I are different individuals. Sidgwick insists that the distinction is “real,” “fundamental,” and “fundamentally important” as a way of marking his denial of Schopenhauer’s claim that the distinction is “only apparent” (Schopenhauer 1965: 207), “a delusion” (205) a “*phenomenal appearance*” (207), “erroneous” (209), “*Maya*, i.e., illusion, deception, phantasm, mirage” (209). Sidgwick is denying the view he attributes to Schopenhauer, “the real identity of any one ego with all others.”

On my reading, the passage does not give a positive argument for egoism. It merely denies that a prominent attack on egoism works. Egoism comes off, as in Scottish law, not proven (false).

This fits Sidgwick’s presentation of the passage: “Prof. v. Gizycki . . . pointed out that I had made no attempt to show the irrationality of the sacrifice of self-interest to duty . . . I quite agree . . . that the missing argument, if demanded, ought to be supplied.” The reader expects that the “missing argument” will be an argument for egoism. (Sidgwick has also just written that “I admit that I put it [Egoism] forward [in earlier editions] without a sufficient rational justification” (FC 484).) But Sidgwick then writes that “and certainly the assumption upon which the rationality of Egoism is based has been denied by philosophers.” He goes on to give, not an argument for egoism, but a response to an attack on it.

This reading also fits the role of the passage in the *Methods*. There, Sidgwick notes that his proof of utilitarianism “requires that the Egoist should affirm . . . that his own greatest happiness is not merely the rational ultimate end for himself, but a part of Universal Good: and he may avoid the proof of Utilitarianism by declining to affirm this.” Sidgwick then writes: “[i]t would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental” (etc.) (ME 497–98). Asserting that the distinction is real and fundamental backs up “declining to affirm” that my happiness is “a part of Universal Good” – it is a way of avoiding the proof of utilitarianism, not an independent argument for egoism.

<sup>4</sup>For the same take on the dualism, see Hurka 2014: 136.

## III

One benefit of reading Sidgwick as targeting Schopenhauer is that Sidgwick *could* do more than merely say that denying a presupposition of the case for egoism “seems to Common Sense . . . absurd.” Schopenhauer offers an argument for denying the presupposition: he thinks it follows from Kant’s view that space and time belong only to the phenomenal world. Sidgwick could (and does) attack Kant’s arguments in the *Aesthetic* (LK 38–57). Or he could object that even if these arguments work, Schopenhauer is wrong to claim that “[c]onsequently, that which shows itself in the countless phenomena of this world of the senses can be only one thing.” The correct inference might be that the notion of number – of one or of more than one – does not apply to things in themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Another benefit is that the argument of the passage comes out as very plausible.<sup>6</sup> Sidgwick is not, in answer to a request for a defence of egoism, just baldly asserting egoism.<sup>7</sup> He is right that the case for choosing egoism rather than utilitarianism for guidance presupposes that there is more than one individual. He is right that common sense denies Schopenhauer’s view that there is only one individual. If common sense can be trusted here, he is right that the attack on egoism by “philosophers” fails.

He may even be right that, as a result, egoism cannot be “disproved.” Sidgwick holds that a “proof” of (say) utilitarianism must be addressed to someone – say a common sense moralist – in the sense that it starts with premises the common sense moralist accepts. A proof proceeds by “a line of argument which on the one hand allows the validity, to a certain extent, of the maxims already accepted, and on the other hand shows them to be not absolutely valid, but needing to be controlled and completed by some more comprehensive principle” (ME 420; also 421–22, EP 106–07). For example, the common sense moralist takes it to be self-evident that one ought to keep one’s promises. But once the exceptions to this are seen – exceptions admitted by the common sense moralist – the maxim that one ought to keep one’s promises comes to be seen to be derived from utilitarianism (ME 354, 443–44). Now, say that a proof of utilitarianism to a common sense moralist counts as a “disproof” of common sense morality. Applying this to egoism, a disproof of egoism must proceed by allowing the egoist her beliefs, and then showing them to be “not absolutely valid.” One way to do so would be to show that a presupposition of the case for egoism, “there is more than one individual,” is false. But there seems no way of showing that, at least if common sense can be trusted.

It is too quick to conclude that egoism cannot be disproved. The egoist may hold other vulnerable commitments. I take Sidgwick to be replying to the challenge raised by Schopenhauer to a particular commitment. Sidgwick seems to think that there are at least no commitments that create internal inconsistencies in the egoist position, but the passage does not consider other vulnerabilities.

## IV

Sidgwick writes, of von Gizycki’s view that “the preference of . . . general happiness to private happiness is a dictate of reason,” that “I do not deny this position to be tenable;

<sup>5</sup>For brief criticisms of Schopenhauer here, see Young 2005: 182–83.

