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UTILITARIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS:
SIDGWICK AND SINGER

Henry Sidgwick and Peter Singer are two of the most important utilitarian moralists. Unsurprisingly, they have much in common, including a commitment to a sophisticated form of utilitarianism and to a broadly foundationalist view of epistemic justification in ethics. Their commonalities extend to their attitudes toward practical ethics, which will hereafter be my focus. Both share a keen sense of the importance of moral philosophy to practical ethics. In his *Practical Ethics*, Sidgwick argues that “the effort to construct a Theory of Right is not a matter of mere speculative interest, but of the deepest practical import”.¹ In the preface to the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics* he explains that although his main aim is to

concentrate the reader’s attention, from first to last, not on the practical results to which our methods lead, but on the methods themselves. . . . I am occupied from first to last in considering how conclusions are to be rationally reached in the familiar matter of our common daily life and actual practice.²

In his most recent intellectual autobiography, Singer remarks that

it is important that philosophy, and especially ethics, should reach out beyond the academy and show the public as a whole that it has something significant to say.³

¹ See Henry Sidgwick, “The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society”, in *Practical Ethics*, edited by Sissela Bok, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 15-30, at p. 24.

² See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 1st ed., London, Macmillan and Co., 1874; 7th ed., 1907, reprint Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, p. viii; see also p. 215.

³ See Peter Singer, “An Intellectual Autobiography”, in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, edited by Jeffrey Schaler, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 2009, p. 56.

In addition, both are exponents of the idea that moral philosophers possess a certain sort of expertise. Sidgwick contends that philosophers have an important role to play in practical ethical theorizing because they are “experts... persons who have gone through a thorough training in psychology, sociology, and logic”.⁴ In his pithy “Moral Experts”, Singer argues that moral philosophers are “experts in matters of morals” because their training makes them “more than ordinarily competent in argument and in the detection of invalid inferences”, and because of their “understanding of moral concepts and of the logic of moral argument”.⁵ Most important of all, both are authors of a work entitled *Practical Ethics*, in which they deal with (some of) the most pressing moral issues of their time.

At this point, one might argue, the similarities end. Sidgwick’s utilitarian programme has been described as “Benthamism grown tame and sleek”.⁶ In his formidable article “The Point of View of the Universe”, Bernard Williams accuses Sidgwick of making “fairly uncritical use” of aspects of common-sense morality, and of relying on utilitarianism to “justify the status quo”.⁷ This is not an unreasonable accusation, since Sidgwick himself seems to suggest that one aim of the moral philosopher is to “establish and concatenate at least the main part of the commonly accepted moral rules”.⁸ Singer, on the other hand, has been described as “The Dangerous Philosopher” and

⁴ See H. Sidgwick, “The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society”, in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 19-20.

⁵ See P. Singer, “Moral Experts”, in *Analysis* 32, 1972, pp. 115-7, at p. 117.

⁶ See David G. Ritchie, “Review of H. Sidgwick, *The Elements of Politics*”, in *International Journal of Ethics* 2, 1892, pp. 254-7, at p. 255.

⁷ See Bernard Williams, “The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics”, in *Making sense of humanity and other philosophical papers, 1982-1993*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 153-71, at pp. 159 and 154.

⁸ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 373. In the same place he says that the “truth of a philosopher’s premises will always be tested by the acceptability of his conclusions”. See also p. 102.

as a “moral iconoclast”.⁹ He holds that it is not the business of the moral philosopher to capture and explain our common-sense moral convictions.

No conclusions about what we ought to do can validly be drawn from a description of what most people in our society think we ought to do. If we have a soundly based moral theory we ought to be prepared to accept its implications even if they force us to change our moral views on major issues. Once this point is forgotten, moral philosophy loses its capacity to generate radical criticism of prevailing moral standards, and serves only to preserve the status quo.¹⁰

Singer hopes to “make philosophy radical by linking it more closely to practice”.¹¹ He makes conscious efforts to popularize his own views.¹² Sidgwick made no such efforts. Instead, he claimed that “I would not if I could, and I could not if I would, say anything which would make philosophy – my philosophy – popular”.¹³ The foregoing seems to imply that while both are exponents of a utilitarian account of morality they use it to very different effect. Sidgwick is a conservative about moral matters,

⁹ For these monikers, see Michael Specter, “The Dangerous Philosopher”, in *The New Yorker*, September 1999 and the subtitle of *Peter Singer Under Fire*.

¹⁰ See P. Singer, “Philosophers are back on the Job”, in *Unsanctifying Human Life*, edited by Helga Kuhse, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 53-65, at p. 62.

¹¹ See P. Singer, “An Intellectual Autobiography”, in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, p. 24.

¹² For example, *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

¹³ See H. Sidgwick, *Journal*, December 1884, in Arthur and Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick, *Henry Sidgwick A Memoir*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1906, reprint Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1996, p. 396. For more on this issue, see Stefan Collini, “My Roles and their Duties: Sidgwick as Philosopher, Professor, and Public Moralist”, in *Henry Sidgwick. Proceedings of the British Academy*, edited by R. Harrison, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 9-49.

while Singer is a radical. I think this way of viewing the two is mistaken or, at the very least, overstated. Sidgwick is less conservative than has been suggested and Singer is less radical than he initially seems. To illustrate my point, I will rely on what each has to say about the moral demands of suffering and destitution.

