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Droits réservés

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- 1 My aim in *Sidgwickian Ethics*¹ is to interpret and evaluate the central argument of *The Methods of Ethics*,² in a way that brings out the important conceptual and historical connections between Sidgwick's views and contemporary moral philosophy.
- 2 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 realise by voluntary action" (ME 1). He finds just three such methods "implicit in our common moral reasoning": egoism, utilitarianism, and intuitionism (ME 14). According to egoism, as Sidgwick defines it:

The rational agent regards quantity of consequent pleasure for himself as alone important in choosing between alternatives of action. (ME 95)
- 3 Sidgwick is well aware of the important structural parallels between egoism and utilitarianism. Though he does not himself give it, we can generate a definition of utilitarianism modeled on his definition of egoism. According to utilitarianism, thus defined:

The rational agent regards the quantity of consequent pleasure for all sentient beings as alone important in choosing between alternatives of action.
- 4 The definition of intuitionism requires more care, for it is really a hybrid concept, with both an epistemic and a moral-theoretic component. And that hybrid character is crucial to Sidgwick's distinctive philosophical view. He characterizes intuitionism as the view that

We have the power of seeing clearly that certain kinds of actions are right and reasonable in themselves, apart from [at least some of] their consequences. (ME 200)
- 5 The epistemic component here is the idea that some moral claims are self-evident; the moral-theoretic component is the idea that what is self-evident is something non-consequentialist.
- 6 Though I claim to vindicate much of what I find in Sidgwick, my approach doesn't fit everything he says, and my conclusions differ in some important ways from his. As to approach, Sidgwick often presents himself as primarily concerned with methods, not

principles, and with developing and considering three methods neutrally and in isolation, rather than with “discussing the considerations which should...be decisive in determining the adoptions of ethical first principles...[or establishing]...such principles” (ME 14). But I think the most interesting and interpretively troubling parts of the methods are exactly those parts where Sidgwick is focused on conflicts between ethical first principles and on which such principles we should adopt: most importantly III XI, III XIII, IV II, and the Concluding Chapter. And I think that in order to understand these Chapters, the most crucial background is the metaethics and moral epistemology found most centrally in I I, I III, and I VIII.

- 7 Sidgwick’s own conclusions about the conflicts between, respectively, utilitarianism and intuitionism, and utilitarianism and egoism, are well captured in a passage from the short intellectual autobiography added by E.E. Constance Jones to the Preface to the 6th edition of the *Methods*:

I had found...that the opposition between Utilitarianism and Intuitionism was due to a misunderstanding. There was indeed a fundamental opposition between the individual’s interest and either morality, which I could not solve by any method I had yet found trustworthy, without the assumption of the moral government of the world. (ME xxii)

- 8 To unpack: Sidgwick thinks that utilitarianism and intuitionism can be reconciled because, first, there is no real epistemic contrast between utilitarianism and intuitionism: all sensible moralists will be epistemic intuitionists; and, second, the moral-theoretic conflict between utilitarianism and intuitionism is won by the utilitarian. By contrast, utilitarianism and egoism cannot be reconciled (without theological help); they remain in fundamental opposition, an opposition which Sidgwick often characterizes as involving a contradiction.
- 9 I disagree in important ways with these conclusions of Sidgwick’s. First, I think he does not succeed in arguing for utilitarianism as against the moral-theoretic component of intuitionism, primarily because his attack on the moral-theoretic component of intuitionism is subject to a charge of unfairness: he requires the intuitionist’s putative first principles to satisfy criteria which are so stringent that his own favored, proto-utilitarian first principles do not satisfy them either. Second, I think his view about the conflict between egoism and utilitarianism is too pessimistic: while he typically presents the conflict as involving a fundamental contradiction, his arguments in fact do not properly generate any such contradiction, but instead provide support for a range of plausible and historically distinctive views of practical reason, according to which there are both agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons.
- 10 After the introductory chapter my book has four further chapters on, respectively, Sidgwick’s Metaethics, Sidgwick’s Moral Epistemology, Utilitarianism Versus Dogmatic Intuitionism, and Utilitarianism Versus Egoism. In this brief overview I cannot hope to articulate even in summary form all that is in those chapters. But I do hope to be able to say enough to introduce the most important claims I make with which some other interpreters, including in some cases some of my commentators here, disagree; to indicate the key textual sources for central interpretive issues in and objections to Sidgwick; and to indicate when I take my discussion to move in directions relatively underexplored in the Sidgwick literature.
- 11 In the Chapter on Sidgwick’s metaethics, I claim that Sidgwick commits himself to, and defends with appropriate modesty, ethical non-naturalism. I locate non-naturalism

