Prichard's Arguments against Ideal Utilitarianism

ROBERT SHAVER
University of Manitoba

I give and evaluate Prichard's many (often obscure and idiosyncratic) arguments against ideal utilitarianism.

In 1907, Rashdall observed that '[t]here is a general consensus . . . that Ethics must be "teleological," though not hedonistic'.[1] In 1913 he wrote that '[i]ntuitionism must be regarded as an impossible and obsolete mode of ethical thought; and it is seldom consistently maintained at the present day'.[2]

Rashdall saw a consensus on ideal utilitarianism – the view that the right is determined by the good, as in traditional utilitarianism, but where the good includes more than happiness. Rashdall spoke too soon. The dissent began with Prichard's 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?'. The mistake Prichard thought he found was exactly what Rashdall welcomed as the consensus view – that the right is determined by the good. Prichard argued that at least some duties are not justified as promoting one best state of affairs. After Prichard, the consensus Rashdall saw disappeared, leaving us with the controverted landscape we now take for granted.

I shall give and evaluate Prichard's many arguments against ideal utilitarianism. One variety of argument, resting on the worry that ideal utilitarianism gives the wrong verdicts, is now familiar. (In some

[1] Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil* (London, 1924 [1907]), vol. 2, p. 41. See also Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 216-17.

[2] Hastings Rashdall, *Ethics* (London, 1913), p. 60. Prichard agrees with an even more extreme version of this history, though not with Rashdall's evaluation – hence the view that moral philosophy rests on a mistake, a mistake he thinks Butler and Kant made as well (for Kant, see MO 208, 215, 216, MM 153-9, to Ross 11.12.36, 14.7.38; for Butler, see MO 208, 216, MM 160). (References to Prichard are to *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, 2002) – B = 'What is the Basis of Moral Obligation?'; DI = 'Duty and Interest' [1928]; DIF = 'Duty and Ignorance of Fact' [1932]; K = 'Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*'; M = 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' [1912]; MM = 'Manuscript on Morals' [1928-45]; MO = 'Moral Obligation' [1937] – or to the letters in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS English Letters c 131, d 116. (Similarly, Carritt claims that: '[n]early all moralists since Plato have attempted . . . to prove that certain acts are right . . . generally . . . by deducing the act from the conception of a good or end which it is to achieve' (*The Theory of Morals* (London, 1928), pp. 71-2).)

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histories of the debate, it is the only argument noted.[3]) I close with versions of it (V–VII). Other arguments are obscure, criticized even by Carritt and Ross. They rest on claims about, for example, the derivation of any 'ought' claim, or what properties of actions can ground, or whether we can think about things that do not exist. I consider these in I–IV. One general, and perhaps surprising, conclusion is that Prichard, unlike Carritt, Ross, and almost all contemporary critics, came to rely mainly on various abstract principles – often without moral content – rather than intuitions about particular cases.

I

In 'Mistake', Prichard's main argument against ideal utilitarianism is as follows:

(1.1) 'An "ought" . . . can only be derived from another "ought."'
(1.2) Therefore the ideal utilitarian must say that 'what is good ought to be'.
(1.3) But 'the word "ought" refers to actions and actions alone'.

Prichard gives two arguments for (1.3):

(i) 'The proper language is never "So and so ought to be", but "I ought to do so and so."'[4]
(ii) '[W]e can only feel the imperativeness upon us of something which is in our power' and 'it is actions and actions alone which, directly at least, are in our power' (M 9–10; also DI 47).

One problem with this argument is that the ideal utilitarian can deny (1.1). Moore, for example, holds that an 'ought' can be derived from a claim about goodness, either because 'ought' is defined in terms of goodness (*Principia*) or because it is a synthetic a priori truth that one ought to maximize the good (*Ethics*).[5] Rashdall seems to hold the

[3] See, for example, Stephen Darwall, 'Moore to Stevenson', *Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Robert J. Cavalier (New York, 1989), pp. 366–93, at 378-82.

[4] Similarly, Ross objects to 'ought to be' that states of affairs do not have obligations (W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford, 1930), p. 105). Thomas Baldwin, *G. E. Moore* (London, 1990), p. 77 and Thomas Hurka, 'Moore in the Middle', *Ethics* 113 (2003), pp. 599–628, at p. 604 n. 27, agree.

[5] See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1903), pp. 18, 24-6, 101, 106, 146-8; *Ethics* (New York: 1965 [1912]), pp. 24-6, 28, 30, 66, 71, 73, 77, 106; also 'A Reply to My Critics', *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (La Salle: 1968 [1942]), pp. 535-677, at 558-9. It is not clear whether, in *Ethics*, Moore thinks 'one ought to maximize the good' is an underived synthetic a priori truth, in which case he could agree with (1.1) (see below), or whether he thinks one can infer directly but non-analytically from 'x maximizes the good' to 'one ought to do x' (as is perhaps suggested by his claim that actions are right 'only if and because' they maximize the good) (*Ethics*, p. 30).

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Principia view; Laird clearly holds the *Ethics* view.[6] On either view, there is no need to apply 'ought' to states of affairs; that a state of affairs is best simply entails that one ought to bring it about, if one can.

The point is not just that ideal utilitarians can deny (1.1). (1.1) is highly counter-intuitive. Prichard does not intend (1.1) merely to rule out inferences from the non-normative to the normative. It is to support thinking that the badness of pain is not 'the reason why we ought not to inflict pain on another' or that 'we do not come to appreciate an obligation . . . by an argument of which a premiss is the . . . activity of appreciating the goodness . . . of a consequence of the act' (M 10 n. 4, 13–14). Strangely, Prichard concedes 'that unless we recognized that something which an act will originate is good, we should not recognize that we ought to do the action' (M 10). The 'goodness of the thing produced is a presupposition of the obligation to produce it' (B 2–3). He adds that 'this is not to imply that . . . the badness of pain [is] the reason why we ought not to inflict it without special cause' (M 10).[7] He is right that the implication does not follow; but the obvious explanation for why producing goodness is a necessary condition on an 'ought' claim is that suggested by the ideal utilitarians.

