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# The Point of View of the Universe

## *Sidgwick & Contemporary Ethics*

KATARZYNA DE LAZARI-RADEK & PETER SINGER

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# A Biographical Prologue

> For philosophy and history alike have taught . . .
> to seek not what is 'safe,' but what is true.[1]

## 1. Beginnings

Henry Sidgwick was born on 31 May 1838 in Skipton, Yorkshire, the fourth child of the Reverend William Sidgwick, a grammar school headmaster, and Mary Croft. He was only 3 years old when his father died. In 1852 Sidgwick was sent to Rugby school, one of the best in England. This was the result of the encouragement of Edward White Benson, a cousin of Sidgwick's father, who was later to become both the husband of Sidgwick's sister Mary and the archbishop of Canterbury. Sidgwick remembers Benson's influence throughout his years at Rugby and also on the choice of Trinity College, Cambridge, where he started studying in 1855. At the time, he later wrote, he 'had no other ideal except to be a scholar as like [Benson] as possible'.[2] He remained in various posts at Trinity College and the University of Cambridge for the next 45 years.

From the beginning, Sidgwick was an outstanding student. In his second term at Cambridge he obtained the Bell Scholarship. A year later he was awarded the Craven Scholarship for classical studies—'far the greatest of University prizes'—which was worth £75 a year, and for which all the best scholars at all year levels competed. Sidgwick communicated the good news to Benson:

> I was astounded by the appearance of the University Marshal in my rooms to communicate to me the exhilarating intelligence which I hope you received as soon

[1] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 62.
[2] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 11.

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as electricity could convey it. My first idea, although I had been thinking about the Craven lately a good deal, was a vague fancy that I was about to be hauled up for some offence committed against the statutes of the University. Soon, however, the benign and at the same time meaning smile of that remarkable personage conveyed a misty idea of some news divinely good. It was not, however, till the oracular words, 'You are elected to the Craven Scholarship' had passed his lips that I realised the tremendous fact. I then gave a wild shriek, leapt up into the air, and threw up my arms above my head. . . . The worthy marshal, however, who is, I suppose, accustomed to all the various manifestations of ecstasy, remained imperturbable; seemed loftily amused by my inquiring when I should call on the Vice-Chancellor, . . . and condescended to agree to come next morning to receive his sovereign, as I had no money about me.[3]

With the Craven there came another award which turned out to be more important than the money—an invitation to join the Apostles. Sidgwick's interest in philosophy developed as a result of the Saturday evening discussions with this select group of the brightest students at Cambridge. He later wrote that his election to the Apostles had 'more effect on my intellectual life than any one thing that happened to me afterwards'.[4] What did he find so special about the Apostles? Here is his answer:

I can only describe it as the spirit of the pursuit of truth with absolute devotion and unreserve by a group of intimate friends, who were perfectly frank with each other, and indulged in any amount of humorous sarcasm and playful banter, and yet each respects the other, and when he discourses tries to learn from him and see what he sees. Absolute candour was the only duty that the tradition of the society enforced. No consistency was demanded with opinions previously held—truth as we saw it then and there was what we had to embrace and maintain, and there were no propositions so well established that an Apostle had not the right to deny or question, if he did so sincerely and not from mere love of paradox. The gravest subjects were continually debated, but gravity of treatment, as I have said, was not imposed, though sincerity was.[5]

The idea of complete sincerity in the pursuit of truth became a crucial element in Sidgwick's life, both as a philosopher and as a human being, although as we shall see, in his view sincerity did not imply that one ought to be transparent about everything.

[3] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 17.
[4] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 34.
[5] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 34–35.

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## 2. Belief and Reason

In 1859, after four years of studies, Sidgwick was appointed a Fellow and Lecturer in Classics at Trinity College. Though he had become interested in moral issues, no possibility of teaching ethics was then given to him—the so-called 'Moral Sciences' were taught only by professors. He began his philosophical studies with the work of John Stuart Mill, but soon formed the view that philosophy was not likely to answer his most important questions about 'the nature of man and his relation to God and the universe'. Sidgwick had been brought up in a religious family and at first the existence of God and the truth of Christianity were no doubt as obvious to him as anything else. However, his studies and his scrupulous nature and persistent desire to learn the truth inevitably led him to reassess his beliefs. There were too many questions to which he could not find satisfying answers, and what once seemed obvious now began to appear without a firm basis. Victorian England at this time, with the discoveries of Lyell, Darwin, and Huxley, was the scene of many debates in which reason was opposed to religious belief. In this conflict, from the beginning of his academic career, Sidgwick's choice was clear. In 1861 he wrote in his journal: 'In no "spiritual pride" but with a perhaps mistaken trust in the reason that I find in me I wish to show forth in my own life the supremacy of reason.'[6]

At first Sidgwick hoped that scientific studies of language, culture, and history would help him find a reasonable justification for religious teachings. This was consistent with the spirit of the Cambridge Apostles:

> What was fixed and unalterable and accepted by us all was the necessity and duty of examining the evidence for historical Christianity with strict scientific impartiality; placing ourselves as far as possible outside traditional sentiments and opinions, and endeavouring to weigh the pros and cons on all theological questions as a duly instructed rational being from another planet—or let us say from China—would naturally weigh them.[7]

[6] Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics*, 25, citing a manuscript from Sidgwick's papers at Trinity College, Cambridge.

[7] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 40.

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Accordingly, Sidgwick devoted three years to learning Arabic and Hebrew; but then he started to wonder if he might be wasting his time:

> I began . . . to think that the comparative historical study which I had planned would not really give any important aid in answering the great questions raised by the orthodox Christianity from which my view of the Universe had been derived. Was Jesus incarnate God, miraculously brought into the world as a man? Were his utterances of divine authority? Did he actually rise from the grave with a human body glorified, and therewith ascend into heaven? Or if the answers to these questions could not strictly be affirmative in the ordinary sense of the term, what element of truth, vital for mankind, could be disengaged from the husk of legend, or symbolised by the legend, supposing the truth itself capable of being established by human reasoning?[8]

The inability of historical studies to answer these questions led Sidgwick back to philosophy and when in 1867 he was offered a lectureship in Moral Sciences, he accepted it, 'determined to throw myself into the work of making, if possible, a philosophical school in Cambridge'.[9]

Sidgwick's inability to believe in the Church and its teachings led him to a decision that threatened his career as a philosopher, even though it was the result of his commitment to the search for the truth. When Sidgwick started teaching at Cambridge, every Fellow had to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. Some of the Fellows took this as a technical requirement—they had to say that they accepted the Articles, but they did not have to do so sincerely. Not Sidgwick. Already at the end of 1860 in a letter to his friend Oscar Browning he wrote:

> I think I could juggle myself into signing the Articles as well as any one else: but I really feel that it may at least be the duty of some—if so *emou ge* [for me, anyway]—to avoid the best-motived perjury.[10]

How deeply troubling the problem was for him is apparent from the fact that the first letter Sidgwick wrote to Mill, in 1867, was not about philosophy but about this issue. After apologizing for writing a long letter, which was coming from 'a perfect stranger', Sidgwick raised the

[8] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 37.
[9] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 38.
[10] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *Memoir*, 62.

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question of religious tests, and referred to discussions about where 'the line between expedient conformity and inexpedient hypocrisy is to be drawn'. Mill did not offer Sidgwick any practical advice, but suggested that Sidgwick turn his attention to the larger question of what, on utilitarian grounds, ought to be the exceptions to the rule that we should tell the truth.[11]

Finally, in spring 1869, Sidgwick acted. He wrote to his mother:

> Many thanks for your letter. It reached me at a critical point of my career. I have just resigned my Assistant Tutorship and informed the Authorities that I intend to resign my Fellowship very shortly. It is not impossible that they may appoint me lecturer in spite of this, though I hardly expect it. I will tell you when anything is decided. Meanwhile it is a secret. You may be glad to hear that the Master expressed himself very kindly about me in communicating my resignation to the College. In fact every one is very kind, and if I am not reappointed it will not be from want of goodwill, but from a conviction that the interests of the College do not allow it. Whatever happens I am happy and know that I have done what was right. In fact, though I had some struggle before doing it, it now appears not the least bit of a sacrifice, but simply the natural and inevitable thing to do.[12]

Trinity College did appoint Sidgwick to a lectureship, a position that did not require subscribing to the Articles, and he was able to continue his academic career. Thus his resignation did him no harm, and because as a lecturer, rather than a Fellow, he was no longer a member of the governing body of the College, it may have contributed to the completion of his greatest work. After *The Methods of Ethics* was published he wrote to Browning: 'I often think that if I had not resigned my Fellowship I should never have written my book.'[13]

It was also at this time that Sidgwick began his efforts to enhance educational possibilities for women at Cambridge. Women could not, at the time, become students of the university, but in 1870, Sidgwick organized, with others, 'Lectures for Ladies' and the following year, took the bold step of renting a house in which the ladies attending the lectures could live. This led to the founding of Newnham Hall, which today is Newnham College.

[11] Sidgwick to Mill, 28 July 1867; Mill to Sidgwick, 3 Aug. 1867 and 26 Nov. 1867.
[12] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 196–7.
[13] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 321.

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Sidgwick's resignation influenced the attitudes of others and contributed to the movement against the requirement that Fellows of Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of Durham must accept the Church of England's central doctrines. That reform was achieved in 1871 when religious tests were abolished by an Act of Parliament. Sidgwick was then able to return to his previous post. In 1883 he was appointed to the Knightbridge Professorship of Moral Philosophy, the most prestigious position that a moral philosopher could hold at the university.

