CHAPTER IX

SELF-REGARDING VIRTUES

§ 1. I CONCEIVE that according to the morality of Common Sense, an ultimate harmony between (1) Self-interest and (2) Virtue is assumed or postulated; so that the performance of duty and cultivation of Virtue generally may be regarded as a “duty to self,” as being always conducive to the agent’s true interest and well-being. But further, Common Sense (in modern Europe) recognises a strict duty of preserving one’s own life, even when the prospect life offers is one in which pain preponderates over pleasure; it is, indeed, held to be right and praiseworthy to encounter certain death in the performance of strict duty, or for the preservation of the life of another, or for any very important gain to society; but not merely in order to avoid pain to the agent. At the same time, within the limits fixed by this and other duties, Common Sense considers, I think,¹ that it is a duty to seek our own happiness, except in so far as we can promote the welfare of others by sacrificing it. This “due concern about our own interest or happiness” may be called the Duty of Prudence. It should, however, be observed that—since it is less evident that men do not adequately desire their own greatest good, than

¹ Kant argues (Met. Anfang. d. Tugendlehre, Th. I., § iv.) that as every one “inevitably wills” means to promote his own happiness this cannot be regarded as a duty. But, as I have before urged (Book i. chap. iv. § 1), a man does not “inevitably will” to do what he believes will be most conducive to his own greatest happiness.

The view in the text is that of Butler (Dissertation Of the nature of Virtue); who admits that “nature has not given us so sensible a disapprobation of imprudence and folly as of falsehood, injustice, and cruelty”; but points out that such sensible disapprobation is for various reasons less needed in the former case.

H. Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics
© Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 1962
that their efforts are not sufficiently well directed to its attain­ment—in conceiving Prudence as a Virtue or Excellence, attention is often fixed almost exclusively on its intellectual side. Thus regarded, Prudence may be said to be merely Wisdom made more definite by the acceptance of Self-interest as its sole ultimate end: the habit of calculating carefully the best means to the attainment of our own interest, and resisting all irrational impulses which may tend to perturb our calcula­tions or prevent us from acting on them.

§ 2. There are, however, current notions of particular virtues, which might be called Self-regarding; but yet with respect to which it is not quite clear whether they are merely particular applications of Prudence, or whether they have independent maxims. Of these Temperance, one of the four cardinal virtues ancienly recognised, seems the most prominent. In its ordinary use, Temperance is the habit of controlling the principal appetites (or desires which have an immediate corporeal cause). The habit of moderating and controlling our desires generally is recognised by Common Sense as useful and desirable, but with less distinctness and emphasis.

All are agreed that our appetites need control: but in order to establish a maxim of Temperance, we have to determine within what limits, on what principle, and to what end they ought to be controlled. Now in the case of the appetites for food, drink, sleep, stimulants, etc., no one doubts that bodily health and vigour is the end naturally subserved by their gratification, and that the latter ought to be checked whenever it tends to defeat this end (including in the notion of health the most perfect condition of the mental faculties, so far as this appears to depend upon the general state of the body). And, further, the indulgence of a bodily appetite is manifestly imprudent, if it involves the loss of any greater gratification of whatever kind: and otherwise wrong if it interferes with the performance of duties; though it is perhaps doubtful how far this latter indulgence would commonly be condemned as 'intemperance.'

Some, however, deduce from the obvious truth, that the maintenance of bodily health is the chief natural end of the appetites, a more rigid rule of restraint, and one that goes beyond prudence. They say that this end ought to fix not