Prichard gives no argument for (1.1). He does cite Rashdall's claim that '[t]he good is that which "ought to be"' (MO 210, 224; also M 9).[8] (Moore also writes of the good as what 'ought to exist', 'ought to be', 'what we ought to aim at', what 'ought to be [one's] end', or

[6] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 135-8; *Ethics*, pp. 14, 40, 61, 75-6; John Laird, *A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1926), pp. 21-2, 25.

[7] The counter-intuitive nature of (1.1) is noted by A. C. Ewing, 'Recent Developments in British Ethical Thought', *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century*, ed. C. A. Mace (London, 1966), pp. 65–95, at p. 71 and Oliver Johnson, *Rightness and Goodness* (The Hague, 1959), p. 22. As Johnson notes, Ross and Carritt share the unexpected view that production of *some* goodness is a necessary condition on rightness; see *Rightness*, pp. 12, 37; Carritt, *Theory*, pp. 41-2, 54, 86, 139; Ross, *Right*, pp. 36, 162. Prichard might hold the more plausible position that the badness of pain is not the *whole* reason why we ought not to inflict pain. In 'Basis', he writes that 'any moral principle . . . includes mention of two things, (a) a good thing which the action will produce, (b) a definite relation in which the agent stands either to another or to himself' (B 4; also MO 217). The badness of pain is not the whole reason because it does not mention a relation. (For this suggestion, see Thomas Hurka, 'Underivative Duty: Prichard on Moral Obligation', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 27 (2010), pp. 111–34, at 117-18. For a different reading, on which the badness is not part of the reason at all, see Jonathan Dancy, 'Has Anyone Ever Been a Non-Intuitionist?', *Underivative Duty: British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing*, ed. Thomas Hurka (Oxford, 2011), pp. 87–105, at 98-105.) But if this is Prichard's point, he would need to explain why the badness could never be the whole reason, or why it could never be decisive – why (in, say, a case in which the relations were the same) 'the decision of what we ought to do turns not on the question "Which of the alternative courses of action will originate the greater good?"' (M 14 n.)

[8] Rashdall's quotation marks are around only the 'ought', not the 'ought to be'.

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that which 'we ought to try to bring about'.[9]) Prichard may think Rashdall concedes (1.1). Rashdall's view, however, is not so clear (see Appendix).

A different problem is that some ideal utilitarians might accept (1.1) – holding 'one ought to maximize the good' as underived. They have no need to say that the good 'ought to be', since they are not deriving 'ought' claims from claims about goodness at all. Perhaps Prichard does not intend to target this view.[10] But if so, his argument misses one sort of ideal utilitarianism. (Prichard could, however, ask why this is the *only* duty.)

II

In 'Moral Obligation', Prichard argues that ideal utilitarians are guilty of 'resolving obligation into something which it is not' (MO 225). They make 'a mistake which is far more radical than any which we should even be inclined to suspect beforehand' (MO 221).

(2.1) Ideal utilitarians think that obligatory acts have a common property (or 'character').
(2.2) '[T]he only thing which it is possible to think that an act's possession of a certain character can give rise to is its possession of some other character.'
(2.3) Therefore ideal utilitarians must understand 'We ought to do act x' as referring to 'not even in the widest sense of the term a characteristic of ourselves . . . but a characteristic of the action'.
(2.4) 'We ought to do x' refers to a property of ourselves, not to a property of x.
(2.5) Therefore ideal utilitarians resolve our obligation to do x – a property of us – into something which it is not – a property of x (MO 222).[11]

Here (2.2) is the questionable premiss. (2.2) rules out any inference from properties of the act to obligations of agents. As above, it rules out the inference from the fact that an act has the property of causing

[9] Moore, *Principia*, pp. viii, 17, 119, 121; 118, 128; 120, 64; 99; 121. By writing of the good as what is 'intrinsically desirable' or 'desirable as an end', he also implies that it is what ought to be desired (pp. 51, 65). Prichard notes some of these passages at MO 224.

[10] For debate over Prichard's target, see Dancy, 'Non-Intuitionist?', pp. 98-105 and Hurka, 'Underivative', pp. 116-17. I thank Hurka for pressing the underived-ought view.

[11] For 2.2, see also to Ross 15.4.37, 16.8.47, to Carritt 12.12.36, to Laird 4.1.39, to Broad 4.3.43.

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pain to an obligation not to perform that act. But (as Prichard notes in correspondence) it rules out a great deal more; it also rules out the view, held by Ross, Carritt, Broad and indeed the earlier Prichard, that one can infer from the nature of the act to obligations of agents.[12] For example, earlier Prichard wrote that '[w]e recognize . . . that this performance of a service to X, who has done us a service, just in virtue of its being the performance of a service to one who has rendered a service to the would-be agent, ought to be done by us'. Indeed, Prichard thought this fact is self-evident. Similarly, he noted that it is wrong to suggest that 'even if the nature of the act is completely stated, it is still necessary to give a reason' (M 13) and that 'in thinking of our keeping our promise to X as a duty, we are thinking of the action as rendered a duty by its being the keeping of our promise' (DI 29; also B 4). The point of moral principles is that they bring out 'just that feature of the act which constitutes it an obligation' (B 5).

Prichard does not argue for (2.2), but he does address Joseph's denial of it. Joseph writes that '[a]n obligatory act is like a well-remembered face; the face no doubt has characters because of which it is well remembered, but it is called well-remembered to signify not those characters, but that others remember it'.[13] A property of us – that we well remember the face – arises from a property of the face (a hooked nose, say), just as a property of us – that we are obligated – arises from a property of the act. Prichard replies that 'it cannot be maintained that what renders a face well remembered is its having certain distinctive features, as distinct from our having noticed that it has them, without implying that what is called its being well remembered is a certain character of the face' (MO 222–3). Prichard's point might be that something more than a hooked nose is necessary to make a face well remembered. I must, in addition, notice the nose. A property of the face does not, on its own, give rise to a property of us. But this defence of (2.2) supposes that the ideal utilitarian must hold that properties of acts, on their own, give rise to properties of agents. The ideal utilitarian need not require this. A property of an action – that it maximizes the good – can give rise to a property of us – that we are obligated to do it – given that we have an obligation to maximize the good. (Similarly, the hooked nose can give rise to our remembering it, given that we notice it.)[14]

[12] See to Ross 11.12.36, 16.12.36, 10.5.40, 8.1.46, to Carritt 12.12.36, to Broad, 4.3.43.