## 3. Towards *The Methods of Ethics*

The Preface to the sixth edition of *The Methods of Ethics* includes an autobiographical sketch of Sidgwick's philosophical development. The utilitarianism of Mill, he writes, brought him

> relief from the apparently external and arbitrary pressure of moral rules which I had been educated to obey, and which presented themselves to me as to some extent doubtful and confused; and sometimes, even when clear, as merely dogmatic, unreasoned, incoherent. (*ME* p. xvii)[14]

Comparing Mill's utilitarianism and Whilliam Whewell's intuitionism, Sidgwick found the intuitionists 'hopelessly loose…in their definitions and axioms'. At first Sidgwick was attracted both by Mill's psychological hedonism (every man seeks his own happiness) and his ethical hedonism (every man should seek the general happiness); but he came to see the combination of the two as incoherent. We must choose one or the other; but on what grounds can we do so? Mill had acknowledged that sometimes one can best serve the happiness of others by an 'absolute sacrifice' of one's own happiness. The hero, Mill wrote, could prize the happiness of others more than his own happiness.[15] But Sidgwick knew that, whether or not he could be a moral hero, he 'was not the kind of moral hero who does this without reason; from *blind* habit'. He didn't even wish to be that kind of hero, because that kind of hero was certainly not a philosopher. Sidgwick's

[14] References in the text to *ME* followed by a page number are to Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn (London: Macmillan, 1907).

[15] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2, §19.

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allegiance was to reason ahead of universal happiness; before sacrificing his own happiness for the good of the whole, he needed a reason for so doing.

The search for a justification for such a sacrifice led Sidgwick to part company with Mill and 'recognize the need of a fundamental ethical intuition' on which the utilitarian position could be based. Sidgwick read Kant again, but concluded that Kant could not give him the answer he was looking for—a demonstration that self-interest is subordinate to duty. He believed that a rational egoist could accept both the Kantian principle and the Hobbesian principle of self-preservation and say:

> I quite admit that when the painful necessity comes for another man to choose between his own happiness and the general happiness, he must as a reasonable being prefer his own, *i.e.* it is right for him to do this on my principle. No doubt, as I probably do not sympathise with him in particular any more than with other persons, I as a disengaged spectator should like him to sacrifice himself to the general good: but I do not expect him to do it, any more than I should do it myself in his place. (*ME* pp. xix–xx)

Neither of his 'masters', Kant and Mill, could convince Sidgwick that self-interest is any less 'undeniably reasonable' than self-sacrifice. He turned to the work of Joseph Butler, an 18th-century philosopher and theologian who became bishop of Durham and had an influence on David Hume and Adam Smith, as well as on Sidgwick. Butler argued that 'Reasonable Self-love' is 'one of the two chief or superior principles in the nature of man'.[16] Butler referred to the 'Dualism of the Governing Faculty', an expression that Sidgwick changed into his own well-known 'Dualism of Practical Reason'. Reading the earlier intuitionists Henry More and Samuel Clarke, he found the axiom he needed for justifying utilitarianism: 'That a rational agent is bound to aim at Universal Happiness.' Sidgwick was a utilitarian again, though 'on an Intuitional basis'. In this way he could unite the two seemingly opposed moral theories, intuitionism and utilitarianism; but he did not, as we will see, find a way out of the conflict between self-interest and utilitarianism.

[16] Sidgwick is here referring to Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, sermon 11, first publ. in 1726.

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In 1874, when Sidgwick was finishing the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics*, he wrote to a friend: 'The book solves nothing, but may clear up the ideas of one or two people a little.'[17] The modesty is typical of the man and of his conception of his role as a philosopher. He did not believe that he would be able to present the final truths of ethics.

In the remaining 26 years of his life, though Sidgwick wrote many other books, he continued to rewrite *The Methods*: a second edition was published in 1877, a third in 1884, a fourth in 1890, a fifth in 1893, and a posthumous sixth edition, based in part on revisions he had prepared, in 1901, with a seventh edition (correcting a few minor errors from the sixth) in 1907. This seventh edition is now the standard text of *The Methods*.

## 4. Marriage

In 1876, at the age of 38, Sidgwick married Eleanor Mildred Balfour, who was then 31 and came from a distinguished and politically influential family. Her father, who had died when she was a child, had been a Member of Parliament, and her mother could trace her ancestry back to Sir Robert Cecil, a leading statesman under both Elizabeth I and James I. The family lived in a mansion of eighty rooms on an estate of 10,000 acres.[18] Sidgwick first got to know Eleanor's brother, Arthur Balfour, who was his student at Cambridge. Arthur later followed his father into Parliament, and subsequently became leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister. Eleanor had been educated at home, but she moved to Cambridge in 1875 to live in Newnham Hall and study mathematics, for which she had a particular talent. Sidgwick was, as we have seen, the key figure in the founding of Newnham Hall, but he and Eleanor bonded also because of their mutual interest in research into psychic phenomena. Sidgwick had formed a group to explore, by scientific methods, such questions as whether there is survival after the death of the body

[17] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 284.

[18] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 295, based on J. Oppenheim, 'A Mother's Role'.

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and, as one member of the group put it, 'Is the universe friendly?'[19] Eleanor, Arthur, and another brother, as well as her sister's husband, Lord Rayleigh (who subsequently received the Nobel Prize for Physics), were members of that group, initially known as 'the Sidgwick group' and later as the Society for Psychical Research. Sidgwick and other members of the group attended séances, but were always disappointed in the results, which often suggested fraud.

The marriage was a meeting of minds. Sidgwick wrote to his mother that while Eleanor 'is not exactly perfect' what was positive in her was 'quite quite good . . . I cannot imagine her doing anything wrong'. William James thought that they were 'the incarnation of pure intellect—a very odd appearing couple'.[20] Odd or not, Eleanor undoubtedly had a fine intellect—she is the co-author, with Rayleigh, of three papers on electricity published by the Royal Society. Henry and Eleanor had no children, and E. M. Young, in his biography of Arthur Balfour, states that Sidgwick was impotent.[21] He may have been more romantically attracted to men than to women. In his papers, under the heading 'My Friends', are some jottings in which he mentions two unnamed friends and about each writes 'I love him'. There is also a line that reads: 'Some are women to me, and to some I am a woman.'[22] One of Sidgwick's friends was the poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds, who wrote *A Problem in Greek Ethics,* a eulogy of homosexuality in ancient Greece published, at the time, in a limited privately distributed edition. After Symonds's death in 1893, Sidgwick worked with Symonds's literary executor to remove references to Symonds's homosexuality from what was to be published of his literary remains. This was, after all, the period of the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, and on this issue—in contrast to the issue of requiring College Fellows to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles—Sidgwick evidently thought that the time for reforming public morality was not ripe.

[19] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 287.
[20] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 299.
[21] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 779. Note to p. 414.
[22] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 415.

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## 5. Later Life and Death

After publishing *The Methods* Sidgwick wrote *Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers,* which appeared first as a long article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1878 and then was published as a book in 1886. His interests in economics and politics resulted in *The Principles of Political Economy* (1883), *The Scope and Method of Economic Science* (1885), and *The Elements of Politics* (1891). He was the author of many articles, essays, and reviews in the leading periodicals of his time, and was particularly interested in making ethics more practical and relevant to the moral issues of his time. Towards the end of his life he collected some of his writings on applied ethics in a volume called *Practical Ethics* (1898).

Sidgwick's writing suffers from what is one of his greatest virtues as a philosopher—his ability to see all sides of a question, which often led him to qualify his statements and digress to deal with objections. Those who heard him speak, however, often had a very different impression from that left by his writings. John Neville Keynes, a Cambridge economist, colleague of Sidgwick, and the father of the more famous John Maynard Keynes, wrote:

> It was extraordinary how illuminating he would be, whatever turn the conversation might take: on one topic after another he had something interesting to say, and what he said was always to the point and suggestive. He had an excellent memory, and there seemed to be no limit to the range of his knowledge. He was a capital storyteller: his supply of apposite stories—they were always pertinent to the previous conversation, never brought in merely for their own sake—seemed inexhaustible. And all his talk was touched by a subtle, delicate humour that added to its charm.[23]

Leslie Stephen recalled that Sidgwick had a stammer, but used it to good effect: 'His hearers watched and waited for the coming thought which then exploded the more effectually.' Sidgwick was also good at bringing other people into the conversation: 'He would wait with slightly parted lips for an answer to some inquiry, showing a keen interest which encouraged your expectation that you were about to say a good thing, and sometimes, let us hope, helped to realise the expectation.'[24]

[23] J. N. Keynes, 'Obituary', 591, cited in A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir,* 316.
[24] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir,* 315.

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These conversational skills no doubt became even more valuable in 1880, when Eleanor was appointed Vice-Principal of Newnham and the Sidgwicks lived, during term, in rooms in the college. Sidgwick played his part in college life, and his role became more significant still when Eleanor became Principal in 1891. Under Eleanor's direction—and in part because of her donation of £30,000, a very significant sum in those days—the college thrived and expanded. Portraits of both Eleanor and Henry still hang in the Newnham College dining hall.

