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# Ordinary Moral Thought and Common-Sense Morality: Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics

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## Ordinary Moral Thought and Common-Sense Morality: Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics

### 1. *Introduction*

The elaboration of an ethical theory has to start somewhere, and it seems that a proper place to start is our ordinary moral thought. We can broadly define ordinary moral thought as that pre-theoretical shared set of received rules of conduct and value judgments we typically refer to when we deliberate and assess actions and people. Such pre-philosophical background is made up of explicitly asserted and imparted norms and convictions, but it also includes more implicit aspects such as assumptions underlying everyday behaviour and conventions about the meaning and the uses of moral words, without which the explicit contents would not be intelligible and sensible. Moral philosophers disagree as to the extent to which philosophical ethics should lend weight to and be compatible with ordinary moral thought, and Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) is certainly a relevant figure in this debate. In this article, I shall analyse the notion of ordinary moral thought and its role in Sidgwick's masterpiece *The Methods of Ethics* (first edition: 1874; seventh edition: 1907). In *The Methods*, Sidgwick explicitly takes ordinary moral thought as a starting point and as a privileged object of enquiry. A key phase of Sidgwick's work consists in examining the moral code of his age with the aim of finding fundamental ethical intuitions<sup>1</sup>, and ordinary moral thought – which he usually calls «common sense» and «common-sense

<sup>1</sup> See Sidgwick's report of his ethical reflection and working plan in *The Methods of Ethics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 1962, pp. xv-xxi (in particular, pp. xix-xx).

the dialectic between utilitarian theory and moral common sense<sup>82</sup>.

*Summary. Ordinary Moral Thought and Common-Sense Morality: Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics*

This paper is dedicated to the relationship between ordinary moral thought and ethical theory in Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*. I suggest that different contents of ordinary moral thought play different roles and are lent different philosophical weight in Sidgwick's arguments. I start by showing how Sidgwick appeals to certain features of ordinary moral thought, deduced from moral language and experience, both in criticising rival metaethical positions and in establishing his own claims. I then turn to the notion of common-sense morality. After clarifying what Sidgwick means by this expression, I argue that common-sense morality has neither probative value in Sidgwick's argument for the utilitarian principle nor independent validity, and that its authority is ultimately motivated on utilitarian grounds. Pointing out how different contents of ordinary moral thought play different argumentative roles in the foundation and defence of Sidgwick's utilitarianism enables to account more comprehensively for Sidgwick's arguments and moral methodology and provides with a more articulated account of the dialectic between his utilitarian theory and ordinary moral thought.

*Riassunto. Pensiero morale ordinario e moralità di senso comune: I metodi dell'etica di Sidgwick*

Questo articolo affronta il rapporto tra pensiero morale ordinario e teoria etica ne *I metodi dell'etica* di Henry Sidgwick. Sostengo che diversi contenuti del pensiero morale ordinario abbiano ruoli differenti e differente rilevanza filosofica nelle argomentazioni di Sidgwick. Nella prima sezione mostro come Sidgwick faccia appello a certi elementi del pensiero morale ordinario, derivati dal linguaggio e dall'esperienza morale, sia per criticare posizioni metaetiche rivali sia per stabilire le proprie tesi. Successivamente esamino la

<sup>82</sup> I wish to thank audiences at the 5<sup>th</sup> TiLPS History of Analytic Philosophy Workshop in Tilburg and at GAP.11 in Berlin (and in particular Christian Seidel) for comments and questions on a previous draft of this paper. I also thank the anonymous referees for this journal for their helpful comments and suggestions.

nozione di «moralità di senso comune». Dopo aver chiarito cosa Sidgwick intenda con questa espressione, sostengo che la moralità di senso comune non abbia valore di evidenza nella fondazione dell'utilitarismo né goda di una validità o autorità epistemica indipendente – al contrario, la sua autorità è in definitiva motivata da ragioni utilitaristiche. In tal modo, mi propongo di fornire una rappresentazione più completa e precisa della metodologia morale di Sidgwick e della dialettica tra la sua teoria utilitaristica e il pensiero morale ordinario.

*Keywords:* Henry Sidgwick, Utilitarianism, Common-Sense Morality, Metaphilosophy.

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