<sup>6</sup>Contrast the negative verdicts of Shaver 1999: 98; Schultz 2004: 215–19; Skelton 2008: 202; Hurka 2014: 241.

<sup>7</sup>For this view, see Crisp 2015: 196 n. 6. Crisp does not offer this as a criticism: “since the distinction is fundamental, assertion is only what we should expect.” Shaver and Hurka do offer this as criticism (Shaver 2013: 19; Hurka 2014: 241).

since, even if the reality and essentiality of the distinction between one individual and another be granted, I do not see how to prove its fundamental practical importance to anyone who refuses to admit it.” Sidgwick adds: “but I find such a refusal impossible to myself, and I think it paradoxical” (FC 485). This suggests that Sidgwick finds a range of permissible responses to “the reality and essentiality of the distinction between one individual and another.”<sup>8</sup> One can agree to the reality of the distinction, but suppose that this has no “practical importance” and so be a utilitarian (as Sidgwick is in other contexts). Or one can agree, suppose that it does have practical importance, and so be an egoist. This is what one would expect if “the reality and essentiality of the distinction between one individual and another” is a presupposition of the case for egoism: accepting it does not determine that one be an egoist.

Of course, Sidgwick claims that:

the proposition that this distinction is to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual . . . seems self-evident, although it *prima facie* contradicts the equally self-evident proposition that my own good is no more to be regarded than the good of another.

Whether Sidgwick’s considered view is that egoism seems self-evident is a matter of controversy.<sup>9</sup> But here, at least, he seems to think it is self-evident. (He has also just written that he has a “conviction . . . that it would be irrational to sacrifice any portion of my own happiness unless the sacrifice is to be . . . compensated by an equivalent addition to my own happiness . . . I find [this] with as much clearness and certainty as the process of introspective reflection can give” (FC 484).) I suggest that this is why he does not supply the “missing argument” for egoism – he does not think there *is* an argument, in the sense of a deduction of egoism from other premises. That is why he turns so quickly to defending a presupposition of the case for egoism.

It is not clear why Sidgwick (sometimes) takes egoism to seem self-evident, especially given that many find it obviously not self-evident (e.g., Broad 1930: 244, 245, 1971: 272, 274; Crisp 2006: 132; Irwin 2009: 464–65, 519–22; Parfit 2011: 131, 135–37; Hurka 2014: 241).<sup>10</sup> Here are five possibilities.

(i) As many have noted, Sidgwick sometimes links his axiom of “Prudence” to egoism. Prudence seems to state that the time at which some good comes is in itself irrelevant. That may be self-evident, but does nothing to support egoism.<sup>11</sup>

(ii) Perhaps Sidgwick runs together egoism and a different challenge to the claim that “my own good is no more to be regarded than the good of another.” As, again,

<sup>8</sup>For the same point, see Shaver 2013: 24; Hurka 2014: 240.

<sup>9</sup>For the debate, see Schneewind 1977: 361–66; Shaver 1999: 74–77; Skelton 2008: 200–202; Phillips 2011: 138–39; Hurka 2014: 159, 162, 240; Crisp 2015: 117–19, esp. nn. 39, 43. By “seems self-evident,” I mean “seems knowable without inference.” This property differs from the “highest certainty” or “genuine” self-evidence obtained by meeting all of Sidgwick’s epistemic tests (which add consistency with one’s other beliefs and lack of peer disagreement). For discussion, see Shaver 1999: 64–67, 79–80; Skelton 2010: 511, 518–19; Phillips 2011: 60, 77–78; Hurka 2014: 112–13; Crisp 2015: 108.

<sup>10</sup>Hurka 2014: 241 notes that Moore, McTaggart, Rashdall, Prichard, and Ross also found egoism not self-evident.

<sup>11</sup>See von Gizycki 1890: 120–21; Hayward 1901: 122, 131, 133–37; Schneewind 1977: 361; Shaver 1999: 75–77; Skelton 2008: 200–201; Phillips 2011: 96–97, 138–39; de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014: 118. For attempts to read the axiom of Prudence in a way that supports egoism, see Schneewind 1977: 362–64; Hurka 2014: 159; Crisp 2015: 117–19.

many have noted, I can think that my own good is to be regarded more than the good of another without thinking, with the egoist, that the good of another fails to give me reasons at all. For example, David Phillips writes that “the fact that a certain noise causes someone pain gives anyone a reason to . . . stop it. But . . . the fact that a noise causes me pain gives me a *special* reason to . . . stop it – a reason with a different, and additional, force than the reason everyone has” (Phillips 2011: 129–30, 148–50; Phillips 2019: 75). Many agree, and some find this self-evident (e.g., Broad 1930: 243–44, 1971: 279–80; Crisp 1996: 62–63, 2006: 133–35, 2014: 240–41, 2015: 198–99; Parfit 2011: 131–41).