Early in May 1900, shortly before his 62nd birthday, Sidgwick was diagnosed with cancer and told that he did not have long to live. Later that month he travelled to Oxford, for he had promised to give a lecture to the Philosophical Society there. He took the opportunity to tell his brother Arthur of his impending death. Arthur later recalled that Sidgwick had said that knowing what was to come had led him to ask himself whether he had 'done his work and lived his life as he had meant'. His verdict was that he had, in the main, done his work to the best of his power, 'whatever the worth of it'.[25]

Sidgwick was operated on at the end of May and then taken to the Rayleigh estate, in Terling, Essex, to await the end. After a short remission, his condition deteriorated and he died on 28 August 1900. He was buried in the church cemetery in Terling, Essex, after a ceremony that used the Church of England funeral service. Sidgwick had given no explicit directions about his funeral, but in May he had said to Eleanor, with regard to the Church of England service, that 'not to use it was what seemed to him most in harmony with his views and actions in life' and if it were not used, he would like to have the following words said over his grave: 'Let us commend to the love of God with silent prayer the soul of a sinful man who partly tried to do his duty. It is by his wish that I say over his grave these words and no more.'[26]

[25] Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 715. The original source is a letter from Arthur Sidgwick.

[26] A. Sidgwick, E. Sidgwick, *A Memoir*, 599.

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## 6. Sidgwick's Reputation

The first edition of *The Methods* was widely reviewed and discussed.[27] Most reviews were positive, although there were exceptions, including a very critical essay by F. H. Bradley. Just 12 years after the publication of the first edition, Hastings Rashdall wrote that:

> *The Methods of Ethics* has long been recognized as a philosophical classic. It is one of those books of which it is safe to prophesy that no advance in philosophic doctrine will ever render them obsolete. It is not merely a piece of acute and subtle philosophical criticism but a work of art with a unity and beauty of its own as much as a Dialogue of Plato or of Berkeley.[28]

John Neville Keynes, too, writing after Sidgwick's death, described *The Methods* as 'so striking and original in character and of such fundamental importance as fairly to entitle the work to be regarded as epoch-making'.[29]

Sidgwick's high reputation began to be challenged early in the 20th century. To members of the Bloomsbury group, strongly influenced by G. E. Moore, he was seen as a relic of the Victorian era, a period that they viewed with scorn. Among this group was John Maynard Keynes, who after reading Sidgwick's memoir remarked in a letter to a friend that Sidgwick 'never did anything but wonder whether Christianity was true and prove it wasn't and hope that it was'.[30] Like other young members of the Bloomsbury group, John Maynard Keynes was under the spell of G. E. Moore, and had come to believe that Moore's *Principia Ethica* was so extraordinary a work that its 'wonder and originality' could not possibly be exaggerated.

[27] The first reviews appeared in *Mind* in 1876: Alexander Bain, 'Mr. Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', 178–97, and Henry Calderwood, 'Mr. Sidgwick and Intuitionism', 197–206. In 1877 F. H. Bradley wrote an extensive critical text titled 'Mr. Sidgwick's Hedonism: An Examination of the Main Argument of the Methods of Ethics'. It was initially published privately and later included in his *Collected Essays*. In the same year F. Y. Edgeworth published a short book on *The Methods* titled: *New and Old Methods of Ethics*.

[28] Rashdall, 'Professor Sidgwick's Utilitarianism', 200; we owe this reference to M. G. Singer, 'The Many Methods of Sidgwick's Ethics', 422–3.

[29] Keynes, 'Obituary', 587.

[30] From a letter of J. M. Keynes to B. Swithinbank, 27 Mar. 1906 (Keynes Papers, King's College, Cambridge), from B. Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, 4.

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(Most philosophers today regard *Principia Ethica* as considerably less wonderful and original than *The Methods,* on which it draws heavily.) Moore's influence on the younger Keynes was so strong that he wrote to a friend 'I even begin to agree with Moore about Sidgwick—that he was a wicked edifactious person.'[31] ('Edifactious' does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and we will leave it to the reader to guess what Keynes may have meant by it.)

Sidgwick's insistence that there are moral truths we can know by intuition was accepted by G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross, the most influential British moral philosophers of the first half of the 20th century; though as we shall see, they differed from him over what these moral truths are. To that extent Sidgwick's approach to ethics, if not the content of his views, remained influential until the Second World War. Already during the 1930s, however, the rise of logical positivism meant that the new generation of philosophers consigned both Ross and Sidgwick to the outer darkness where, according to the tenets of logical positivism, those who utter unverifiable, and therefore meaningless, non-tautologous propositions belong.[32] After the war this approach to philosophy prevailed. It was succeeded by the view that the role of philosophy was to show that substantive philosophical problems could be resolved—or perhaps better, dissolved—by analyzing the way we use ordinary language. This style of doing philosophy left no room for substantive moral argument. Hence for two decades most English-speaking philosophers had little regard for normative ethical theory. That began to change in the 1960s when students demanded that their courses should be relevant to the world in which they lived, and to the issues that concerned them, like racial equality and the war in Vietnam. In the ensuing revival of normative and practical ethics, Sidgwick began to be read and appreciated once again. By the beginning of the 21st century, it was not unusual for *The Methods* to be ranked among the best books on ethics ever written.

[31] From a letter quoted in R. F. Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*, 114.

[32] John Deigh has argued that the decline of interest in Sidgwick's ethics was due to the epistemology on which it was based falling out of favour with analytic philosophers; see his 'Sidgwick's Epistemology', 435–46. Skelton argues against some of Deigh's claims in 'On Sidgwick's Demise: A Reply to Professor Deigh', 70–7, and Deigh replies in 'Some Further Thoughts on Sidgwick's Epistemology', 78–89.

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# 1

# What is Ethics?

## 1. Sidgwick's Approach to Ethics

Sidgwick's masterpiece is called *The Methods of Ethics*; but what is a 'method of ethics'? The term is unusual in ethics, and Sidgwick may have taken it from John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic,* a work that he admired, and which discussed methods of scientific investigation. Science has its methods, and uses them to obtain knowledge. Can ethics be put on the same footing by developing and refining its methods?[1] In the very first sentence of book I, Sidgwick defines a 'Method of Ethics' as 'any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings "ought"—or what it is "right" for them—to do, or to seek to realize by voluntary action'. In the next sentence he explains that he uses the word 'individual' deliberately, to differentiate ethics from politics, which he sees as concerned with the proper constitution and public conduct of governed societies.

Ethics is a study of what we ought to do, not of what is the case. Hence it is to be distinguished from those areas of sociology or psychology that study morality as a social practice, or examine the psychological factors that lead us to make the ethical judgments we make or the extent to which they influence our behaviour. This doesn't mean that there is no connection between ethics and the descriptive sciences. We cannot decide what ought to be, or know how to bring it about, without knowledge of how things are. Moreover

[1] Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics*, 194.

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Sidgwick believes that, if we are trying to find out what we ought to do, a good place to begin is with the answers that our fellow humans have given to this question, and this too requires knowledge of facts. Nevertheless, Sidgwick is clear that determining what *is* is essentially different from determining what is *right* and which judgments about right and wrong are true.

How then should we go about deciding what we ought to do? Most people, Sidgwick observes, draw on a variety of different principles, applying them in shifting, confused, and even inconsistent combinations. The task of philosophers is to examine these principles, ensure that they are internally consistent, or if not revise them so that they are consistent. The different ways of deciding what we ought to do need to be consolidated into a small number of 'methods of ethics' and then we must see if these methods conflict because it is, Sidgwick tells us, 'a fundamental postulate of Ethics, that so far as two methods conflict, one or other of them must be modified or rejected' (*ME* 6).

So what are these methods and what are these different practical principles that 'the common sense of mankind is prima facie prepared to accept as ultimate'? We need to set aside, first, ends that depend on some further goal. A doctor may tell a patient that he ought to exercise, but this advice presupposes that the patient wants to be healthy. If he prefers a life without exertion to good health, the 'ought' has no further hold on him. A method of ethics must be about ends that are not optional in this way (*ME* 7).

The man who prefers an indolent life does not take his own good health as an end, but presumably that is because he thinks that he will be happier if he does not exercise, and he wants happiness for its own sake. Most people would agree, Sidgwick says, that to act in your own interests, and thus to seek your own happiness, is 'a manifest obligation'. (Sidgwick is here quoting Butler.) We may baulk at the idea of describing the pursuit of our own happiness as an obligation, perhaps because people are all too ready to do it anyway, but we are likely to agree that people ought to care for their own happiness, and that there would be something odd—perhaps even irrational—in being totally unconcerned about it. Thus Sidgwick has arrived at the first candidate for the status of an ultimate principle: the principle that we

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ought to be concerned for our own happiness. The method based on this principle is the method of egoism.

Although most people would agree that one's own happiness is an ultimate end, common moral opinion also takes many other rules as fundamental, for example rules requiring us to act honestly and justly. Generally speaking, Sidgwick says, these rules are regarded as binding, irrespective of the consequences of obeying them. They present themselves to us intuitively, as directly or self-evidently true, and their validity is, or appears to be, categorical; that is, independent of any other principles or ultimate ends. Hence the approach to ethics based on these rules constitutes another method of ethics, which Sidgwick calls the method of intuitionism. In obeying these rules, we achieve the goal of our own moral perfection or excellence (*ME* 8).

Egoists would, of course, reject the idea that it can be right to follow a rule for the rule's sake, irrespective of its consequences. In their view, it would be right to follow a rule only if doing so will improve the prospects of achieving one's own happiness. But there is also another possible basis for rejecting the idea of following rules regardless of the consequences. We might take the ultimate end to be, not our own happiness, but everyone's happiness. This is the utilitarian view. Utilitarians hold that rules are to be followed only to the extent that obeying them will help to bring about the general happiness; aiming at the general happiness is the one categorical duty, and all other duties are applications of it.