[13] W. B. Joseph, *Some Problems in Ethics* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 61–2.

[14] This is another place in which Prichard's target may be the Moore of *Principia* rather than ideal utilitarianism in general. Moore might think that an action's property of maximizing the good is the same property as my being obligated to do it.

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III

After giving this argument, Prichard considers what can be said against one who rejects (2.4), the view that obligations are properties of us rather than actions.

(3.1) If something does not exist, 'there is nothing here for "being something which ought to exist" to be attributed to'.
(3.2) Therefore 'only something which is can be something which ought, or ought not, to exist'.
(3.3) Therefore, nonsensically, 'there could be no such thing as an obligation to do some action, until the act is already done' (MO 225; also DIF 99).

In his correspondence, Prichard also uses the thought behind this argument to support a restricted version of (2.2): 'for the character of the action to necessitate anything, the action has to be actual, i.e. to exist, so . . . there could only be obligations to acts which we are actually doing'.[15] A property of the action cannot give rise to a property of the agent, because the act need not exist when the agent has the property. An obligation based on properties of the act is 'like a cat's grin without the cat'.[16]

One reply, made by Joseph, Broad, Ross, and Carritt, is that properties the act would have, were it performed, can make me obligated.[17] For example, if an act would cause great and pointless misery, that is a reason for me not to perform it. It is hard to see how Prichard himself can avoid this inference from properties an act would have to obligations of agents. Earlier he wrote that 'obligation admits

[15] To Ross 14.7.38; also to Laird 30.7.38.

[16] To Ross 8.1.46.

[17] To Ross 15.4.37, 17.1.40, 10.5.40, 8.1.46; to Broad 4.3.43; Carritt to Prichard, 14.12.36; to Laird 4.1.39, 2.3.45; Broad, Critical Notice of Prichard, *Moral Obligation*, *Mind* 59 (1950), pp. 555-66, at 564. In a summary of Prichard in *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford, 1939), Ross writes that '[w]e cannot . . . say "such and such an act is obligatory," for the act is not there, to be either obligatory or anything else. Nor . . . can we say "such and such an act would be obligatory if it were done;" for clearly its obligatoriness, if it has any, does not depend on its being done' (p. 56). We can, however, say that the act would be good if it were done, and conclude that, if true, this conditional gives the agent an obligation (that is itself not conditional on the act's being done). This seems to be Ross's own view. Carritt writes that Prichard held the paradoxical view 'that from the premises: "If I were to do this it *would* produce good" and "I ought to produce good" we cannot conclude: "I ought to do this." Both premises can be stated unconditionally' ('Fifty Years a Don' (MS at University College, Oxford), pp. 27-8). The concern with non-existent acts seems to have been common, though the Meinong–Russell literature on the general problem is not cited. Joseph, for example, writes that '[p]rovided then that we may speak as if an unperformed action were something to which predicates belong at all' (*Problems*, p. 34). For a much later use of the argument, see A. C. Ewing, *Second Thoughts in Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1959), pp. 54–5.

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of degrees, and that where obligations conflict, the decision of what we ought to do turns not on the question "Which of the alternative courses of action will originate the greater good?" but on the question "Which is the greater obligation?"' (M 14 n.). It is hard to see how I can determine the greater obligation without considering properties of rival possible actions such as 'that would fulfil a trivial promise' or 'that would prevent me from keeping an important promise'. Or again, Prichard wrote that 'we may not appreciate the wrongness of telling a certain story until we realize that we should thereby be hurting the feelings of one of our audience' (M 12).[18] This looks like an inference from a property the act would have, if performed, to an obligation not to perform it.

Another reply, suggested by Broad, is to find something that exists before the act is performed, such as a description of the act, to which properties can be attributed. Broad suggests that 'x ought to exist' asserts of a description of x that it ought to have an instance.[19]

Before leaving this argument, it might help to note a statement of it earlier in 'Moral Obligation'. In saying that 'X ought to educate Y' we cannot be attributing a property to the act, because 'we can no more either think or assert of something which does not exist that it ought to exist than we can think or assert anything else about it. Of what we think does not exist we can think and assert nothing at all.' Prichard then suggests that we could mean '"[*i*]*f* X is or will be educating Y, his educating Y is, or will be, something which ought to exist."' He allows that what is grammatically categorical – 'X ought to educate Y' – might be hypothetical in meaning. But he dismisses the proposal: 'we find ourselves forced to admit that when we assert, e.g., that X *ought* to be educating Y, we *are* attributing a certain attribute to X, and therefore are implying the existence of such an attribute as the being under an obligation to do some action' (MO 168–9).

[18] Prichard does note that he rejects the view of 'Mistake' and 'Duty and Interest' (to Laird 2.3.45, to Ross 11.12.36, 8.1.46). For a time, his positive view was that obligations are based on properties of the circumstances rather than the acts. For example, the obligation to relieve someone's pain arises from the fact that the person is suffering, not from (as Ross and Carritt think) the fact that the act would be a relieving of pain of another; the obligation to keep a promise arises from having made the promise, not from the fact that my action would be a keeping of a promise (to Carritt 15.12.36, to Ross 11.12.36; also to Ross 16.12.36, 28.1.38, 14.7.38). (Sometimes Prichard gives a special role to one property of the circumstances, namely my belief that if I do x, there will be effect y (to Laird 2.3.45, to Ross 8.1.46, DIF 99-100).) But Prichard came to worry that the relevant properties of the circumstances are hypothetical facts (if I do this, that will follow). Since he also held that hypothetical facts cannot ground categorical ones, this led him to doubt the circumstances view, and wonder whether the properties of the act view was not right after all (to Ross 8.1.46, 10.12.46, 16.8.47).

[19] Broad, 'Notice', p. 564.

