

## *Epistemic Barriers and Practical Dualism*

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### **Introduction**

Here we will argue that Henry Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason, the paired imperative of being egoistic and/or utilitarian, follows from the epistemic barriers that arise when giving credence to skepticism about the external world, and particularly skepticism about other minds, and skepticism about reincarnation. We will argue that this is true whether we begin with the premises of universal utilitarianism or egoism.

### **Antecedents and Consequents**

There are several antecedents, agnosticism about the external world and universal utilitarianism, which get us to the dualism of practical reason.

### **Universal Utilitarianism and Egoism**

One might assume Universal Utilitarianism, the belief that one ought to maximize the total welfare of persons, or Egoism, the belief that one ought to maximize one's own personal welfare. Different formulations of these positions have been defended (Bentham, 1763; Mill, 1861). Though we will most closely advise that formulation found in Sidgwick (Sidgwick, 1907). Universal Utilitarianism or Egoism should be the starting places for considerations of Sidgwick's Dualism because it is Sidgwick's own starting place and preferred conclusion, from which the Dualism of Practical Reason is considered a degenerate form.

Furthermore, even if we are not accepting Sidgwick's starting place, if we are attempting to reject egoism, we want to assert some version of altruistic consideration, at some distance on Singer's expanding circle (Singer, 2011). The most extreme form, the most expansive circle, would be Universal Utilitarianism, which means that it is the position that the egoist would have to maximally defeat; the least extreme form, the least expansive circle, would be Egoism, which means that it is the position that the universal utilitarian would have to maximally defeat.

Furthermore, because Universal Utilitarianism is universalizing and egoism personalizing, the former encompasses all less expanded forms of altruism as degenerate forms of itself, and you can use universal instantiation to go from total welfare down to individual welfare, because the individual is part of the total, and the latter excludes them. In contrast, one cannot use egoism as an equivalent starting place.

### **Dualism of Practical Reason**

Henry Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason is the belief that one ought to do the best for the most people and that one ought to do the best for oneself; according to this, universal utilitarianism and egoism are both simultaneously prerogatives of practical reason (Sidgwick, 1907). Some authors have suggested that Sidgwick's Dualism is incoherent because one cannot uphold two mutually exclusive duties at the same time (Shaver, 2023). However, some authors

have given accounts of the Sidgwick's Dualism that are coherent (Phillips, 2011). Others suggest that Sidgwick's Dualism stands as rationally irreducible (Copp, 1997).

### **Skepticism about the External World**

One might assume Skepticism about the External World, and particularly Agnosticism about the External World, the belief that skepticism towards the external world, may or may not be true. This can be further exacerbated by a skepticism about other minds, noting that while we are once removed from the evidence of the external world, we are two-times removed from evidence of other minds, once by the veil between our own inner mind and the outer world, and once by the veil between the outer world and the inner mind of another (Avramides, 2023). This form of skepticism is perhaps most famously found in Descartes (Descartes, 1641). But the skepticism has been taken seriously by authors since: "Malebranche, Locke, Hume and Berkeley" (Reid, 1785 paraphrased in Avramides, 2023). Modern scientifically informed skepticism can be found in Brain in a Vat and Boltzmann Brain thought experiments (Harman, 1973, p. 5; Carroll, 2020). This form of skepticism gives credence to solipsism, the belief that one is the only being in the universe, but if one is agnostic, this is balanced by credence in other minds.

### **Skepticism about Reincarnation**

One might assume Skepticism about Reincarnation, and particularly Agnosticism about the Reincarnation, the belief that skepticism towards reincarnation, may or may not be true. This form of skepticism is perhaps most famously found in Buddhist texts (McClland, 2010). Modern philosophers, like Will MacAskill have appealed to reincarnation, not literally but metaphorically, as a kind of intuition pump for the value of other people (McAskill, 2022). This form of skepticism gives credence to a kind of universalism, the belief that one is the universe, but if one is agnostic, this is balanced by credence in other minds.

### **Argument**

The arguments proceed as follows (also formalized in Appendix Table 1 and Table 1, respectively).

#### **From Universal Utilitarianism to Dualism**

First, we can start by assuming External World Agnosticism, which puts credence both on External World Skepticism (SEW) and on its opposite: the external world does not exist and therefore only the individual ego exists, and the opposite (Table 1). By External World Agnosticism, there is a probability that external world skepticism is false and/or a probability that external world skepticism is true (P1).