We have therefore arrived at three distinct 'methods of ethics' which Sidgwick will proceed to examine in detail—not so much to prove them valid or invalid, but rather to give, as he says, a 'critical exposition' of each method (*ME* 78). In the history of ethical thought, all three of these methods of reasoning—egoism, intuitionism, and utilitarianism—have been implicit in many of the approaches taken, but Sidgwick's focus is not on the history of these schools of thought, nor on the specific ethical theories that have resulted from their use. Instead he wants to examine them as occupants of some kind of logical space, or as he puts it: 'as alternatives between which—as far as they cannot be reconciled—the human mind seems to me necessarily forced to choose, when it attempts to frame a complete synthesis

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of practical maxims and to act in a perfectly consistent manner' (*ME* 12).

Why just these three methods, and not others? Sidgwick does discuss three other possible ultimate reasons for action: that we should do what God wills, that we should seek self-realization, and that we should live in accordance with our nature. With regard to the view that we should act in accordance with God's will, he makes the wry comment that 'There is indeed a difficulty in understanding how God's Will can fail to be realized, whether we do right or wrong…' He then mentions a more practical difficulty with taking God's will as a reason for acting: to do so we would need to know what God's will is. If it is claimed that we can know this only by revelation, then obviously to know what we ought to do we must go beyond the scope of ethics. If on the other hand it is claimed that we can know the divine will by the use of our reason, then we are going to engage in the same process of thought that Sidgwick is already planning, and the appeal to God's will does not offer any special criterion of what is right.

The suggestion that we seek self-realization could, Sidgwick notes, be understood as a form of the method of egoism, since self-realization is arguably what best promotes our own interests. Alternatively, it could be seen as a form of the principle that we should live in accordance with our own nature. This latter principle, Sidgwick points out, only makes sense on the assumption that nature shows some form of design, and hence that by looking at human nature, we can discover the kind of life we were designed to live. For if the natural world is aimless, how can it determine what we ought to do? Advocates of this view also fail to specify what they mean by 'natural'. Is every human impulse natural? If not, how are we to determine which impulses are natural and which are not? Not, surely, by rejecting the less common ones as unnatural, nor by discovering which occurred earlier in our development, for, as Sidgwick writes, there is no ground for assuming that 'Nature abhors the exceptional, or prefers the earlier in time to the later'; and he adds that, if we look at the history of our species, we find that some of our most admirable impulses, like philanthropy, or love of knowledge, are both rarer and appeared later than other, less admirable impulses (*ME* 81–2). Once such confusions are exposed,

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however, attempts to derive what ought to be by appealing to what our nature is stand revealed as palpable failures.

## 2. The Scope of Ethics

The most striking aspect of Sidgwick's definition of a method of ethics is its breadth. For Sidgwick ethics is concerned with what it is rational and reasonable to do, and *any* rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ought to do will count as a method of ethics. There are no constraints on the upshot of rationality. If there are overriding reasons to act in accordance with an ultimate principle, then that principle is, for Sidgwick, an ethical principle—and conversely, if something truly is an ultimate ethical principle, it cannot be irrational to act on it. This definition enables him to classify egoism as a method of ethics.

Sidgwick's understanding of 'ethics' is wider than 'morality' as employed by many philosophers today. R. M. Hare, one of the most significant figures in 20th-century British moral philosophy, argued that if I make a moral judgment, I must be prepared to universalize it—and that means that I must be willing to apply the judgment irrespective of who gains or loses from it.[2] The fact that I will be happier if I embezzle millions of dollars from my employer does not show that this is what I ought to do, because when we make moral judgments, the fact that *I* am the one who gains is not relevant. I would have to apply the same judgment even if I were the employer, and someone else were the embezzler, or if I were neither of these but the employees who had to take wage cuts, or the consumers who had to pay higher prices, to make up for the losses—and of course I would not want to do that. Thus universalizability rules out 'first person egoism'—that is, the form of egoism that makes an ineliminable reference to the speaker's interests. 'Third person egoism'—represented by the principle 'Everyone ought to do what is in his or her own interests'—is universalizable, because it contains no first person pronouns or proper names. But if I accept third person egoism, I must accept that

[2] Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, ch. 3, and *Moral Thinking*, ch. 6.

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the thief who steals my wallet is doing what he ought to do—as long as he has correctly judged that the theft is in his interest.

Since universalizability is, for Hare, a matter of how we use moral language, the first person egoist cannot, on Hare's view, make genuine moral judgments. The first person egoist can, however, consistently be an amoralist, declining to make any moral judgments at all. Whether any form of egoism is a rational position to hold is a separate question that would require more substantive argument. We will consider David Gauthier's defence of rational egoism in Chapter 6, when we discuss Sidgwick's problem of the dualism of practical reason; for our present purposes, it is sufficient to note that this question cannot be answered by a definition of 'morality' or an account of how we use moral language.

John Rawls regards egoism as consistent, and therefore not irrational, but 'incompatible with what we intuitively regard as the moral point of view'.[3] For Rawls, egoism is not an alternative conception of what it is right to do, but 'a challenge to any such conception'. Derek Parfit agrees. He refers to the way Sidgwick uses 'ought' as the 'decisive-reason' sense, according to which 'what we ought to do' means 'what we have decisive reasons to do'. He thinks, however, that there is a distinct 'moral ought' that is worth preserving. In this distinct sense, it would be misleading to use 'ought' to mean 'what we have decisive reasons to do'. He points out that: 'We often believe that we have decisive reasons to act in some way, though we do not believe that we ought morally to act in this way.'[4] In a note in which he discusses some of Sidgwick's mistakes, he writes: 'He should have distinguished more clearly between the concept of what we ought morally to do, and of what we have most reason to do.'[5]

Hare, Rawls, and Parfit are no doubt right about how moral language is commonly used. Sidgwick himself is not oblivious to this usage, for he occasionally acknowledges that it is common to distinguish prudential judgments from moral judgments (for example, *ME* 25). He uses 'ethics' in a wider sense, however, and we think it is to

[3] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 117.
[4] Parfit, *On What Matters*, Volume One 166.
[5] Parfit, *On What Matters*, Volume One, 453, note to p. xl.

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Sidgwick's credit that he did not seek to make a merely terminological point about the nature of ethics. Since one of the aims of this book is to expound Sidgwick's position, we will follow Sidgwick's terminology. This means using 'ought' in the wide sense—what Parfit calls the 'decisive-reason' sense—so that to say that people ought to do something is to say that they have decisive reasons to do it.

Nothing substantive depends on the usage we adopt. If we had adopted the narrower usage, we could still have asked what it is rational for an individual to do, and the egoist's answer would have remained a possible answer to that question, alongside the method of intuitionism and the method of utilitarianism. We might then have called egoism a 'method of rational choice' rather than a 'method of ethics' and the contest for the best 'method of ethics' in this narrow sense of the term would then have been—at least as far as Sidgwick's chosen 'methods' are concerned—between intuitionism and utilitarianism. As we shall argue in Chapter 6, however, the victory for 'ethics' would prove hollow if egoism turns out to be superior as a method of rational choice.[6]

If Sidgwick did not distinguish clearly between 'ethics' and 'morality', nor between what we have most reason to do and what morality requires us to do, he may have assumed that when we say that an act is morally wrong, we imply that we have decisive reasons not to do it. Many people regard it as strange to contemplate that reason and morality could come apart—that is, that the morally right thing to do might be something quite different from what we have most reason to do. Internalists about the relationship between reason and morality, or moral rationalists as they are sometimes called, hold that if something is morally wrong, then we have a reason not to do it (strong moral rationalists say that we have an overriding reason not to do it). Externalists about the relationship between reason and morality hold that the reasons for doing what is right lie outside morality—for instance, in feelings of empathy or compassion for others, or perhaps

[6] Sidgwick's approach now seems quite contemporary. Scanlon observes at the outset of *Being Realistic about Reasons* that, although English-language moral philosophy in the second half of the 20th century tended to focus on the meanings of moral judgments, today the pendulum has swung back towards a focus on what we have most reason to do.

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in the desire to be rewarded in heaven, or to maintain one's reputation as an ethical person. Strong moral rationalism gains support from the oddity of recommending one course of conduct as morally right, while at the same time saying that it would be rational to do something else. Does not such a view undermine morality altogether? This troubling possibility is one ground for preferring the wider usage, in which what we ought to do is what it is rational to do. Then the question does not even arise; but as we have said, nothing really hangs on the terminological issue, because we still have to discuss, for example, whether it is rational to show concern for others, rather than only for oneself. We shall return to these issues in Chapters 6 and 7.

## 3. The Aim of Ethics

What is the point of doing moral philosophy? Are moral philosophers like some kind of secular preacher, who, appealing to reason rather than to divine revelation, tells you what you ought to do? We recognize expertise in physics, medicine, mathematics, and history, but many people find the idea that philosophers are, or can be, 'moral experts' disturbing or even offensive. We can easily accept that we do not know much about how computers work, so when our computers cease to work properly, we seek expert assistance. But what is it that moral philosophers know that other people do not? And how can that help us decide what we ought to do? On moral issues, we tend to believe, people should think for themselves.

Sidgwick believes that moral philosophy, when done well, enables us to get clearer and better answers to the central question: 'What ought I to do?' This is possible because 'the unphilosophic man is apt to hold different principles at once, and to apply different methods in more or less confused combination' (*ME* 6). Consistently with that view, Sidgwick sees the aim of the study of ethics as 'to systematise and free from error the apparent cognitions that most men have of the rightness or reasonableness of conduct' and to find 'valid ultimate reasons for acting or abstaining' (*ME* 77–8). The aim of the moral philosopher is not merely to 'define and formulate the common moral opinions of mankind', but 'to tell men what they ought

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to think, rather than what they do think: he is expected to transcend Common Sense in his premises, and is allowed a certain divergence from Common Sense in his conclusions' (*ME* 373).