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Two things stand out. First, Prichard does not reject speaking of properties an act would have, were it performed. He does not really mean that we can 'think and assert nothing at all' about non-existent things.

Second, Prichard considers 'if X educates Y, his educating Y will be something that ought to exist' as giving the meaning of 'X ought to educate Y'. He then rejects it as not giving this meaning, since in saying 'X ought to educate Y' we are attributing a property to X. He does not consider that 'if X educates Y, his educating Y will be something that ought to exist' might be offered as giving the ground of the obligation rather than the meaning of 'X ought to educate Y'. This would let one think both that X has the property of being under a moral obligation and that the obligation depends on properties of the possible acts. (In correspondence he does consider this, but his response is merely the unsupported claim that hypothetical facts cannot ground categorical ones.[20])

IV

In 'Moral Obligation', before giving the arguments I have considered in II and III, Prichard gives arguments against what he calls 'teleological' and 'quasi-teleological' theories of obligation. 'Teleological' theories explain obligation by aims the agent possesses; 'quasi-teleological' theories explain obligation by aims the agent ought to possess. For Prichard, it seems that a theory is not teleological (of either sort) in virtue of basing obligation on the production of the good, but rather by basing obligation on the aims of the agent. Thus when Prichard interprets Sidgwick as basing obligation on what we ought to bring about rather than on what we ought to aim at, he notes that Sidgwick is refuted not by the arguments against quasi-teleological theories, but by those I consider in II, III and VII, against basing obligation on goodness (MO 207 n. 58).

Prichard distinguishes between two sorts of 'ought': there are moral 'oughts' found in categorical imperatives, and non-moral 'oughts' found in hypothetical imperatives. He thinks that the 'oughts' found in hypothetical imperatives are not really ought-claims at all, since they can be replaced by saying that a certain means is efficient for attaining a certain end (MO 166, MM 126–8, DI 34, 43, K 54–5).[21] But he could give his argument without thinking this, as long as the 'ought' of hypothetical imperatives is not the 'ought' of moral obligation. His

[20] To Laird 4.1.39, 7.1.39, 10.1.39, 2.3.45; to Ross 10.5.40, 8.1.46, 10.12.46, 16.8.47.

[21] This is controversial. It is denied by Sidgwick (*The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, 1981 [1907]), p. 37) and Broad ('Notice', p. 558; 'Obligations, Ultimate and Derived', *Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy* (London, 1971), pp. 351-68, at 362-3.

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objection is that utilitarians justify only non-moral ought claims: they take one's aim to be to maximize happiness, and conclude that, say, one ought to tell the truth because that will maximize happiness; here the 'ought' is the 'ought' of a hypothetical imperative (MM 135, 142–5).

Prichard does not direct this objection against the (obviously preferable) quasi-teleological interpretation of utilitarianism, on which utilitarians say one's aim ought to be to maximize happiness, or against the (even more preferable) interpretation on which utilitarians say that one ought to bring about the maximum happiness. Against these views, he could still charge that there is no obligation to tell the truth, since the 'ought' remains hypothetical. But he could not charge that utilitarianism 'can be ruled out on the general ground that it substitutes the non-moral for the moral "ought," and is therefore not a view of morality at all' (MM 145; also 143, 144). For the 'ought' in 'one ought to aim at the general happiness' or 'one ought to bring about the general happiness' is not the hypothetical 'ought'. Prichard must, then, rule out the 'ought to aim' and 'ought to bring about' views.[22]

He has two arguments against the 'ought to aim' view. First,

(4.1) The quasi-teleologist holds that there is something 'at which we ought to aim in acting'.
(4.2) To aim at X entails 'being moved to act by the desire of X'.
(4.3) Therefore the quasi-teleologist holds that one ought to be moved by the desire for X.
(4.4) But 'a moral obligation is by its very nature a moral obligation to perform some activity, and . . . therefore there cannot be such a thing as a moral obligation to be moved by a certain desire, since whatever our being so moved may be, it is not an activity'. To this Prichard adds
(4.5) 'Ought' implies 'can'.
(4.6) '[I]t is not in our power to desire something' (MO 198; also 199, 202, B 3).

One reply is to deny (4.4) and (4.5). Broad notes that we say '"You ought to be ashamed of yourself"' or '"You ought not to wish for another's humiliation."'[23] Broad seems to be taking the 'ought' in the ideal-stating sense which does not imply 'can', but perhaps this is how a quasi-teleologist should understand 'ought to aim' in the first place.[24]

[22] When he makes the charge just quoted, he thinks the 'ought to aim' view has been eliminated and that Sidgwick does not hold the 'ought to bring about' view (MM 142, 137).

[23] Broad, 'Notice', p. 561.

[24] For brief discussion of this 'ought', see the Appendix.

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The second argument against the 'ought to aim' view would let Prichard concede Broad's point. The objection is that one cannot argue from claims about what we ought to desire to claims about what we are obligated to do.

> At first sight no doubt it is plausible to say that *if* we grant that we ought to have something X . . . as our end, we have to allow as a corollary that we ought to do those acts which most conduce to X. But . . . it is obvious that as the 'ought' in the statement 'we ought to do these acts which most conduce to X' can only be the non-moral 'ought,' it has no force for us whatever, unless X actually *is* our purpose. (MM 135; also 142, MO 203)

Where A is the means to X, it does not follow that I ought to do A unless I actually aim at X. That I ought to aim at X is irrelevant.

Whether this is true is very dubious. If, say, I grant that a better-informed version of myself would advise me to have X as an end, it seems very plausible to think that I ought to do what conduces to X. What is irrelevant here is that I actually aim at something other than X. There is an 'ought' that, unlike Prichard's non-moral 'ought', does not depend on my actual aims, but like Prichard's non-moral 'ought', does transmit normative force from ends to means. Prichard himself suggests, without criticism, something close to this: 'we, being only imperfect, do not always have the existence of what is good as our purpose, yet we can only find out what in a moral sense we ought to do by working out what would be the actions we ought to do in the non-moral sense, if the existence of what is good were our purpose' (MM 146).

