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On Henry Sidgwick's "My Station and Its Duties"*

Anthony Skelton

Henry Sidgwick completed the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics* in 1874. He was unhappy with the result. To his friend Oscar Browning he reportedly said, "the first word of my book . . . is '*Ethics*,' the last word is 'failure.' "[1] Sidgwick was perturbed, for he had reasoned himself to the "dualism of practical reason," the view that utilitarianism and egoism are equally rational, but conflicting, ethical methods.[2] He had reasons to lament his failure. Sidgwick wrote *The Methods of Ethics* to solve a problem that he found in the moral reasoning of the "unphilosophic man."[3] In this man's reasoning about what to do he draws on a plurality of basic principles with no obvious priority relation between them, leading him to wonder, in cases in which the principles render conflicting verdicts, what he ought all things considered to do. Sidgwick thinks the solution to this problem lies in finding a systematic and comprehensive method of ethics that leaves no room for such wonder. Indeed, he had a personal stake in finding this solution. In his *Memoir* he writes, "I have mixed up the personal and general questions, because every speculation of this kind ends, with me, in a practical problem, 'What is to be done here and now.' That is a question which I *must* answer."[4] If he could not avoid the dual-

* A retrospective essay on Henry Sidgwick, "My Station and Its Duties," *International Journal of Ethics* 4 (1893): 1–17. All unattributed page references are to this article. I wish to thank Dale Jamieson, Thomas Hurka, Anne Skelton, and especially Robert Shaver and Peter Singer for helpful comments on a previous version of this retrospective essay.

1. Quoted in F. H. Hayward, *The Ethical Philosophy of Sidgwick* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1901), xix; italics in original.

2. For detailed discussion of the dualism, see Robert Shaver, *Rational Egoism: A Selective and Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and David Phillips, *Sidgwickian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), 6.

4. Arthur Sidgwick and Eleanor M. Sidgwick, *Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 467; emphasis added.

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ism, he was forced to admit that he failed to find a conclusive answer to his question and that his life's work in ethics had come to nothing.

This did not lead Sidgwick to ethical stasis. But if he could not answer his query by reference to some uniquely rational moral theory, how was he to do so? How was he to overcome the sort of disagreement on ultimate reasons that his dualism represented?

Sidgwick found an opportunity to answer his question in the ethical societies that began forming in the mid-1880s in Britain.[5] It was as president of the London Ethical Society that he wrote "My Station and Its Duties."[6] The address was used to sketch a method for dealing with practical moral difficulties. He advances views relevant to the role a philosopher should play in helping to resolve such problems.[7]

I

Sidgwick pursues his agenda while examining obstacles to the Society's aims. Its first aim is to "assist individual and social efforts after right living" (2).[8] He suggests that there are, broadly speaking, two obstacles to right living, those that lie in our "external circumstances and material conditions" and those that lie in our "minds and hearts" (2).[9] He puts the former to one side; he accepts the "ethical" truth that "it is possible to act rightly under any material conditions" (2).[10] He dwells on internal obstacles, defects in the will to do what we ought and in knowledge of what we ought to do. He focuses on the latter, though he thinks that both merit attention (4).[11]

5. The ethical societies movement is surveyed in I. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and in G. Spiller, *The Ethical Movement in Great Britain* (London: Farleigh, 1934). The primary purpose of these societies, which comprised, among others, philosophers, scientists, and lay people, was ethical "investigation and construction rather than . . . advocacy and dogmatic inculcation." See "Preface," in *Ethics and Religion*, ed. Society of Ethical Propagandists (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1900), vii.

6. A revised version of this article is reprinted in Henry Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, ed. Sissela Bok (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; originally published in 1898) and in *Ethics and Religion* under the title "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society."

7. It is a pity, then, that it is largely ignored in major works on Sidgwick, e.g., J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 16.

9. Ibid., 16.

10. Ibid., 16. For (sensible) criticism of this, see Karen Hanson, "Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice—in Theory," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12 (1998): 137–46, at 138.

11. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 18. In general, his focus in practical ethics is on remedying this variety of defect.