By definition, if there is a probability that external world skepticism is false, then there is a probability I am not the only person with welfare (P2).

And, by definition, if there is a probability that external world skepticism is true, then there is a probability that I am the only person with welfare (P3).

So, by constructive dilemma, using the three above premises, there is a probability that I am not the only person with welfare and/or there is a probability that I am the only person with welfare (P4).

Second, we can assume Universal Utilitarianism, which states that I should maximize the total welfare. Per Universal Utilitarianism, if there is a probability that there is some total welfare not equal to my welfare, then there is a probability that I ought to maximize that total welfare (P5).

Also, per Universal Utilitarianism, if there is a probability that the total welfare just is equal to my welfare, then there is a probability that I ought to maximize my welfare (P6).

Therefore, again by constructive dilemma, applied to the above three premises, there is a probability that I ought to maximize the welfare of all persons and/or there is a probability that I ought to maximize the welfare of myself, which amounts to a version of the Dualism of Practical Reason that Sidgwick postulated (P7).

### **From Egoism to Dualism**

First, we can start by assuming Reincarnation Agnosticism, which puts credence both on Reincarnation Skepticism (SR) and on its opposite: other people are the ego reincarnated, and the opposite (Table 2). By Reincarnation Agnosticism, there is a probability that reincarnation skepticism is false and/or a probability that reincarnation skepticism is true (P1).

By definition, if there is a probability that reincarnation skepticism is false, then there is a probability I am not every other person with welfare (P2).

And, by definition, if there is a probability that reincarnation skepticism is true, then there is a probability that I am every other person with welfare (P3).

So, by constructive dilemma, using the three above premises, there is a probability that I am not every other person with welfare and/or there is a probability that I am every other person with welfare (P4).

Second, we can assume Egoism, which states that I should maximize my own personal welfare. Per Egoism, if there is a probability that there is some total welfare not equal to my welfare, then there is a probability that I ought to maximize my own welfare (P5).

Also, per Egoism, if there is a probability that the total welfare just is equal to my welfare, then there is a probability that I ought to maximize the total welfare (P6).

Therefore, as with the prior case, again by constructive dilemma, applied to the above three premises, there is a probability that I ought to maximize the welfare of all persons and/or there is a probability that I ought to maximize the welfare of myself, which amounts to a version of the Dualism of Practical Reason that Sidgwick postulated (P7).

### **Some Thought Experiments**

In order to exemplify these arguments, let us propose the following thought experiments to show how epistemic barriers lead to practical dualism. First thought experiment:

**The Utilitarian Boltzmann Brain:** Imagine you are a Utilitarian but you are also in a Boltzmann Brain universe, so you cannot be certain that you are not a Boltzmann Brain, so you cannot be certain that other people actually exist.

What is our intuition about this case? Clearly, if one is a utilitarian, then one ought to help others and not harm others. But, on the one hand, if all other persons are merely the illusions made by Boltzmann fluctuations, then clearly you could do no harm or help to them. On the other hand, if

there are other real people, then clearly you could harm or help them. Given that you are not sure either way, the best option would be some combination of the two, perhaps balanced according to your degree of credence in each.

Now, returning to a consideration of our own lives, although we are perhaps in a seemingly more epistemically advantaged situation than the Utilitarian Boltzmann Brain, every epistemic agent has to contend with doubts about the external world and doubts about other minds. We may all indeed be Greeks in caves, or brains floating in voids, or computers simulating virtual reality for all we know (Bostrom, 2003). Even if we are fairly confident in the existence of other minds, we still cannot completely abdicate our high confidence in our own internal states for the lesser confidence in numerous other persons' internal states without on balance giving ourselves at least some epistemic preference. Because of the sharp unreduced interpersonal epistemic barrier between the conscious self and the external world, there must be a sharp unreduced dividing line between egoistic and universalistic reasons.

So, we have shown an example of practical dualism rationalized by non-arbitrary interpersonal epistemic barriers. But does the dualism collapse once those barriers are removed? Consider a second thought experiment:

**The Egoist Reincarnated:** Imagine you are an Egoist but you are also in a Reincarnation universe, so you cannot be certain that you will not be reincarnated, so you cannot be certain which other persons will be you.

What is our intuition about this case?