Prichard might have replies to these objections to his arguments against the 'ought to aim' view. But even if he does, the big problem is that the utilitarian can escape by holding the 'ought to bring about' view and say nothing about aims.

Prichard considers this. He notes that although Sidgwick sometimes writes of aiming, his real view may be that 'where something would be good this fact involves that we ought to do what would most conduce to it, the notion of "end" or "purpose" having nothing to do with obligation' (MO 207 n. 58; also MM 135, 136–7). In 'Moral Obligation', Prichard then refers the reader to the objections I consider in II, III, and VI (MO 207 n. 58).[25] In 'Manuscript', instead of doing this, Prichard then objects that Sidgwick comes out as holding an 'intuitional' view, since 'if he had been asked "how according to common sense do we come to apprehend that such actions [as making others happy] are right?" he could only

[25] In 'Manuscript', he quickly dismisses Moore by noting that it is plain that by 'I ought to do x' we do not mean 'x will cause a good result' (MM 153). This does not address those like Laird and the later Moore who think the connection between 'I ought to do x' and 'x will cause a good result' is synthetic a priori.

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have answered that, according to common sense, we do so directly' (MM 137).[26] But as Prichard admits later, Sidgwick could say, as Prichard has Moore and Rashdall say, that we come to apprehend that it is right to make others happy by seeing that happiness is good (MM 151–2; 152–3). The crucial arguments, then, are not those against the teleologists and quasi-teleologists, but against those who base obligation on the good.[27]

V

In 'Mistake', after giving the argument considered in I, Prichard adds that

> the best way to see the failure of this view is to see its failure to correspond to our actual moral convictions. Suppose we ask ourselves whether our sense that we ought to pay our debts or to tell the truth arises from our recognition that in doing so we should be originating something good, e.g. material comfort in A or true belief in B . . . We at once and without hesitation answer 'No.' Again, if we take as our illustration our sense that we ought to act justly as between two parties, we have, if possible, even less hesitation in giving a similar answer; for the balance of resulting good may be, and often is, not on the side of justice. (M 10; also B 2)

This objection was made by Butler and Price; it becomes the centrepiece of the second chapter of Ross's *The Right and the Good*. Here I note two features of Prichard's statement of it.

(i) One version of the objection claims that the ideal utilitarian gives the wrong verdict. Prichard claims this for justice. When Butler and Price made this objection, their target was hedonistic utilitarianism. They did not need to worry that the utilitarian might, by expanding what counts as good, get the right verdict – by, for example, counting just distribution as itself a good.[28] Although Prichard takes as his target 'Utilitarianism in the generic sense, in which what is good is not limited to pleasure', he does not consider this reply (M 9). Carritt, and Ross by the time of *Foundations*, do: they argue that while the utilitarian can add goods to get the right verdicts, the justification for thinking of these

[26] For more on this objection, see Dancy, 'Non-Intuitionist?'.

[27] Oddly, in his survey of arguments for deontology, Gerald Gaus privileges (and endorses) both the objection that utilitarians secure only non-moral 'oughts' and (4.1)–(4.6) ('What is Deontology?', Part I, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35 (2001), pp. 27-42, at 34-5).

[28] For an early statement of this tactic, see Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 72-3; *Ethics*, pp. 74, 77.

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states of affairs as good is a prior judgement that one has a duty to, for example, pay one's debts.[29]

Prichard may not have considered the expanding-the-good tactic for two reasons. First, he seems to have a very restricted view of what is good. In 'Mistake', he allows that knowledge is good and pain bad (M 10). But later he argues that this is false – only capacities such as virtue are good (MO 173).[30] This would exclude the states of affairs employed by the ideal utilitarian. In addition, his view that actions are good only in virtue of their motives (M 11, B 3, MM 155–6) would rule out thinking that, say, that an action is an instance of promise-keeping makes the action good. But by itself it does not rule out thinking that the result of the action – that a promise has been kept – is good.

Second, Prichard may not have considered the expanding-the-good tactic because of his view of consequences. Prichard writes that '[b]y "a consequence of the act" . . . we mean a particular something Y caused by X, and so brought about by the agent indirectly' (MM 139; also 141). If ideal utilitarianism is stated as the view that an action is made right by its good consequences, this view would exclude counting the state of affairs that-the-action-has-been-performed as a good consequence.[31] The same view underlies Prichard's claim that Moore and Rashdall are inconsistent for thinking that both the good results of an action and the goodness of the action itself can make an action right (MO 212–13, MM 152; also MO 209). But this view of consequences and results yields an uninteresting semantic victory. Well before Prichard wrote, Rashdall had included the value of both acts and their consequences, and Broad had argued that ideal utilitarians should take 'the total state of the universe', 'past, present, and future', as fixing rightness.[32]

(ii) Another version of the objection claims that the ideal utilitarian may get the right verdict, but gives the wrong reason for it (see also MM 136).[33] In Prichard's example, the ideal utilitarian thinks he should pay his debt to A because doing so will bring about A's material comfort. The worry might be that we think only that we owe a debt, rather than of what A might do with what is owed. But the ideal utilitarian need

[29] I consider Ross and Carritt in 'The Birth of Deontology', in Hurka, *Underivative*, pp. 126-45. Ross has no objection to adding the good of justice to explain the duty of justice; his objection is to that tactic employed for fidelity, recompense and gratitude.

[30] See also to Ross, 20.12.28.

[31] Ross, in *Right*, makes the same exclusion (pp. 36-8, 46-7).

[32] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 96-7; Broad, 'The Doctrine of Consequences in Ethics', in *Essays*, pp. 17-42, at 36-8. See also Broad, 'Certain Features in Moore's Ethical Doctrines', in Schilpp, *Moore*, pp. 43-67, at 48-9, and Moore's acceptance of the point at 'Reply', pp. 559-60.

[33] For more on this strategy, see Hurka, 'Underivative', pp. 112-15, and *British Ethical Theorists from Sidgwick to Ewing* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 125-6, 167.

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not cite consequences that far down the line. If the good is expanded to include the state of affairs in which debts are paid, the ideal utilitarian can think that he should pay his debt to A because doing so will bring it about that the debt has been paid. In the case of lying and true belief, the ideal utilitarian might similarly say that he should not lie because the state of affairs in which lies are told is bad – or perhaps here it does not seem wrong to cite the true belief in B as the reason for not lying.