Sidgwick believes that moral judgments are about something real, and we can get them right or we can get them wrong. Careful reflection on the nature and ground of our judgments, of the sort that he himself undertakes in *The Methods of Ethics,* will reduce the likelihood of error. So those who spend some of their time thinking and reflecting about ethics are more likely to give a true answer to the question 'What ought I to do?' than those who do not do this. That makes moral philosophers moral experts, at least relative to the unreflective others, even if Sidgwick was too modest to claim that title for himself.

## 4. Why Only These Methods of Ethics?

As we have seen, Sidgwick chooses only three methods—egoism, intuitionism, and utilitarianism—for detailed examination. Terence Irwin has challenged Sidgwick's justification for selecting just these methods. He points out that when Sidgwick defends his choice of methods, he says that he is interested in methods 'which are logically connected with the different ultimate reasons widely accepted' and goes on to say that 'such reasons were supplied by the notions of Happiness and Excellence or Perfection . . . regarded as ultimate ends, and Duty as prescribed by unconditional rules' (*ME* 78). In the case of happiness, because we can aim at it either for ourselves or universally, Sidgwick presents two methods—egoistic hedonism and universalist hedonism. One could expect, Irwin writes, that he would do the same with perfectionism, and present egoistic perfectionism and universalist perfectionism.[7] Moreover, a distinct reason for action is given by the idea that moral principles are unconditionally binding, without any further reference to any ends that they promote. That should make five methods, the first four what we now call now teleological, and the last a deontological one. Sidgwick reduces this

[7] See Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 449.

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to three by absorbing the goal of excellence or perfection, whether aimed at for oneself or universally, into the deontological method of perfectionism.[8]

Irwin believes that Sidgwick has no satisfactory reason for this move. First, Irwin sees no ground for dividing the goal of happiness into egoistic and universalist variants while not treating the goal of perfection in the same way, and second he sees no reason for treating teleological perfectionism and deontological intuitionism as the same method.[9]

Sidgwick has anticipated this criticism. In the first chapter of *The Methods*, he refers to the fact that the goal of happiness can be pursued either for oneself or for everyone. He then turns to the goal of excellence or perfection, and comments: 'At first sight, indeed, the same alternatives present themselves.' There is, however, a difference. We are all familiar with circumstances in which we face a choice between our own happiness and the happiness of others. Similarly, we can imagine circumstances in which we face a choice between our own perfection or excellence, and the excellence or perfection of others. (Perhaps we would have to betray our friends in order to prevent many others falling under a corrupting influence.) In the case of happiness, many thinkers urge that I should be prepared to give up my own happiness for the sake of the happiness of others, but when it comes to excellence or perfection, Sidgwick notes, 'no moralist who takes Excellence as an ultimate end has ever approved of such sacrifice' and 'no one has ever directed an individual to promote the virtue of others except in so far as this promotion is compatible with, or rather involved in, the complete realisation of Virtue in himself' (*ME* 10–11). In other words, universal perfectionism as a teleological method of ethics that parallels universal hedonism by trying to maximize what it takes to be of ultimate value is a friendless non-starter.[10]

[8] Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 449.

[9] Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 452.

[10] Anthony Skelton has pointed out to us that Hastings Rashdall, in *The Theory of Good and Evil* (a work he dedicated 'to the memory of my teachers, Thomas Hill Green and Henry

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That might still leave us with four methods, rather than three; but Sidgwick also offers a reason for holding that perfectionism is not an independent method. Instead, he argues, it has to be grounded on the deontological approach that is central to his method of intuitionism:

And since Virtue is commonly conceived as the most valuable element of human Excellence . . . any method which takes Perfection or Excellence of human nature as ultimate End will *prima facie* coincide to a great extent with that based on what I called the Intuitional view: and I have accordingly decided to treat it as a special form of this latter. (*ME* 11)

This passage is followed by a footnote in which Sidgwick explains that later in his book he will argue that Perfectionism cannot be an Ultimate End. We shall discuss that argument in Chapter 8; here Sidgwick is limiting himself to explaining why, although the goal

Sidgwick'), came close to approving of the sacrifice of one's own virtue for the greater good of others. Rashdall writes:

> in considering one's own moral good, there may be cases in which it may be right, just in order to do one's duty, to adopt a course of action which may be likely on the whole to have an injurious effect on one's own character, in that sense of character in which a man is made better or worse by influences not under the immediate control of his own will. It may sometimes be right for a man to adopt a profession which in the long run may have a lowering effect upon his ideals and upon his conduct, in preference to one which would be likely to have a more elevating influence; or in innumerable other ways to face temptations which he does not know that he will always be able to resist rather than to purchase his own moral purity at the cost of other people's well-being. (*The Theory of Good and Evil*, ii. 46–7)

Skelton points out that, for Rashdall, well-being includes virtue (*The Theory of Good and Evil*, 37) and therefore this implies that Rashdall thinks it right to sacrifice one's own virtue to increase the virtue of others. On the other hand, after the passage quoted, Rashdall immediately goes on to counter such an implication by writing:

> But still, this admission does not involve any abandonment of our previous contention—that it can never be right for a man to do an immediately wrong act for the sake of any other advantage to himself or others. By choosing the greater good, he has done his duty (even in choosing a course which may in the long run react in some ways unfavourably upon his own character), and by doing his duty he has chosen the greatest good for himself. He would have become a worse man by taking the opposite course. Paradox as it may seem, he would have become a less moral man on the whole by attaching too high a value to his own Morality.

So it seems that, for Rashdall, it is not possible to sacrifice one's virtue by doing what is right, for that would not be a sacrifice of one's own virtue.

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of happiness leads to two distinct methods, the goal of perfectionism does not, and indeed does not even constitute an independent method.

Sidgwick returns to this question in his subsequent justification of his selection of the three methods in the chapter on 'Ethical Principles and Methods' where he admits that 'almost any method may be connected with almost any ultimate reason by means of some—often plausible—assumption' and that this makes it difficult to classify ethical systems, as their affinities with each other may vary depending on whether one is comparing the ultimate ends, or the method. He says that, in deciding how to classify ethical systems, he will take the distinctness of the methods as paramount. Since the view that perfection is the ultimate end takes right conduct to be determined by axioms of duty that we know intuitively, it falls under the method of intuitionism (*ME* 83–4).

Sidgwick's explanation of why he lumps together perfectionism and common sense morality under the umbrella of the method of intuitionism may not satisfy everyone. Even those who think Sidgwick should have treated perfectionism as a separate method, however, must admit that Sidgwick does take the arguments in favour of perfectionism into account, when he considers whether perfectionism is an ultimate end.

Now that we have understood why Sidgwick chooses the three methods of egoism, intuitionism, and utilitarianism, we will consider whether he is on firm ground in rejecting possible methods of ethics based on God's will, self-realization, and acting according to our nature.

Sidgwick mentions that 'many religious persons' regard the fact that God wills us to do something as the highest reason for doing it. That statement remains true today, and makes this point worth a fuller discussion. We share Sidgwick's difficulty in understanding how we *could* do something that is contrary to the will of an omniscient, omnipotent creator, who must have been able to foresee, when he created the universe, every action of every human being, and presumably has the ability to change each and every one of our actions, if he wishes to do so. The usual story that theists tell here is that God gave

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us free will, because that is so great a good that it outweighs all the bad things that humans have used their free will to do. We find this dubious on both metaphysical and ethical grounds. Metaphysically, this idea will not work unless free will is understood as agents making uncaused choices, for if our choices can have causes and still be free, God could have arranged the causes so that we freely choose to do only what he wants us to do. But we find the idea of uncaused choices mysterious, and even if we could understand it, we cannot see how we could be responsible for choices that are not caused by anything at all. Ethically this argument is dubious because it implies that the value of free will is so great that it outweighs all the atrocities that humans have committed, including the slaughters of all the wars that have ever occurred, plus the Nazi holocaust, Stalin's crimes, the killing fields of Cambodia, and so on and on, for tens of thousands of years. And then to that we must add up all the individual acts of cruelty committed on a daily basis, and we should not forget the vast amount of suffering that humans inflict on untold billions of animals. We find it hard to accept that having free will is *so* good that it can outweigh all that.

If, however, this difficulty can be overcome, the view that our knowledge of God's will gives us a rational procedure for finding out what we ought to do must still face a dilemma.

How do we know what God's will is? Has God revealed his will to us in a sacred text, or do we have to use our reason to discover what he wants us to do? If God has revealed his will to us, then discovering what we ought to do involves interpreting the sacred text, or perhaps judging between different claimants to be the one to whom God revealed his will. Either way, as Sidgwick points out, it becomes a religious activity, rather than a philosophical one, and hence 'beyond the range of our study'. This would imply that we should abandon philosophical ethics, but Sidgwick seems not to take this possibility very seriously, for he goes on to write another 430 pages of almost entirely secular ethics. This is consistent with accepting the other horn of his dilemma for the theistic moralist: that we have to use our reason to discover what God wills. On that interpretation, of course, Sidgwick's effort to discover what we

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have most reason to do could also be seen as an effort to discover what God wills us to do. (Sidgwick could not accept the beliefs of the Church of England, but the words he asked to have said at his funeral service suggest that he was a theist of some sort.) God makes a reappearance in the concluding chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*, not as a source of knowledge of what we ought to do, but as a possible source of a self-interested motivation for doing it, and hence of harmonizing egoism and utilitarianism. We will say more about this in Chapter 6.