What is our intuition about this case? Clearly, if one is an egoist, then one ought to help oneself and not harm oneself. But, on the one hand, if all other persons are your reincarnated selves, then clearly you should help them and not harm them. On the other hand, if other persons are not your reincarnated selves, then you have no reason to help them or not harm them. Like with the Utilitarian Boltzmann Brain, given uncertainty, the best option would be some combination of the two.

Now, again, returning to a consideration of our own lives, although we are perhaps in a seemingly more epistemically advantaged situation than the Egoist Reincarnated, we are sure what happens beyond death, and so we are not certain that we won't be reincarnated. We may all be ancient bodhisattvas. Even being fairly confident that reincarnation is impossible, we still might hold out a possibility. Thus, given that any barrier between self and other may ultimately be an illusion disproven by time, or not, the difference between egoistic and universalistic reasons may blur.

## **Objections**

The above argument for Sidgwick's Dualism is vulnerable to the following objections:

### **Objecting to External World or Reincarnation Skepticism**

If a utilitarian rejects External World Agnosticism, claiming a hard stand either for or against skepticism, then one can avoid Sidgwick's Dualism. Likewise, if an egoist rejects Reincarnation Skepticism, then one can also avoid Sidgwick's Dualism. For skepticism would yield maximal egoism/utilitarianism; against skepticism would yield maximal utilitarianism/egoism. However, either position seems difficult to perfectly defend, such that some minimal credence may always

be given to the theory that one is wrong. Because certainty is difficult in this domain especially, this rejection seems premature for any agent in a non-ideal epistemic condition (Bayes, 1763; Critch, 2014; Strevens, 2014; Lin, 2024).

Perhaps one still might object to egoism because the identity is arbitrary, not relevantly mattering (Shaver, 2023). However, but we directly suggesting that the self-centered knowing subject is not arbitrary, precisely due to the epistemic veils in between that knowing subject and the external world, making identity non-arbitrarily irreducible for a deliberative agent. There are multiple barriers between the phenomenal self and the other. If Kant is right, then we never access the noumena (Kant, 1999). There is the veil between the present self and the future self, between the internal self and the external world, and between the external world and the internal other (Malebranche in Avramides, 2023). All of these are non-arbitrarily because they directly and unavoidably affect the deliberative process. All of this tends to set up discrete event horizons that a Parfitian rejection of personal identity cannot trespass (Parfit, 1984). Identity is epistemically non-arbitrary (Sidgwick 1907, 498). Thus, “real identity of any one ego with all others” cannot be perfectly established in the epistemic domain (Sidgwick 1896: 281; Schopenhauer 1965: 204–7).

Perhaps one still might object that egoism reduces to a Here-Now view, because only the Here-Now is epistemically direct (Parfit, 1984). One can then simply propose a Here-Now Egoist and a Universal Utilitarian, though this view may not itself withstand scrutiny.

### **Objecting to Universal Utilitarianism or Egoism**

One can object that utilitarianism is false or that egoism is false. This would opt in favor of either ethical anti-realism or some other kind of ethical structure (deontology, virtue, etc.).

If one opted for ethical anti-realism, there would simply be no moral obligations at all. Thus, Sidgwick’s Dualism could be rejected on the grounds that all ethical positions are rejected.

If one opted for some other kind of ethical structure, then utilitarianism/egoism would not have to be asserted. On most ethical systems, some principle of total welfare might still be accommodated, but utilitarianism/egoism may just be one of many obligations. Thus, Sidgwick’s Dualism would not be *the only* obligation. However, since the Principle of Beneficence is shared by many moral systems, not just by utilitarianism, a weaker version of the dualism might succeed, that establishes Sidgwick’s dualism *one of many* obligations. However, even if one accepts some other form of ethical structure, this might reduce back to Universal Utilitarianism anyway. As Sidgwick shows, all competing ethical intuitions require tiebreakers, and this reduces back to Universal Utilitarianism anyways.

If one accepts Egoism instead of Universal Utilitarianism or vice versa, one can still arrive at the Practical Dualism, but via an alternative route.

If one accepts utilitarianism/egoism, one still might be tempted to reject to either of the premises assumed (P5, P6). The first is difficult to reject, because it just assumes that if there is a total welfare, one ought to maximize it, which is the definition of Universal Utilitarianism. The second might be rejected on the grounds that it is egoistic, not utilitarian. But it seems to be true by simply restating the former principle but with an equality substitution of total for personal welfare. In a universe of one individual, Universal Utilitarianism would advocate for the maximum of that individual person’s welfare.