Prichard might reply that the problem is not that the ideal utilitarian cites consequences too far removed from those we really cite. It is rather that in deciding upon our duty, we do not think of these states of affairs as goods at all. But while this may be sometimes, or even often, true, the ideal utilitarian can note that if, on reflection, we do think these states of affairs are goods, it does not matter much that we do not in every instance of acting have this thought.[34]

VI

In a footnote in 'Mistake', Prichard writes that

> if the badness of pain were the reason why we ought not to inflict pain on another, it would equally be a reason why we ought not to inflict pain on ourselves; yet, though we should allow the wanton infliction of pain on ourselves to be foolish, we should not think of describing it as wrong. (M 10 n. 4; also MM 135, 136, to Ross 8.1.46)

Some might describe it as wrong. But the more important reply is that the ideal utilitarian's claim that the badness of pain gives us reason not to inflict it on ourselves or others is unchallenged. That we have reason not to inflict it on ourselves explains why it would be foolish to do so.[35] We may not speak of 'wrongness' here, but that might be because we reserve 'wrong' for actions we are most concerned to prevent, or even because many have come to think that morality is silent when my actions do not harm others.[36] Even if we do not call the reasons in our own case 'moral reasons', this can be seen as an irrelevant fact about language, rather than a reflection of what the badness of pain can explain.

[34] For one recognition of the point, see Ross, *Foundations*, p. 69.

[35] Hurka has suggested to me that Prichard may intend 'foolish' to mean 'causes pain to me', just as he means by 'good to me', 'causes pleasure in me'. If so, Prichard can consistently say that my inflicting pain on myself is foolish but not something I have reason not to do. This does not, of course, meet the worry that *we* think there is a reason present (nor does it fit the text so well: it turns 'we should allow the wanton infliction of pain on ourselves to be foolish' into a trivial claim).

[36] The last is not Prichard's view, since he admits obligations to oneself (M 13). For one ideal utilitarian discussion of the issue, see Ewing, *Second,* pp. 112-14.

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VII

In 'What is the Basis of Moral Obligation?' the following argument replaces the argument, criticized in I, that turns on speaking of what 'ought to be'. Prichard asks one to suppose that

> all the houses and provisions of a village are damaged by a landslide, and suppose every villager but one is hurt. Suppose the circumstances such that the one sound man could only devote himself to providing food and shelter for one person. The acquisition of food and shelter by each would be equally good. Hence on the [ideal utilitarian] view there would be an obligation and an equal obligation on the one sound man to find food and shelter for himself, for his parent, and for a stranger. But while it might be contended that he had the right to consider himself as much as any other . . . no one would suppose that he was under a positive obligation to do so. Moreover everyone would hold, contrary to the view, that the obligation to help his father was greater than that to help a stranger. Again, if he happened to be able to help himself most, there would, on the view, be a positive obligation on him to neglect the others, and to help them would be wrong . . . Again allow that for anyone to have mean thoughts is a bad thing in the universe. No one thinks it is equally an obligation on me to suppress them and to persuade another to suppress them. Their suppression in me is considered as my special business or duty in a way in which their suppression in another is not, and not merely because the latter is more difficult. (B 2)[37]

Here Prichard makes two now-familiar objections to the impartiality of ideal utilitarianism: the man is more obligated to help his father than the stranger, even if equal amounts of good are produced; and (as in the 'Mistake' footnote) there is a self–other asymmetry, in that I am more obligated to suppress my mean thoughts than those of another, even if I could do either with equal ease, and the man is permitted to help others rather than himself, even if less good is produced.[38]

[37] Elsewhere Prichard makes the related point that we think of bringing about good for ourself and good for others as different duties. We think the same for bringing about the good of our child, the child of relations, the child of a stranger, or an orphan. The ideal utilitarian is wrong, then, to hold that we think that an act becomes a duty simply by thinking that it brings about something good (MO 217). (This is a rare later appeal to intuitions about cases, though the intuitions concern the classification of duties.) Since this argument concerns only how we think about our duties, the ideal utilitarian could concede that we often do not think of what these duties have in common – that they bring about good to someone. Ideal utilitarianism says only that what makes a duty a duty is that it brings about good to someone, not that we always think this. The argument in 'Basis' is stronger because it concludes that the ideal utilitarian is mistaken about our duty, rather than merely mistaken about how we often think about our duty.

[38] Thanks to Brad Hooker for noting the different objections here. For the asymmetry, see Michael Slote, 'Morality and Self-Other Asymmetry', *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984), pp. 179–92. Slote does not give an example of special obligations to oneself, and Prichard does not give the other side of the asymmetry, namely that the man who is not obligated to produce the greater good in himself would be obligated to produce it in others.

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Prichard writes 'not merely because the latter is more difficult' to rule out one of the familiar ideal utilitarian explanations of the difference in duties.[39] There is, however, another familiar reply Prichard does not rule out: again the good might be expanded, now to include (say) the state of affairs in which sons help fathers. Of course there is a familiar counter-reply: if I can either help my father, or perform some act that would enable five other sons to help each of their fathers, the ideal utilitarian would tell me not to help my father. Some now take this sort of example to be decisive against ideal utilitarianism. Thomas Baldwin, arguing against Moore, says there is '[s]urely not' a good reason to perform the act that would enable five others to help each of their fathers. This is 'surely uncontentious'.[40] Judith Thomson has the same view.[41] Perhaps Prichard simply did not think of this sort of example. But there may be another explanation.

It is striking that the arguments I have considered in this section and the previous two – arguments that dominate the debate now – get so little attention from later Prichard. Each barely appears in the longer, later works. The claims Prichard came to rely on (and in the first case relied on even in 'Mistake') are principles like 'an "ought" can be derived only from another "ought"' or '"ought" refers to actions alone' or 'the property of an action can give rise only to another property of that action' or 'we cannot think or assert anything of things that do not exist' or 'hypothetical facts cannot ground categorical facts'. These are the claims – often about what derivations are permissible between types of statements – about which Prichard is most confident.[42]

This point might correct one view of Prichard. The end of 'Mistake' is naturally read as suggesting that Prichard has knowledge of, and

[39] Oddly, in 'Mistake' Prichard suggests this very explanation: it 'is simply because we can and because others cannot directly modify our disposition that it is our business to improve it, and that it is not theirs, or, at least, not theirs to the same extent' (M 13). Ross agrees (*Right*, p. 26).