(iii) Perhaps Sidgwick does not carefully distinguish all-things-considered and pro tanto claims. Perhaps it is plausible to think that I have a pro tanto reason to promote my good, a reason not derived from a pro tanto reason to promote anyone’s good. It is less plausible to claim that I have an all-things-considered reason to promote my good. As Terence Irwin notes, Sidgwick sometimes supports egoism by noting the “wide acceptance of the principle that it is reasonable for a man to act in the manner most conducive to his own happiness” (ME 119) – that is not wide acceptance of the principle that it is all-things-considered reasonable to so act (Irwin 2009: 464–65, 519–20; also Shaver 1999: 156–57, Hurka 2014: 162). Rather – as Sidgwick writes later – it supports the view that such acts are “*prima facie* reasonable” (ME 120).

(iv) Perhaps Sidgwick does not carefully distinguish egoism from the views that rational sacrifice requires compensation or that maximizing my own good is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition on rational action.<sup>12</sup> The latter views are more plausible, since they allow that contribution to the good of others might (when possible) also be a necessary condition on rational action.

(v) The foregoing explanations all rest on thinking Sidgwick is confused about the content of what he finds self-evident. But there are other explanations of disagreements about self-evidence. Sometimes “what is self-evident to one mind is not so to another” (LK 464).<sup>13</sup> The “belief that ‘a thing cannot act where it is not’ . . . was found to conflict apparently with the hypothesis of universal gravitation . . . and this has, I think, destroyed any appearance of intuitive certainty in it for most of us” (LK 462; also VB 585). Before the hypothesis of universal gravitation, it seemed self-evident that a thing cannot act where it is not. What undermined this belief was not the exposure of confusion, but rather “a multitude of particular observations of the position of the heavenly bodies” (LK 462). What one finds self-evident depends on one’s situation. Applying this to egoism, Sidgwick may have found egoism self-evident because of his intellectual history. In his sketch of this history, Sidgwick writes that, after reading Mill, “a sense grew upon me that . . . it is surely the business of Ethical Philosophy to find and make explicit the rational ground” of uncompensated sacrifice. He “put to [Mill] the dilemma: – Either it is for my own happiness or it is not. If not, why [should I do it]?” (ME xviii). Sidgwick seems to have assumed from the start that “the *onus probandi* lies with those who maintain that disinterested conduct, as such, is reasonable” (ME 120). Given his understanding of the landscape – the Greeks were egoists (e.g., ME 91–92); most moderns took uncompensated sacrifice to be problematic (he notes Hobbes, Spinoza, Cumberland, Clarke, Shaftesbury, Butler, Berkeley, Hume, Reid, Paley, Bentham, Stewart, Kant, and Comte); “in the ages of Christian faith, it has been obvious and natural to hold that the realisation of virtue is essentially an

<sup>12</sup>For the former, see Paytas 2020. For versions of the latter, see, for example, Shaver 1999 on “veto egoism” (e.g., 111); McLeod 2000: 284; Phillips 2011: 134, 136, 140; Crisp 2015: 228–30.

<sup>13</sup>I take Sidgwick to mean “what seems self-evident to one mind does not seem so to another.”

enlightened and far-seeing pursuit of Happiness for the agent” (ME 120) – this is not so surprising. Sidgwick may be wrong about the history of philosophy or about the religious or common sense of his time, but his beliefs may explain why he takes egoism to seem self-evident.<sup>14</sup>

## V

Sidgwick writes that the “assumption is simply that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently ‘I’ am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals.” One question concerns how to read “I am concerned with the quality of my existence” (etc.). If this is a *statement* of egoism, and a “consequence” of taking the distinction between individuals as real, it would seem that Sidgwick is, after all, giving a positive argument for egoism in the passage (and moreover a positive argument that does not merely assert its self-evidence).<sup>15</sup>

This is an unlikely reading. Sidgwick continues by writing that “[i]f this be admitted, the proposition that this distinction is to be taken as fundamental in determining the

<sup>14</sup>In the first through fourth editions of the *Methods*, Sidgwick writes of egoism that “there seems to be more general agreement among reflective persons as to the reasonableness of its fundamental principle, than exists in the case of Intuitionism or. . . Utilitarianism” (e.g., ME (1) 107). The fifth edition changes the wording slightly but retains the comparative claim. The last editions drop the comparison, writing only of “wide acceptance” (ME 119). For egoism and Sidgwick’s history, see Frankena 1992; Shaver 1999: ch. 4; Irwin 2009: 429, 431, 465, 519–20; Hurka 2014: 260–61. For a history of egoism in Britain from Hobbes to Bentham that is sympathetic to Sidgwick’s take, see Crisp 2019. Schultz, who addresses not just Sidgwick’s views of philosophers but also those of many intellectuals of his time, writes that Sidgwick “was simply steeped in the problem of self-sacrifice. . . Egoism, one might say, was too close to see clearly, so prevalent was it in the Western tradition as understood by Sidgwick” (Schultz 2004: 220).