Like the idea of doing what God wills, the idea of living according to nature still has followers, both in the popular sense of, say, objecting to same-sex marriage as 'unnatural' and in the more philosophical sense of natural law theory. John Stuart Mill wrote an essay opposing the appeal to nature in moral arguments, saying that the many confusing associations of the word 'nature' make it one of 'the most copious sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law'.[11] Mill pointed out that by 'nature' we may mean everything that exists, or everything that exists *apart* from human beings and untouched by human agency. In the former sense, everything we do is natural, including building freeways, curing disease, making pink candy canes, and creating embryos in laboratories. In the latter sense, a virgin forest may be natural, but it is not possible for us, as human agents, to do what is natural.

Sidgwick's objection is different. He clearly has natural law theory in mind when he writes that those who use 'natural' in a way that has some positive ethical overtones usually suppose that by observing human nature we can discover how humans were designed to live. If nature is aimless, however, we have no reason to derive 'what ought to be' from 'what is'. Despite renewed attempts to defend natural law since Sidgwick wrote these words, we have seen none that show how it is possible to derive values from natural facts about the world. The 'new natural law' of theorists like Germain Grisez and John Finnis avoids this objection only by assuming that our reason can show us that there are some self-evident goods, such as life, health, knowledge,

[11] Mill, *On Nature*, 7.

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friendship, and marriage. It thus becomes a form of intuitionism, rather than a distinct method of ethics.[12]

The third of the possible methods that Sidgwick rejects is self-realization, which today is more likely to be explored in self-help books and other works of popular psychology than in the writings of moral philosophers. The idea that we should pursue self-realization because it will make us happier is, as Sidgwick points out, a factual claim that, if true, makes the pursuit of self-realization part of the method of egoism. If, on the other hand, the idea is that we ought to realize ourselves because it is in our nature to do so, we are back to deducing values from facts about nature.

Sidgwick was right, then, to reject the three possible methods of ethics that he considers but does not accept. Perhaps, though, there are others with stronger claims that he does not even discuss? Let's take, for example, the normative views that Derek Parfit discusses in *On What Matters*, a book that in some ways can be seen as a contemporary equivalent of *The Methods of Ethics*. Like Sidgwick, Parfit focuses on three broad normative theories: Kantianism, consequentialism, and contractualism. Of these three, consequentialism is Sidgwick's utilitarianism, though in a form that leaves it open what the ultimate good is. What about Kantianism and contractualism? Sidgwick was familiar with them. Why did he not consider either of them to be a method of ethics?

Sidgwick does not include contractualism as a method of ethics because, as he tells us in the opening sentence of *The Methods of Ethics,* by a method of ethics he means any rational procedure that enables us to say what 'individual human beings' ought to do, and he then adds that he uses the word 'individual' to distinguish the study of ethics from that of politics, 'which seeks to determine the proper constitution and the right public conduct of governed societies'. It seems likely, therefore, that Sidgwick regarded contractualism as belonging to politics rather than ethics, since the leading social contract theorists, like Hobbes and Locke, were concerned, first and foremost, to set out the grounds of the obligation of the governed to obey the government.

[12] See Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights,* and Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus.*

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Contractualism today is more readily seen as an ethical theory, rather than a political one, but it still seeks to determine the right *public* standard for conduct and an answer to questions like 'In living together, what standards of right and wrong should we all accept?' or in Thomas Scanlon's version 'What standards cannot be reasonably rejected by anyone?' These are important and interesting questions, but they are not Sidgwick's 'What ought I to do?' Sidgwick of course had no way of considering the versions of contractualism later put forward by Rawls and Scanlon, but we doubt that they would have persuaded him to regard contractualism as an independent method of ethics. For one thing, Sidgwick was interested in the whole of ethics, and not only, as Rawls was, those parts of it concerned with just institutions, or as Scanlon is, with what we *owe* to each other. Moreover, as we shall explain more fully in Chapter 10, he would have denied that the answer to 'What ought I to do?' has to refer to a *public* standard, or has to be justifiable *to others* in a way that goes beyond them being simply justifiable.

As far as Kantianism goes, Sidgwick includes Kant among 'intuitional moralists' (*ME* 366), although without explaining in what respect he is an intuitionist. Sidgwick discusses Kant's ethics more fully in his *Outlines of the History of Ethics,* saying there that the English moral philosopher whom he most closely resembles is Richard Price, a contemporary of Kant, who certainly was an intuitionist. The points on which Sidgwick sees Kant and Price as in agreement include the idea that we ought to do what is right for its own sake, not for the consequences we thereby bring about; that an action is not good unless done from a good motive; that no natural inclination can provide a good motive, but rather that we should act because we see that doing so is our duty; and that this 'seeing' something as our duty comes from our reason. Sidgwick also notes, however, that Kant is more philosophically consistent than Price in recognizing that the criterion of rightness must, on such a view, depend on some formal properties of the action, rather than on the material facts, which would inevitably be related to the motive or consequences of the action.[13]

[13] Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics,* 271–2.

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In his posthumously published autobiographical note Sidgwick writes that, after initially agreeing with Mill that Kant's ethics is a 'grotesque failure', he later reread Kant and 'was impressed with the truth and importance of its fundamental principle—*Act from a principle or maxim that you can will to be a universal law*', which he says put the 'golden rule' of the gospel 'into a form that commended itself to my reason' (*ME* p. xvii). This recognition was apparently not sufficient, however, for Sidgwick to consider that Kant had a unique method of ethics distinct from the method of intuitionism because Sidgwick could not accept its metaphysical basis; that is, Kant's attempt to base morality on freedom. Sidgwick thought that this attempt relied on a 'fundamental confusion' between the kind of freedom that involves our reason triumphing over our inclination, and thus is achieved only when we do what is right, and the more common sense of freedom, in which we can also choose to do wrong, and which is implied by the idea that if we do choose what is wrong, we deserve blame or punishment (*ME* p. xvii). If Kant's famous principle of universal law cannot depend on material facts, however, nor on the concept of freedom, what can it be based on? Only, Sidgwick believed, on something that we grasp intuitively, and so Kant must be an intuitionist.

Sidgwick considers Kant's principle to be important, in that he thinks that no action based on a maxim that one cannot will to be a universal law could be ethical; but he does not think that the reverse holds. He argues that people who act conscientiously may hold opposing views, and each of them may be able to will that the maxim of their action should be a universal law. But since they disagree, they cannot both be right. Hence the categorical imperative cannot be the sole criterion of moral rightness, as Kant thought it was. That, Sidgwick thinks, is 'an error analogous to that of supposing that Formal Logic supplies a complete criterion of truth' (*ME* 209–10). Kantians will no doubt claim that Sidgwick has failed to understand Kant correctly, but exactly what the correct interpretation of Kant's categorical imperative is remains controversial. Since we have no desire to venture into the thickets of Kant interpretation, we will not offer an opinion on whether Kant's ethics offers a distinct and defensible method of ethics. Parfit argues that it is only defensible in

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a form that converges with both rule consequentialism and Scanlon's form of contractualism. If we accept this argument, the question is not whether Kant's theory can be interpreted or modified in a manner that makes it more defensible than Sidgwick believes it to be, but whether such an interpretation leaves it sufficiently distinct from other methods of ethics, including those that Sidgwick discusses.[14]

Sidgwick would no doubt classify most other plausible candidates for methods of ethics as variants of the method of intuitionism. So, for example, in considering whether 'living in accordance with nature' provides a basis for a method of ethics, Sidgwick mentions the idea of natural rights, and says that this conception faces the problem of establishing some reason, beyond mere custom, that is a plausible moral principle. This problem can only be solved, he says, by appealing to some ultimate good, such as happiness or perfection, or by appealing to some other principle, which will be known by intuition. In either case, natural rights will become an element in a different method, not a distinct method of its own (*ME* 82–3). We agree that derivations of rights tend to be based either on some form of rule consequentialism, or on intuition. How else can we decide what rights people have, and when, if ever, they may be overridden? As R. M. Hare put, 'rights are the stamping ground of intuitionists'.[15] The same could be true of virtue ethics, since virtues figure prominently in Sidgwick's discussion of intuitionism, but Sidgwick has another objection to virtue ethics, which we will consider in Chapter 8, when we discuss his view on ultimate value.

We conclude that Sidgwick does not reject plausible 'methods of ethics' in order to make it easier for him to reach his desired conclusion. Yes, he could have classified perfectionism differently, and then had four methods rather than three, and perhaps if he were writing today he could include forms of Kantianism or contractualism as distinct methods. But methods are not the same as ethical theories, and so we should not expect Sidgwick to discuss all the well-known philosophical traditions. Sidgwick tells us in the first paragraph of the

[14] Parfit, *On What Matters,* Volume One, chs. 8–10.
[15] Hare, 'Abortion and the Golden Rule', 203.

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preface to the first edition of *The Methods* that 'it does not deal, except by way of illustration, with the history of ethical thought' (*ME* p. vii). More importantly, the fact that he does not regard every distinctive ethical theory as a method of ethics does not mean that these theories do not get considered. As we will see in the following chapters, all of the major metaethical and normative ethical theories do get discussed at some point in *The Methods*.

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# 2

# Reason and Action

## 1. Sidgwick on Practical Reason and the Nature of Ethical Judgments

When Sidgwick explains what a method of ethics is, he speaks of it as a 'rational procedure'. Can ethics really be based on reason? In this chapter we discuss the nature of practical reason and what we have reasons for doing. We begin, as usual, by setting out Sidgwick's position. This will lead to some of the central philosophical questions about ethics. Are moral judgments objective or subjective? What role can reason play in our decisions about what we ought to do?