[40] Baldwin, *Moore*, p. 116. His example concerns promises rather than father-savings.

[41] Judith Jarvis Thomson, *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), pp. 137–48.

[42] For example, it is 'obvious' that the ideal utilitarian must say that the good is what ought to be (M 9); 'it is clear when we reflect' that the property of an action can give rise only to another property of that action (MO 222); 'when we consider the matter thoroughly we find ourselves forced to admit' that when we say 'X ought to be educating Y' we attribute a property to X (MO 169); 'as we recognize when we reflect' it is 'obvious' that actions do not have the property of being obligatory (DIF 99); 'there is not the slightest plausibility in maintaining that we ought to do a certain action *on the ground* that it will lead to a certain state of affairs, unless the term "ought" is understood in the non-moral sense of conducive to . . . our actual purpose' (MM 142); 'it is really self-evident that an obligation is necessarily an obligation to perform a certain action, and not to have a certain motive' (MO 199); it is 'self-evident' that hypothetical facts cannot ground categorical ones (to Laird 4.1.39).

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is dogmatic about, moral judgements. We should 'realize the self-evidence of our obligations'. Doubts can be allayed by 'getting face to face with a particular instance of the situation . . . and then directly appreciating the obligation' (M 20). But earlier he notes that 'owing to a lack of thoughtfulness, even the best men are blind to many of their obligations' (M 14 n.; also B 6). 'Basis' concludes with Prichard claiming that 'owing to the complication of human relations, the problem of what one ought to do, from the point of life as a whole, must present itself to any thinking man as one of intense difficulty and, indeed, doubt' (B 6).[43] Perhaps this is why, unlike both Ross and recent critics of ideal utilitarianism, he came to rely more on the abstract principles rather than the moral judgements. In one way, this is a good thing – I think the intuition Baldwin and Thomson rely on is not shared as widely as they believe.[44] But since I have argued that the abstract principles do not fare so well either, this may offer Prichard small consolation.

bshaver@cc.umanitoba.ca

APPENDIX: RASHDALL ON 'OUGHT TO BE'

Like Moore in *Principia*, Rashdall holds that 'the idea of "good" or "value" is logically the primary conception . . . That action is right which tends to bring about the good.'[45] He does say that '[t]he good is that which "ought" to be', 'what ought to be so far as it can be', what is 'reasonably or rightly to be desired', 'an end that ought to be realized', what 'ought always to be promoted', or what 'ought to be pursued'.[46] The last three formulations respect Prichard's restriction of 'ought' to actions (or last four, if desiring is an action). Given them, one might treat 'ought to be' and 'ought to exist' as elliptical for 'ought to

[43] Prichard does say, against Sidgwick, that 'it is self-evident that there is no such duty', where the duty in question is a duty to aim at our whole good (MO 206). But it is not clear whether this is a version of the argument noted in VI, against thinking that there is a duty to bring about one's happiness, or whether what Prichard finds self-evident is that there is no duty *to aim at* one's happiness. (The same goes for his claim that 'even if we had been purely benevolent beings, there would not have been a *duty* to be moved by the desire of the good of all others' (MO 207) Here he might be objecting, in addition, to deriving a duty from a 'non-moral' 'ought'.) MM 135 and 136 seem to reject a duty to bring about (as well as aim at) one's own good, but on MM 137, when Prichard turns to consider that Sidgwick might mean 'bring about' rather than 'aim at', he writes that 'it is plausible to say that we think it our duty . . . to make mankind, including ourselves, happy'.

[44] Thomson says 'I will only assume that you believe a certain moral judgment is true if I find it hard to understand how you could possibly believe it false' (*Realm*, pp. 32-3). It is easy to understand why one might sacrifice one to save five.

[45] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 135; also *Ethics*, pp. 14, 61.

[46] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 135; *Ethics*, pp. 14, 72; *Ethics*, pp. 75; 22; 14; 40, *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 138, *Is Conscience an Emotion?* (Boston, 1914), p. 45; *Ethics*, p. 63 n.2.

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be desired' or 'ought to be brought about'. (Prichard, Ross and Broad make the same suggestion, but do not attribute it to Rashdall.[47])

One might now object that, since 'ought' implies 'can', Rashdall's account fails to explain something he rightly notes, namely how something can be good even when it cannot be desired or promoted.[48]

In reply, Rashdall might say that he is relying on a sense of 'ought' that does not imply 'can'. Sidgwick uses this 'wide' 'ought' when speaking of what 'ought to be' or '"ought to" exist'.[49] Similarly, Broad notes that this 'ought' is the one teleologists use when they say 'everyone ought to desire so-and-so as an ultimate end'.[50] Moore also endorses this use of 'ought'.[51] (Some object that an 'ought' that does not imply 'can' is not an 'ought' at all, but rather just 'good' again.[52] But Sidgwick thinks of the wide 'ought' in terms of the 'narrow' 'ought' that implies 'can': to say that I ought, in the wide sense, to desire x is to say that I ought, in the narrow sense, to desire x 'as far as possible' – something I can *always* do.[53])

Alternatively, Rashdall might identify the good, not with what ought to be desired or brought about (in the wide sense of 'ought'), but with what a being

[47] Prichard, 'Mistake', p. 4; Ross, *Right*, p. 105; C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London, 1930), p. 165. Similarly, Laird, who is also targeted by Prichard, is not serious about applying 'ought' to states of affairs. 'When we affirm . . . as we sometimes do, that anything which is good is a thing which ought to be, we do not, I think, intend to make a statement which is true without any qualification . . . When we say that the world contains happiness here, and beauty there, and that beauty and happiness are excellent, we are making statements about values and their incidence, but are saying nothing whatever about what ought to exist. When, inferring from this, we say (if we do) that the world, in these respects, is what it ought to be, we imply that there is a sense in which values may determine existence . . . [T]he "ought" implies agency' (MO 224; *Study*, pp. 34-5).