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This might leave his approach to practical ethics looking rather too one sided.[12] Sidgwick has a reply.[13] He maintains that the two internal defects are dealt with using "different methods" with problems that "require very different treatment" (2).[14] This seems too strong. One can see this by looking at the comparison that Karen Hanson makes between Sidgwick and John Dewey.[15]

Hanson argues that Dewey's practical ethics deals more appropriately with defects in desire. According to Hanson, Dewey's approach to improving motives involves getting individuals (especially children) to appreciate "the meaning and value of" their actions.[16] This involves appeal to a moral theory that improves motivation by pointing out various costs and benefits of right living, including effects on one's "habits and character," one's "relations" with others, on "the welfare of others," and so forth.[17] But this suggests that improving the will to do the right thing involves remedying defects in one's knowledge or in one's intellectual appreciation of one's knowledge of the morality of one's actions and their effects. The focus appears, that is, to be on epistemic defects or defects of appreciation, suggesting that Sidgwick's aims in concentrating on the intellectual impediments to "right living" are not much different from Dewey's aims.

II

Sidgwick tries to remedy intellectual defects while pursuing one of the society's other aims: to free "the current ideal of what is right from all that is merely traditional and self-contradictory, and thus to widen and perfect it" (5).[18] This involves appeal to "a Theory or Science of Right" which the Society is to "assist in constructing" (5).[19]

Sidgwick is clear that this is not to be confused with developing a full-blown moral theory. He notes that there is too much disagreement among philosophers for this to be the task of practical ethics. Instead, he advocates a conception of practical ethics that does not involve appeal to a comprehensive moral doctrine like utilitarianism.[20] The aim

12. Hanson, "Bridging," 139ff.

13. For a different reply, see Henry Sidgwick, "The Morality of Strife," *International Journal of Ethics* 1 (1890): 1–15, at 1–3.

14. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 16.

15. Hanson, "Bridging," 143–45.

16. Ibid., 143.

17. John Dewey, *The Early Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 4:117; quoted in Hanson, "Bridging," 144.

18. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 19.

19. Ibid., 19.

20. Compare Sissela Bok, "Henry Sidgwick's Practical Ethics," *Utilitas* 12 (2000): 361–78.

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is to work from the "broad and general agreement" among moral philosophers "as to the details and particulars of morality" (14).[21]

Sidgwick is nevertheless clear that constructing such a theory is a job for moral experts: persons who have "gone through a thorough training in psychology, sociology, and logic,—in short . . . philosophers" (6).[22] His idea seems to be that this expertise makes it possible to discern ethical truths that the plain man cannot. He contrasts his view with Joseph Butler's on which the plain man has no need for an expert.[23] On Sidgwick's view the plain man needs the philosopher for moral guidance.[24] Those plain men who think they always know what they ought to do "really know less than they think" (11).[25]

This is not to suggest that the plain man should be dispensed with. The philosopher should "always study with reverent care and patience . . . the Morality of Common Sense" (8–9).[26] Indeed, the "philosopher's practical judgment on particular problems of duty is liable to be untrustworthy, unless it is aided and controlled by the practical judgement of others who are not philosophers" (8).[27]

Sidgwick might, then, think that the philosopher is constrained by commonsense morality.[28] This is not true.[29] The purpose of his study of commonsense morality is merely to gain facts that assist him in applying whatever theory of right he arrives at for practical purposes. His study of the practical judgments of the plain man is required to make complete the information the philosopher needs to determine what to

21. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 26.

22. Ibid., 19–20. He thinks that the work of constructing a science of right requires "the highest gifts and the completest training" (7; Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 20). He is clear that he thinks the philosopher possesses these.

23. Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons*, ed. Stuart Brown (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950), 45.

24. This may explain why Sidgwick chooses to focus on intellectual defects in his addresses on practical ethics.

25. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 23. This bears directly on the dispute between Bart Schultz and J. B. Schneewind respecting whether Sidgwick thinks that each moral agent is equally capable of arriving at knowledge of morality. See Bart Schultz, "The *Methods* of J. B. Schneewind," *Utilitas* 16 (2004): 146–67; and J. B. Schneewind, "Comments on the Commentaries," *Utilitas* 16 (2004): 184–92.

26. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 22.