within a metaethical conceptual scheme with three other main options: naturalism, noncognitivism, and error theory. While I claim that this conceptual scheme (versions of which are found, *inter alia*, in Mackie and Parfit)³ fits Sidgwick well and can be articulated in Sidgwickian language, I do not claim that it is a scheme with which Sidgwick himself explicitly operated. I argue (contra some fascinating work of Robert Shaver's)⁴ that non-naturalism is a fundamental and strategic, rather than a peripheral and tactical, commitment of Sidgwick's. And I argue that, in consequence, though he did not encounter sophisticated contemporary versions of naturalism or noncognitivism, the right way to extrapolate Sidgwick's views into contemporary metaethical debates would involve rejecting any such noncognitivist or naturalistic view and embracing instead the sort of non-naturalism recently articulated, *inter alia*, by Nagel, Parfit, and Scanlon.⁵ I focus finally on the interesting and underexplored relationship between Sidgwick and error theory, drawing in particular on Mackie's presentation, in his paper "Sidgwick's Pessimism,"⁶ of a distinctive Sidgwickian argument for error theory.

- 12 In the Chapter on Sidgwick's moral epistemology I pursue three main themes. First, I interpret and defend Sidgwick's epistemic intuitionism, claiming (i) that Sidgwick offers an argument for intuitionism that is both crucial to him and has non-naturalism as a key premise, and (ii) that, appropriately recast and generalized, Sidgwick's argument for intuitionism is a powerful one. Here again, Shaver's work is my main foil.
- 13 Second, I articulate what I claim is a hitherto unrecognized, or under-recognized, puzzle in Sidgwick's moral epistemology. And I claim that this puzzle helps explain the striking level of scholarly disagreement as to how to understand that moral epistemology. The categories required to frame the puzzle are most readily found in Sidgwick's 1879 paper, "The Establishment of Ethical First Principles".⁷ There Sidgwick begins with the problem of how a proponent of one putative ethical first principle can argue against a proponent of some other, conflicting, putative first principle. Sidgwick articulates two "quite different" forms of argument. In the first, which I label "bipartite argument," we begin with the claim the interlocutor thinks self-evident, and shows that it is not itself really self-evident, but at best a true consequence of some more general and genuinely self-evident claim; in the second, which I label "criterial argument," we develop general, topic-neutral criteria for first principles, and then apply these to determine which putative ethical first principles are genuine. The best initial way to see the puzzle is to contrast "The Establishment of Ethical First Principles" with the passage from *Methods* IV II where Sidgwick presents the same problem, but offers instead (I claim) just one solution, bipartite argument. Why? Why does the conception of independent criterial argument not appear in *Methods* IV II? Thus far, this may seem a minor puzzle: a conflict between a brief early paper and the much revised and much more authoritative text of the *Methods*. But, I suggest, the puzzle cannot be thus dismissed, for two reasons. First, the conception of criterial argument is not a conception that appears only in "The Establishment of Ethical First Principles"; instead, it appears in most of Sidgwick's work in general epistemology, including some of his last published work.⁸ Second, a criterial argument for utilitarianism is apparently offered in Book III of the *Methods*. Hence (in part) the scholarly disagreement about Sidgwick's moral epistemology, even among those who have not drawn inspiration in just the way I have from "The Establishment of Ethical First Principles."