[48] For the objection, see Hurka, 'Moore', pp. 603-4; *British*, p. 53. Bertrand Russell raises this as his objection to taking 'ought' rather than 'good' as primitive ('The Elements of Ethics', in Russell, *Philosophical Essays* (London, 1966 [1910]), pp. 3-51, at 17). For Rashdall on the independence of the good from what we can bring about, see *Ethics*, p. 12; *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 136.

[49] Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 33, quoted with approval by Rashdall at *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 103-4.

[50] Broad, *Types*, p. 163.

[51] Moore, 'The Nature of Moral Philosophy', in Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (London: 1960 [1922]), pp. 310-39, at 316-23. The same holds for Wilbur Urban, one of Ross's targets. Urban identifies value with what ought to be, but he writes that: '[o]f many things we can say that they ought to be, when it would be wholly absurd to think that this notion involved a command to any person or group of persons. Even of things that have already happened . . . we may say that they should have been otherwise. *The imperative is but a special case of the category "ought to be*" . . .' ('Value and Existence', *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 13 (1916), pp. 449-65, at 462). Unlike Rashdall, Urban would deny that 'x is good' could be interchanged with 'x ought to be', but only because he thinks what is good is a proper subset of what is valuable (p. 456).

[52] Ross, *Foundations*, p. 45; Hurka, 'Moore', p. 604; *British*, pp. 45, 53.

[53] Sidgwick, *Methods*, p. 33. For more on this reply to the objection, see my 'The Later British Moralists', *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (London, 2016), pp. 95-109, at 99.

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with the power to desire or bring about any states of affairs ought to desire or bring about (in the sense of 'ought' that implies 'can'). 'Ought' here refers to actions, and the objection that something can be good without it being possible for us to desire or bring it about is met.[54]

But Rashdall might instead intend something much more minimal. He writes that '"Good," "Ought" (when applied to ends), "Value," "the End" I regard as synonymous terms'.[55] This suggests that he is not explaining 'good' in terms of 'ought', but rather giving alternative expressions for one notion.[56] And he is doing so for a particular reason. In almost all of the places in which he identifies the good with what ought to be, his point is that, in defining the right in terms of the good, he is not explaining the normative in terms of the non-normative. Thus he notes, directly before identifying the good with what ought to be, that '[t]here is no attempt here to get rid of the ultimate unanalysable "ought."'[57] Accepting that 'right acts are acts which conduce to the good . . . does not at all involve giving up the distinctive or *sui generis* character of the idea of right or duty. For both notions really involve the fundamental conception of an "ought."'[58] Taking the fundamental judgement to be 'This is good' 'involves no surrender of the ultimate, unanalysable character of the idea of "rightness," "oughtness" or "duty."'[59] Repeatedly, when making the identification, his point is that the notion of good should not be identified with some non-normative notion: 'If I do recognize that that which is much desired ought to be, that is to say something much more and quite different from simply "it is much desired."'[60]

[54] See Rashdall, *Ethics*, pp. 14, 76; *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 138; *Conscience*, pp. 45-6.

[55] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 135 n.; also *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 102; *Conscience*, p. 46. Similarly, Russell writes that to 'explain what we mean by Good and Bad, we may say that a thing is good when on its own account it ought to exist, and bad when on its own account it ought not to exist . . . But all such characterizations really presuppose the notions of good and bad, and are therefore useful only as means of calling up the right ideas, not as logical definitions' ('Elements', p. 17). Russell uses 'ought to exist on its own account' as a way of stressing that the good he is considering is intrinsic and 'impersonal' (p. 18).

[56] One might object that Rashdall's claims that there is one notion, or that 'good' and 'right' are 'correlative' notions that cannot be understood apart (*Theory*, vol. 1, p. 138; *Ethics*, pp. 14, 76; *Conscience*, p. 46), make it hard to see how 'good' is fundamental. But let the one notion be called 'ought'. 'Good' is what ought to be promoted (in a sense that does not imply 'can'). 'Right' is what ought to be done (in a sense that does imply 'can'). 'Good' is fundamental in that it, combined with claims about what one can do, explains what is right, but not vice versa. One cannot understand the notions apart in that both involve 'ought'.

[57] Rashdall, *Theory*, vol. 1, p. 135; also *Conscience*, p. 45.

[58] Rashdall, *Ethics*, p. 14.

[59] Rashdall, *Ethics*, p. 75; also pp. 76-7. When Rashdall writes of an 'ultimate and unanalysable idea' elsewhere, he is making the point that there is no reduction of the normative to the non-normative; see *Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 48, 102.

[60] Rashdall, *Ethics*, pp. 25; also p. 22. In a similar use of 'ought to be', James Seth writes that '[e]thics is the science of the Good. As distinguished from the natural sciences, or the sciences of the actual, it is a normative or regulative science, a science of the ideal. The question of ethical science is not, What is? but What ought to be?' ('Is Pleasure the Summum Bonum?', *International Journal of Ethics* 6 (1896), pp. 409-24, at 409).

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In sum: although Rashdall writes of what '"ought" to be', he need not be read as thinking that 'ought' applies to states of affairs rather than actions such as promoting. Nor need he be read as thinking that what '"ought" to be' is a necessary step in an argument for a conclusion about what one ought to do. His point in introducing 'ought' in the explanation of 'good' might be just that claims about goodness are normative.[61]

[61] Thanks to audiences at Manitoba and Reading, especially to John Cottingham, Jonathan Dancy, Brian Feltham, Brad Hooker, Jonas Olson, Michael Stack, Philip Stratton-Lake, Chris Tillman and Fiona Woollard; to Ben Caplan, Melissa Hiebert, Joyce Jenkins, and especially Tom Hurka, for discussions of the material; to Tom again, for comments as a referee and for introducing me to Prichard's correspondence (and to Carritt's *Fifty Years*); and to Dale Miller and an anonymous referee.

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