Chapter 3 of book I of *The Methods of Ethics* is headed 'Ethical Judgments'. Sidgwick begins by noting that we commonly believe that 'wrong conduct is essentially irrational and can be shown to be so by argument'. We know, he acknowledges, that it is not reason alone that influences people to act ethically, but appeals to reason are nevertheless, he claims, 'an essential part of all moral persuasion' (*ME* 23). On the other hand, he continues, many people agree with Hume's view that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.' On Hume's view, the underlying motive for every action must always be some non-rational 'passion' or as we would now call it, desire. Reason is subordinate to desire, and it is a mistake to think that there can ever be any conflict between the two of them.

Sidgwick therefore sets out the issue between his own position and Hume's. He begins by pointing out that we have all had the experience

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of a conflict between our non-rational or irrational desires and our reason. We may have an appetite for some indulgence that we know to be imprudent (perhaps Sidgwick is here thinking of eating more than is good for us) or we may be angry and therefore desire to do something that we know to be unjust or unkind (here Sidgwick may have in mind a desire to strike out in some way at a person with whom we are angry, although we know it would be wrong to do so).[1] When these things happen, Hume would agree that our reason plays *some* role: we use it to work out the means to our ends ('Where can I get more of that delicious cake?' 'How can I get revenge on that brute?') and also to work out what will happen if we do the action we are contemplating ('It will be bad for my health to be so overweight' or 'My friends will shun me if they discover I am so vengeful'). The question is whether this is *all* that our reason can do in such situations. Is the situation, in fact, not so much a conflict between desire and reason, but a conflict among desires, with reason limited to the role of bringing to our mind facts relevant to our various desires (*ME* 23–5)?

Sidgwick argues that reason plays more than this limited role. He begins his argument indirectly, by considering what account of moral judgments can be given by those who think that deciding what we ought to do is, at bottom, a matter of choosing one set of non-rational desires over a different set of non-rational desires. The first possibility he considers is that the term 'right' applies only to means, and not to ends. This would be consistent with retaining a link between 'right' and 'in accordance with reason' for, on the view we are considering, reason can be used to judge whether a means is suitable for achieving a given end, but it cannot judge the end itself. Sidgwick no doubt has in mind Hume's instrumentalist view of reason, which is still commonly taken for granted in contemporary economics. Against this view, Sidgwick points out that we regard some actions, for example those we call just, as 'right' irrespective of the ends that they bring about, and we also regard the choice of some ends—such as the common good of society, or general happiness—as 'right'. So the proposal

[1] The examples are ours rather than Sidgwick's.

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that 'right' applies only to the means to an end does not account for the moral judgments we make (*ME* 26).

Next Sidgwick examines the possibility that the term 'right' does not refer to any kind of judgment of reason, but instead is a description or expression of present or future feelings. As Sidgwick puts it, on this view the sentence 'Truthspeaking is right' means no more than 'the idea of truthspeaking excites in my mind a feeling of approbation or satisfaction'. What Sidgwick has to say about this view is applicable, not only to Hume and his followers, but to all those who defend some form of ethical subjectivism, including views that were fully developed only after Sidgwick's time, such as emotivism and expressivism. Sidgwick accepts that the feeling of approbation which we may call 'moral sentiment' may accompany moral judgments, but considers it absurd to maintain that a statement about the existence of this feeling is *all* we are saying when we say 'Truth ought to be spoken'. After all, if one person says 'Truth ought to be spoken' and another says 'Truth ought not to be spoken' these propositions contradict each other; but it is perfectly possible that the two people who utter those two different sentences have different feelings of approbation. So true coexisting facts—the facts about what these two people approve—result in two contradictory propositions, and that is impossible (*ME* 26–7).

To this argument against subjectivist theories of ethics, Sidgwick anticipates the objection that even if, when we make moral judgments, we think we are stating propositions that can be true or false, and can contradict each other, all that we have any ground for saying, or all that the reasonable person can, on reflection, affirm, is the subjective fact of the feeling of approval or disapproval.[2] Sidgwick agrees that we utter many statements that because of a certain form seem to be about something objective but really express only our subjective feelings—his examples are statements like 'The air is sweet' or 'The food is disagreeable'. If such statements are challenged we will probably be content to fall back on affirming that we feel these things to be so. But this is not the case with moral approbation, Sidgwick argues,

[2] Sidgwick here anticipates the sceptical view that John Mackie was later to put forward, generally known as the 'error theory'. See Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

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because then we have the conviction 'that the conduct approved is "really" right—*i.e.* that it cannot, without error, be disapproved by any other mind'[3] (*ME* 27).

This point shows only that we do not think of our moral judgments as simply expressing our feelings; but we still do not know that this conviction is well founded. Sidgwick points out that when we change our minds about things on which we have well-formed moral habits, our previous feelings may persist despite the change in our judgment. If, for instance, we are in the habit of telling the truth, but then come to believe that in some peculiar circumstances we ought not to tell the truth, we may still feel repugnance when we do not tell the truth; but this feeling of repugnance is compatible with, and quite different from, our judgment that we are doing what is right. To what, then, does that judgment refer? Some of the moral philosophers who regard ethical judgments as based on feelings hold that these judgments do not refer to our own individual feelings, but to the feelings of others in our society, or perhaps of all humanity.[4] But if we come to a new moral conviction that differs not only from our own previous conviction, but from the convictions of everyone else in our society, or even in the entire world, the fact of this difference will not necessarily prevent us continuing to hold firm to the new conviction.

Up to this point Sidgwick has tried to prove that our moral judgments are not statements about feelings of approbation or aversion. Next he dismisses the view that the meaning of a moral judgment is bound up with the existence of sanctions that may punish or reward people in accordance with whether they do what is right. Sidgwick considers this mistaken because when we say that a man is morally bound to do something, we do not mean merely that he will be subject to sanctions—whether legal or social—if he does not do it (*ME*

[3] Like most philosophers until very recently, Sidgwick was here relying on his own observations. There is now some research that seeks to discover whether ordinary people do in fact have the conviction that, if two people reach conflicting moral judgments, one of them must be in error. See e.g. Sarkissian *et al.*, 'Folk Moral Relativism', 482–505.

[4] Sidgwick may have had Adam Smith in mind, for Smith defends such a view in his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments,* part III, ch. 1.

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29). There are many things that we think people ought to do, although we know that if they do not do it, they will not face any serious penalties; and sometimes, when we think that the conventionally accepted morality of our society is wrong, we may strongly believe that something is the right thing to do, even though we know that we will suffer social sanctions for doing it.

After this Sidgwick considers the possibility that the meaning of 'I ought to do this' does require that there will be a penalty if I do not do it, but the penalty is divinely, rather than socially, ordained, so that the statement means 'God will punish me if I do not'. Sidgwick rejects this, first because some people do not believe in the existence of divine punishment and yet still have moral convictions, and secondly because if we accept this understanding of the moral terms, then we can hardly say that it is *right* or *just* for God to punish sinners and reward the righteous, because this would be saying nothing more than that God *will* punish and reward these people (*ME* 31).

What, then, does Sidgwick think the moral terms *do* mean? Sidgwick's answer is that 'the notion which these terms have in common is too elementary to admit of any formal definition'. It cannot be resolved into any simpler constituent parts. All we can do, he thinks, is try to make it clearer by saying how it relates to other notions in our moral thought, and distinguishing it from different notions with which it is liable to be confused (*ME* 32).

The judgment that 'X ought to be done', when taken in 'the stricter ethical sense' is for Sidgwick a 'dictate' or 'precept' of reason. By that he means, first, that a moral judgment is 'a possible object of knowledge' and this means that all rational beings would come to the same view, if they judge truly (*ME* 33). Secondly, knowing the truth of a moral judgment provides an impulse or motive to action in 'rational beings as such'. Sidgwick does not offer an explicit account of what a 'rational being as such' would be like, but we do get clues to what he has in mind when he goes on to contrast such beings with human beings, in whom he says that knowledge of the truth of a moral judgment is only one motive among others, and not always, and perhaps not usually, a predominant one. He then adds that the very idea that a moral judgment is an 'imperative' suggests some kind of conflict

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between reason and non-rational impulses, and the same is true of terms like 'ought', 'duty', and 'moral obligation', which therefore 'cannot be applied to the actions of rational beings to whom we cannot attribute impulses conflicting with reason', although we can say that what such beings do is right (*ME* 34–5). From this we can conclude that when Sidgwick refers to 'rational beings as such' he has in mind beings lacking any impulses conflicting with reason. This is consistent with the fact that the only other passages in *The Methods* in which he uses this phrase are in book III, in a special note on the argument by which Kant seeks to establish the duty of promoting the happiness of others. Sidgwick scrutinizes Kant's claim that 'all rational beings as such are ends to each' and therefore 'humanity exists as an end in itself' (*ME* 390).[5] Sidgwick does not consider Kant's argument cogent, but he does appear to accept as conceivable Kant's idea of rational beings as such, and Kant's assumption that such beings would differ from human beings in not being subject to non-rational impulses, which includes 'empirical desires and aversions'. Thus rational beings as such would only have desires and impulses that were given to them by reason. Presumably they would lack the desires and aversions that human beings, with a non-rational side to their nature, happen to have, but which other rational beings, with a different empirical nature, might not have.

For now, however, let us return to human beings, for whom moral judgments are a kind of 'unconditional or categorical imperative'. Sidgwick observes that some people may simply deny that they can find in their consciousness any such imperative. If they lack completely any notion of moral obligation, Sidgwick says that he doesn't know how to impart it to them (*ME* 35). But he thinks that many of those who say that they lack this notion may really mean only that they lack the notion of an obligation that should be fulfilled for its own sake, rather than because of its consequences. These people would not reject the idea that there are some universal ends (like general happiness) at which it is ultimately reasonable to aim, and if they

[5] Sidgwick is here quoting, in his own translation, from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.