<sup>15</sup>For this reading, see Phillips 2011: 127–31, 2013: 49, 2019: 75. When Phillips reconstructs the argument, he replaces “I am concerned” with “I ought to be concerned” (2011: 127, 128, 130; 2013: 49). At Phillips 2019: 109, he writes that this is “the best charitable interpretation. . . I don’t claim that it is the only possible interpretation or the most textually straightforward interpretation.” (Strictly, Phillips interprets the argument as going from my (2) – which he offers as a gloss on my (1) – to “I ought to be concerned. . .”) Parfit, Crisp and Hayward may agree with Phillips. Parfit writes that “[g]iven the unity of each person’s life, we each have strong reasons, Sidgwick claims, to care about our own well-being. . . And given the depth of the distinction between different people, it is rationally significant that one person’s loss of happiness cannot be compensated by gains to the happiness of others.” Parfit cites the distinction passage as his source (Parfit 2011: 133, 498). After quoting the distinction passage, Crisp writes that “this difference [between one person and another] provides a source of self-interested reasons” (Crisp 2006: 143; also Crisp 1996: 64, which speaks of distinctness as “grounding” reasons). Crisp and Parfit seem to envisage an argument from distinction to egoism (or at least to agent-relative reasons). (One caveat: Crisp also writes that “P1 [One ought to aim at one’s good on the whole] seems self-evident to Sidgwick because it assumes the significance of the distinction between persons. But it is not inferred from that distinction: it involves it. In other words, in the distinction of individuals passage Sidgwick is merely elucidating P1 in the hope that others may find it easier to grasp” (Crisp 2015: 117 n. 39). This suggests not an argument from distinctness to egoism, but rather that the distinction passage simply states egoism.) Hayward takes the passage to argue for egoism “based on the fact that the personality of the agent is something, for the agent himself, absolutely unique.” Hayward finds the argument “valid,” although he complains that “it is certainly one requiring to be followed out into greater detail. . . A whole book we find devoted to an examination of egoism as a *method*; but only a few words. . . to an examination of its fundamental postulate” (Hayward 1901: 130–31; also 104–05).



ultimate end of rational action for an individual cannot be disproved.” I take “this distinction is to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action” to be equivalent to “egoism.” That fits Sidgwick’s next claim, that the proposition “contradicts the equally self-evident proposition that my own good is no more to be regarded than the good of another.” Hence Sidgwick argues that if (1) the distinction between individuals is real, and so (2) I am concerned with my existence in a special way, then (3) egoism cannot be disproved. It would be very odd for (2) to be a statement of egoism, given that (3) makes the much weaker claim that egoism cannot be disproved.

This suggests a different worry. On my reading, it is puzzling why Sidgwick bothers with (2). As I have presented the argument, Sidgwick goes from (1) to (3).

I think that (2) is offered to back up (1). (2) can be read as saying that I am directly aware of my own mental states but only indirectly aware of yours. (Schopenhauer notes that “everyone is given to himself *directly*, but the rest are given to him only *indirectly* through their representation in his head” (Schopenhauer 1965: 132).) That seems common sense.<sup>16</sup> (1) is part of an explanation of why this is so: I really am distinct from you.<sup>17</sup>

(2), on this reading, suggests another argument. One might try a positive argument for egoism from the claim that I am directly aware of my own mental states but only indirectly aware of yours. The difference in directness supports putting special weight on oneself. I am more confident that I am in pain than that you are, so I should put more weight on my pain than yours. (When teaching the passage, I have found this the most commonly offered interpretation.) But this is not egoism, since it yields only a difference in degree of concern, and is indeed consistent with utilitarianism.

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Many take the distinction passage to give a positive argument for egoism.<sup>18</sup> I have argued that it does not – it merely replies to one objection to egoism, made by Schopenhauer. The distinction between individuals is a presupposition of the case for choosing egoism over utilitarianism for guidance in actual cases. A variety of responses are rationally permitted to the distinction. Insofar as Sidgwick gives a positive argument for egoism, he does so by appealing to its apparent self-evidence or to agreement on it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>There may be exceptions – mirror-touch synesthetes seem to feel some of the experiences of others directly as their own.

<sup>17</sup>Alternatively, Phillips might be right that my (2) is a gloss on my (1), rather than an independent claim inferred from or explained by (1).

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Phillips, Parfit, Crisp, and Hayward, cited in n. 15; Shaver 1999: 83; Schultz 2004: 216–19.

<sup>19</sup>Thanks to Roger Crisp and Joyce Jenkins for very helpful comments.

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