## Downplaying the Dualism

One can downplay the conclusion of Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason as missing the point in some way.

Perhaps the most obvious way to make this downplaying move is to suggest that the dualism arrived at is just epistemic dualism, not practical dualism. Practical Dualism never arises because utilitarianism/egoism has been assumed. The only true Practical Dualism would start from two irreducible normative premises, not one normative and one epistemic premise.

However, there are at least two ways of dealing with this downplaying.

First, one might agree, but point out that, either way, an epistemic dualism results in an effective practical dualism that is not reducible: one cannot resolve the epistemic problem, and thus one cannot resolve its normative consequences. The same irreducible epistemic barrier between egoism and universal utilitarianism is what holds as between Mary the Color Scientist (Jackson, 1982). Just as Mary "knows" all the facts about color but does not have a firsthand experience of color, Mary can "know" all of the facts about the suffering of others but have no firsthand experience of the suffering of others herself. As long as the practical consideration of suffering is enmeshed in the irreducible epistemic consideration of firsthand sensations, the practical consideration also is irreducible.

Second, one might disagree, and point out that the only welfare seems to be a matter of direct epistemic access anyway, and therefore welfare is irreducibly epistemic in nature. One can arrive at this hypothesis by imagining a creature (perhaps like Chalmers' Vulcan) that has no pleasure or pain or affective states itself, but only has inferences of pleasure and pain and other affective states of other beings that it has indirect access to (Shepherd, 2023). Now, further stipulate that every other welfare-having creature in the universe goes extinct. Would this Vulcan have welfare? The obvious observation is that it would not because its welfare only ever was parasitic upon the welfare of other beings that had direct access to affective states.

Another downplaying move one can make is to attempt to show that, because epistemic barriers demarcate a practical dualism, an infinite number of epistemic barriers explode our moral system into an infinite set, *ad absurdum*. After all, there is an epistemic barrier between me and my roommates, a further one between me and my neighbors, a further one between me and foreigners, etc. Indeed, since different epistemic situations separate me from every other particular person, can I not justify treating every other particular person differently? We can rather easily reject this absurdity by noting that the epistemic barriers between the self and other, as in the external world and reincarnation cases, are of a special totalizing kind, with no particularization. The external world barrier separates me from *any others*, not just some. Reincarnation identifies me with *any others*, not just some. Thus, the explosion tends to fail—although it may succeed for any other totalizing epistemic barriers, should they be discovered.

## Conclusion

So, we have argued that, assuming external world skepticism and universal utilitarianism, or assuming reincarnation skepticism and egoism, as long as one is uncertain about the former and even if one is certain of the latter, one is drawn towards Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Formal Argument from External World Agnosticism and Universal Utilitarianism

#	Proposition	Operation
1	$P(\sim SEW) \cup P(SEW)$	Assumption (External World Agnosticism)
2	$P(\sim SEW) \rightarrow P(W_T \neq w_i)$	Definition
3	$P(SEW) \rightarrow P(W_T = w_i)$	Definition
4	$P(W_T \neq w_i) \cup P(W_T = w_i)$	Constructive Dilemma 1, 2, 3
5	$P(W_T \neq w_i) \rightarrow P(O(Max(W_T)))$	Assumption (Universal Utilitarianism)
6	$P(W_T = w_i) \rightarrow P(O(Max(w_i)))$	Assumption (Universal Utilitarianism)
7	$P(O(Max(W_T))) \cup P(O(Max(w_i)))$	Constructive Dilemma 4, 5, 6 (Sidgwick's Dualism)

Table 2: Formal Argument from Reincarnation Agnosticism and Egoism

#	Proposition	Operation
1	$P(\sim SR) \cup P(SR)$	Assumption (Reincarnation Agnosticism)
2	$P(\sim SR) \rightarrow P(w_i \neq W_T)$	Definition
3	$P(SR) \rightarrow P(w_i = W_T)$	Definition
4	$P(W_T \neq w_i) \cup P(W_T = w_i)$	Constructive Dilemma 1, 2, 3
5	$P(W_T \neq w_i) \rightarrow P(O(Max(w_i)))$	Assumption (Egoism)
6	$P(W_T = w_i) \rightarrow P(O(Max(W_T)))$	Assumption (Egoism)
7	$P(O(Max(W_T))) \cup P(O(Max(w_i)))$	Constructive Dilemma 4, 5, 6 (Sidgwick's Dualism)

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