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would accept this idea, then Sidgwick would say to them that to recognize an end as ultimately reasonable already involves recognizing that there is an obligation to do what will bring about that end.

Moreover, even egoists who do not recognize universal ends, but do recognize their own interest as something at which it is ultimately reasonable to aim, still accept that there is a 'dictate of reason'. For on this view, when the end of pursuing one's own interest conflicts with one's irrational desires, reason directs that we pursue our interests. Hence the idea of what we 'ought' to do has a place in an egoistic view as much as in any ordinary moral system (*ME* 35–6).

What, though, if the sceptic about practical reason goes further still, and denies that reason prescribes *any* end at all? The sceptic might, for example, take the view that the agent's own greatest good is not something that he 'ought to' do, or has any kind of obligation to aim at, but rather is merely the ultimate end he most desires (*ME* 36). Sidgwick argues that, even on that view, the notion of 'ought' remains. There will still be hypothetical imperatives that prescribe the fittest means to any end at which we are aiming. Imagine that a doctor tells you that if you wish to be healthy, you ought to rise early. This is not the same as saying that early rising is an indispensable condition of being healthy. The word 'ought' says something more than a description of the physiological facts. It implies that, if you were to adopt the end of preserving your health, and refuse to take the means that are necessary to achieving this end, even when you can do so at no cost to anyone, including yourself, you would be unreasonable (*ME* 37). This is what the doctor's suggestion that, if health is your end, you ought to rise early, adds to the mere factual statement that if you do not rise early you will not be healthy. To do without the basic notion that something ought to be done is much more difficult than we might at first imagine. Hence sweeping scepticism about the use of the moral 'ought' is not an easy way of resisting Sidgwick's idea that ethical judgments present themselves to us as dictates of reason.

As we have just seen, in the chapter on 'Ethical Judgments' Sidgwick argued that our knowledge of the truth of a moral judgment can provide a motive for action in human beings, although it may be only one motive among others. This view seems directly contrary to Hume's

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view that only desires can move us to action, and so requires further explanation and defence. In the following chapter, on 'Pleasure and Desire', Sidgwick returns to the topic of reason as a motivating force, this time discussing what he calls 'the emotional characteristics of the impulse that prompts us to obey the dictates of Reason' (*ME* 39). The reference to an impulse with some emotional aspects now looks closer to Hume's view, especially given that Sidgwick tells us that in *The Methods* '"Desire" is primarily regarded as a felt impulse or stimulus to actions tending to the realisation of what is desired'[6] (*ME* 43 n. 8). Does this mean that Sidgwick thinks there is some emotionally laden impulse that everyone experiences when they grasp the truth of a moral judgment? He acknowledges that these 'emotional characteristics' can be different in different people and even for the same person they can vary at different times, and he gives some examples: for someone who supports rational egoism 'the ruling impulse' can be '"calm" or "cool" self-love'. For a utilitarian it can be 'to do what is judged to be reasonable as such', which is commonly blended with 'sympathy and philanthropic enthusiasm'. Some take reason to be a source of truth external to themselves, and for them there may be a 'sentiment of Reverence for Authority' which could be seen impersonally, or as reverence for a supreme being. This conception of reason as an external authority can be seen as something that is 'irresistibly forced on the reflective mind' and thus as opposed to our own will; alternatively, however, we can identify our self with reason, in which case accepting the authority of reason becomes a form of self-respect, and we can even be moved by the impulse of freedom, if we see our sensual impulses as liable to enslave our rational self. A different kind of impulse towards doing what is right is aspiration or admiration of the moral beauty of virtue, and there are other possible 'phases of emotion' too. What all these impulses have in common with each other is the characteristic of being 'inseparable from an apparent cognition—implicit or explicit, direct or indirect—of *rightness* in the conduct to which they prompt'. There will be

[6] For further discussion see Shaver, 'Sidgwick on Moral Motivation'. We owe several of the quotes in this chapter to Shaver's fine scholarly essay.

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differences in 'the efficacy of these different emotions' but their 'primary practical effect does not appear to vary so long as the cognition of rightness remains unchanged' (*ME* 40).

Sidgwick returns to this idea in the final chapter of *The Methods* when he is discussing the extent to which feelings of sympathy can motivate us to act in accordance with utilitarianism. In the course of this discussion he distinguishes sympathy from what he calls 'strictly moral feelings'. As an example of a strictly moral feeling, he gives the 'sense of the ignobility of Egoism' which he views as 'the normal emotional concomitant or expression of the moral intuition that the Good of the whole is reasonably to be preferred to the Good of a part' (*ME* 500). As we shall see in Chapter 5, this intuition is one he takes to be self-evident, and therefore a 'dictate of reason'. So Sidgwick is saying that there are some feelings that are the 'normal emotional concomitant or expression' of a self-evident moral truth that we grasp by our reason. At the same time, he acknowledges that the exact proportions of these strictly moral feelings, and of other feelings such as sympathy, will vary between individuals and at different times in the life of a single individual. The contrast with Hume has now reappeared, for it seems that, according to Sidgwick, our belief that something is right can lead us to act. Granted, it leads us to act by giving rise to an impulse or feeling, but nevertheless for Sidgwick motivation can start with a cognition—that is, with grasping the truth of a moral judgment. Ethics, Sidgwick tells us, is primarily concerned with these cognitions and its object is to try to systematize them and free them from error.

## 2. The Debate over Objectivity in Ethics

The twentieth century saw a surge of interest in meta-ethics, or more specifically, in questions about what it is to make a moral judgment and whether moral judgments can be true or false. Much of the work done in ethics during the first half of the century was a response to the argument against the 'naturalistic fallacy' presented by G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*. Moore, a student of Sidgwick's, argued that many philosophers before him, including John Stuart Mill, had committed

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the fallacy by attempting to define words such as 'good' in terms of natural qualities like 'pleasant' or 'desired'. This was not a new point—Sidgwick had already insisted that moral notions are of a different character from notions describing empirical qualities like 'pleasant' or 'desired'. Sidgwick, unlike Moore, did not claim any novelty for this insight, which goes back to earlier English philosophers like Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, Richard Price, and Thomas Reid.[7]

Moore held that the way to avoid the naturalistic fallacy is to accept that the term 'good' is like 'yellow' in referring to a simple, indefinable quality. W. D. Ross, the leading British moral philosopher of the 1920s and 1930s, agreed with Sidgwick and Moore that the basic moral concepts are indefinable, although as we shall see in the next chapter, he disagreed sharply with Sidgwick and Moore on normative questions. In 1936 Alfred Ayer, then only 26, published *Language, Truth and Logic,* a manifesto for logical positivism, in which he agreed with Sidgwick and Moore that the basic moral notions are 'unanalyzable', but for completely different reasons. Ayer claimed that the reason why ethical notions are unanalyzable is that they are 'pseudo-concepts'. Moral judgments that use those concepts cannot be true or false. Instead they are used to express our positive or negative attitudes or emotions towards the subject of the judgment. This approach, which became known as 'emotivism', gave rise to a whole new theory, or family of theories, about the meaning of ethical terms. Because emotivists held that moral judgments do not state anything that can be known, emotivism is one of a family of theories known as 'noncognitivism'.

Many philosophers thought that emotivism was unsatisfactory because it fails to explain the role that reason plays in discussion about moral issues. R. M. Hare attempted to overcome this weakness by developing a different noncognitivist view, according to which moral judgments are prescriptions. On this view, moral judgments do not state facts. They belong to the same general type of sentence as imperatives, but differ from ordinary imperatives because to make

[7] For the history of the precursors to Moore's naturalistic fallacy argument, see Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*.

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a judgment that one 'ought' to do something is to prescribe that it be done universally. To reach the conclusion that we can prescribe an action universally, we need to use our reason to ascertain whether we are able to accept that prescription in all situations, real or hypothetical, that are similar in their universal features to the situation in which I find myself. Hence reason enters into the discussion, at least to this extent. More recently, Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn have developed another form of noncognitivism known as expressivism. All these noncognitivist theories deny that ethical judgments state any kind of belief, or assert anything that can properly be judged to be true or false, at least in a strong sense of true and false. Gibbard and Blackburn think that there is a 'minimalist' sense of truth in which moral judgments can be true or false; this is not, however, the sense of 'true' that most people have in mind when they say that it is true that more people live in China than in the United States. In general, noncognitivists hold that we make moral judgments in order to express our feelings or attitudes, or to prescribe certain actions, and to encourage others to take the same attitude or do those actions.

Sidgwick is strongly opposed to this whole approach. Moral utterances state beliefs, he holds, and are uttered to present the truth about our obligations and our reasons for actions. Sidgwick is therefore a cognitivist and an objectivist. The latter term is more specific because it is possible to be a cognitivist and a subjectivist, holding that moral judgments state beliefs about something that can be true or false, but denying that moral judgments present some truth that holds for everyone, independently of their attitudes or those of their culture or community. For a cognitivist subjectivist, whether the judgment 'helping the poor is good' is true or false depends on the attitude of the person making the judgment. Cultural relativists are also cognitivists, for they hold that the truth conveyed by 'stealing is bad' is that the society or culture to which the speaker belongs disapproves of stealing. Therefore for the following discussion we will focus on the more significant distinction between subjectivists and objectivists, rather than on that between cognitivists and noncognitivists. We will argue, along Sidgwickian lines, that subjectivism has such implausible implications that we should reject it in favour of objectivism.

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