- 14 The third and final theme in the moral epistemology Chapter is the overall interpretation of Sidgwick's moral epistemology. I argue for a moderate foundationalist reading, and have a number of tactics, whose effectiveness some of my commentators contest, for largely explaining away the appearance that Sidgwick takes common-sense morality to be epistemically authoritative.
- 15 In Chapter Four, I focus on the first of the two key conflicts where my verdict differs from Sidgwick's: the conflict between utilitarianism and (dogmatic) intuitionism. Sidgwick argues that the dogmatic intuitionist's putative first principles can be rejected because they fail to satisfy the four conditions or criteria articulated on pp. 338-342 of the *Methods*. By contrast, he (implicitly) claims in III XIII that his favored "philosophical intuitions" do satisfy the four conditions. Sidgwick's argument is, I claim, vulnerable to a charge of unfairness. The basic version of the charge can be developed by contrasting the passage where Sidgwick claims that the maxims of common-sense morality fail to meet the four conditions with a passage introducing his favored philosophical intuitions. In the former passage, Sidgwick observes that
- [Common-sense morality's] maxims do not fulfill the conditions...So long as they are left in the state of somewhat vague generalities...we are disposed to yield them unquestioning assent, and it may fairly be claimed that the assent is approximately universal...But as soon as we attempt to give them the definiteness which science requires, we find that we cannot do this without abandoning the universality of acceptance. (ME 342)
- 16 In the latter, introducing his favored philosophical intuitions, Sidgwick observes that they are
- of too abstract a nature, and too universal in their scope, to enable us to ascertain by immediate application of them what we ought to do in any particular case. (ME 379)
- 17 So, the objection has it, Sidgwick insists that common-sense principles meet a standard of determinacy from which he exempts his own favored principles. And that is unfair. I try, on Sidgwick's behalf, various responses to this objection, but find none satisfactory. And I argue that the problem becomes still worse for Sidgwick if the intuitionist is (properly) allowed to frame her view in a Rossian rather than a Whewellian form, employing the concept of *prima facie* duty.
- 18 Finally, in Chapter Five, I turn to the conflict between Egoism and Utilitarianism and the Dualism of Practical Reason. There is lots of scholarly debate as to how to interpret the dualism. I aim in part to characterize this debate, and to contribute to it. But the primary resource to which I appeal is not the text of the most explicit discussions of the dualism, inside and outside the *Methods*. Rather, I focus on Sidgwick's treatments of the self-evident bases of utilitarianism and egoism. I claim that Sidgwick offers an argument, premised on the "real and fundamental distinction" between any one individual and any other, which is supposed to supply the self-evident basis of egoism. I suggest that this argument does not properly support egoism, but does properly support an important, related, weaker claim: that there are agent-relative reasons. I claim that the argument Sidgwick offers, supposed to supply the self-evident basis of utilitarianism, is less successful than his argument for egoism; its key claims are, in a way Sidgwick himself worries about particularly in the first edition, self-evident only because tautologous. Thus Sidgwick offers no proper support for the idea that there are self-evidently-based and conflicting fundamental principles of egoism and utilitarianism. These reflections provide some support for what I label "conflict-

mitigating” interpretations of the dualism of practical reason, though this support has to be balanced against the textual evidence for “conflict-enhancing” interpretations supplied by Sidgwick’s explicit characterizations of the dualism as involving a contradiction.⁹ But they also make Sidgwick the most important model for a range of historically distinctive and plausible hybrid views of practical reason, according to which there are both genuine agent-relative reasons and genuine agent-neutral reasons.

NOTES

1. David Phillips, *Sidgwickian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
 2. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* 7th edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981; original publication: 1st edition 1874, 7th edition 1907). I will refer to it as “ME”. Further page references will be placed in the text. Chapters will be referred to by (Roman) Book then Chapter Number.
 3. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 31-35; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 263.
 4. Robert Shaver, “Sidgwick’s Minimal Metaethics,” *Utilitas* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2000), pp. 261-277.
 5. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Chapter VIII; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Part 6; Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), Chapter 1.
 6. J.L. Mackie, “Sidgwick’s Pessimism,” *Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 26, No. 105 (1976), pp. 317-327.
 7. Henry Sidgwick, “The Establishment of Ethical First Principles,” *Mind* Vol. 4, No. 13 (1879), pp. 106-111.
 8. Five relevant papers are reprinted in Part III of the collection of Sidgwick’s papers edited by Marcus G. Singer, *Essays on Ethics and Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). See in particular “Criteria of Truth and Error” and “Further on the Criteria of Truth and Error,” originally published respectively in 1900 and posthumously in 1905.
 9. I articulate the distinction between “conflict-enhancing” and “conflict-mitigating” interpretations of the dualism on pp. 134-5 of *Sidgwickian Ethics*.
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