27. Ibid., 21.

28. This understanding of Sidgwick is suggested in Michael Pritchard, "Sidgwick's *Practical Ethics*," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12 (1998): 147–51, at 148. This is a common view in practical ethics; see, for example, Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

29. This appears controversial considering what Sidgwick says in *The Methods of Ethics* at 373–74 and at 421–22. For discussion, see Shaver, *Rational Egoism*, 62–74; Roger Crisp, "Sidgwick and the Boundaries of Intuitionism," in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56–75; and Anthony Skelton, "Henry Sidgwick's Moral Epistemology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48 (2010): 491–519.

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do in practice. This information is found in both the conscious and unconscious experience of the plain man "whose earnest and predominant aim is to do . . . [his] duty" (9).[30] This is why the knowledge of interest is the practical judgments of "practical men" about their "station" and why it is the philosopher's "practical" judgement that is to be controlled (8, 10, 8).[31]

Sidgwick appears to subscribe to Peter Singer's view of moral expertise.[32] Like Sidgwick, Singer notes that the plain man is not always able to see what he ought to do. The philosopher is an expert with special training to whom it is reasonable to defer. For "someone familiar with moral concepts and with moral arguments, who has ample time to gather information and think about it, may reasonably be expected to reach a soundly based conclusion more often than someone who is unfamiliar with moral concepts and moral arguments and has little time."[33]

Some may worry that this view is impugned by empirical evidence suggesting that philosophers appear no better than plain persons at moral reasoning.[34] Others may worry that this view leaves no room for the role that autonomy plays in the formation of one's ethical views. For some, it is important that one's moral views be one's own.

In reply to the first worry, Sidgwick could grant that the philosopher is not superior in the decision-making contexts on which the abovementioned empirical research dwells but argue that it does not follow that there are no cases in which philosophers get the right moral answer more often than others. In reply to the second worry, Sidgwick might deny that autonomy plays a role in the formation of ethical beliefs. We do not seem to think there is a role for autonomy in the formation of nonmoral beliefs, and there is no significant difference between these and moral beliefs.[35]

This may not allay the worries. Sidgwick suggests a more modest view (15–17).[36] In thinking about how to free the current ideal from what is merely traditional he lists a set of moral considerations that

30. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 22. Sidgwick notes that he is not interested in the judgements of those "who have no serious concern about their moral duty" (9; *Practical Ethics*, 22).

31. Ibid., 21, 23, 21. He appears to accord the morality of common sense the same role in ethics that he accords to sociological information more generally. For his view of the role that sociological data plays in ethics, see Henry Sidgwick, "The Relation of Ethics to Sociology," *International Journal of Ethics* 10 (1899): 1–21, at 9–12.

32. Peter Singer, "Moral Experts," *Analysis* 32 (1972): 115–17.

33. Ibid., 116–17.

34. See Eric Schwitzgebel and Fiery Cushman, "Expertise in Moral Reasoning? Order Effects on Moral Judgment in Professional Philosophers and Non-Philosophers," *Mind and Language* 27 (2012): 135–53.

35. I owe this point to Robert Shaver.

36. Sidgwick, *Practical Ethics*, 26–30.

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might assist the members of the Society in forming their own moral attitudes and directing their moral behavior, including the avoidance of "arbitrary inequality in the treatment of human beings," not underestimating the value of acting with "rectitude of purpose, that mental attitude and habit of devotion to universal good," the avoidance of harmful inequalities between the social classes and professions, and the adoption of an inclusive conception of the social good including a place for "knowledge and art." On this view, the philosopher is not a moral authority telling others what they ought, specifically, to do. Rather, the philosopher assists people in arriving at their own views about what is right by pointing out ways in which to avoid or detect moral error.[37] She helps them attain a greater understanding of what is morally salient.

A philosopher can more credibly claim expertise respecting this on the basis of her training, experience, and time devotion. This view also avoids the concern that there is no role for autonomy in the formation of one's moral views. Sidgwick is not telling individuals what to do in specific cases. Instead, the advice seems designed to enhance their autonomous practical ethical decision making.

III

In "My Station and Its Duties," Sidgwick attempts to sketch a method for dealing with practical moral problems. He reflects fruitfully on how philosophers might assist in resolving such problems. In so doing, he speaks to issues of contemporary significance.

37. Something like this view is suggested in David Archard, "Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be Moral Experts," *Bioethics* 25 (2011): 119–27, at 127.

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