I.

Sidgwick begins *The Methods of Ethics* with the hope of solving the problem that he argues afflicts the ordinary person in her reasoning about what to do or be. The difficulty is that in such reasoning, most of us appeal to a “loose combination or confusion of methods”.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this delivers plural and conflicting reasons for action, leaving us wondering what we ought, all things considered, to do. To remedy this situation, the moral philosopher “seeks unity of principle, and consistency of method”.¹⁵ This involves developing a method of ethics, that is, “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”.¹⁶

One such method is utilitarianism: the view that an agent acts rightly insofar as her act produces at least as much net aggregate happiness as any other act she could have performed in her situation. Sidgwick devotes a considerable portion of *The Methods of Ethics* to a defense of this framework. Aspects of the argument are obscure and the source of some philosophical and interpretive controversy, but the basic features are clear.¹⁷ The argument begins

¹⁴ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the argument, see J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977; and Anthony Skelton, “Sidgwick's Philosophical Intuitions”, in *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics*, 10, 2008, pp. 185-209.

with a detailed analysis and evaluation of dogmatic intuitionism, the view that “certain kinds of actions are right and reasonable in themselves, apart from their consequences; – or rather with a merely partial consideration of consequences, from which other consequences admitted to be possibly good or bad are definitely excluded”.¹⁸ This view combines epistemic intuitionism – the view that there are non-derivatively justified propositions – with the position that the rules that specify the kinds of actions that are right are those that form the core of common-sense morality, and include requirements of justice, veracity, and benevolence, among others. The problem with this view is that none of the rules of common-sense morality actually satisfy the four conditions, “the complete fulfilment of which would establish a significant proposition, apparently self-evident, in the highest degree of certainty attainable: and which must be approximately realised by the premises of our reasoning in any inquiry, if that reasoning is to lead us cogently to trustworthy conclusions”.¹⁹ These conditions require that for a proposition to be self-evident it must be “clear and precise”, “ascertained by careful reflection”, consistent with other propositions considered self-evident, and that disagreement regarding its truth be absent or rationally explained away.²⁰ The problem is that the rules of common-sense morality are either agreeable but unclear, or clear but disputed, or in conflict with each other. As Sidgwick puts it, “so long as they are left in the state of somewhat vague generalities... we are disposed to yield them unquestioning assent... 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”.²¹ At best, the rules and

¹⁸ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 338-42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

principles of common-sense morality provide adequate guidance to typical people in typical circumstances.²²

Out of his rejection of dogmatic intuitionism emerges Sidgwick's positive view that the only acceptable form of intuitionism is philosophical intuitionism, the view that there are "one or more principles... absolutely and undeniably true and evident".²³ On one (disputed) reckoning there are six philosophical intuitions, the most important of which seem to support utilitarianism, namely, that "as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally... not merely at a particular part of it"²⁴ and that "Happiness (when explained to mean a sum of pleasures)... [is] the sole ultimate end".²⁵ These principles are abstract, making it difficult to infer from them what we ought to do in particular cases. Nevertheless, Sidgwick holds that "Utilitarianism is... the final form into which Intuitionism tends to pass, when the demand for really self-evident first principles is rigorously pressed".²⁶

Once he has arrived at utilitarianism, Sidgwick is keen to disabuse us of the idea that utilitarianism requires us to be impartial in practice. He thinks that though in theory the view requires strict impartiality in practice it permits patterns of moral concern that are decidedly partial.²⁷ He adopts this stance as part of an indirect utilitarianism.²⁸ He thinks that deviating from the strict requirement of impartiality in the sort of cases that he discusses is justified on the grounds that doing so will maximize net aggregate happiness over the long run. This version of utilitarianism permits giving greater weight to oneself, one's family and one's friends and others with whom one has special relations.²⁹

²² *Ibid.*, p. 361.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 388; see also pp. 406-7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-2, 382, and 430 ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 431, 432ff.

However, the view does not completely eliminate the impartiality of utilitarianism. He contends that we ought to treat as equal to our own the pain and suffering and poverty of those who find themselves, through no fault of their own, in dire circumstances.

If I am made aware that, owing to a sudden calamity that could not have been foreseen, another's resources are manifestly inadequate to protect him from pain or serious discomfort, the case is altered; my theoretical obligation to consider his happiness as much as my own becomes at once practical; and I am bound to make as much effort to relieve him as will not entail a greater loss of happiness to myself or others.³⁰

This is a radical commitment. It seems to imply the sort of injunctions that Singer claims are true of the scenarios that he discusses in which one is called upon to sacrifice some resources and/or effort to produce a greater benefit for another. The view entails that if you alone happen upon a small child about to perish by drowning in a pond, then you ought to save her even at the cost of ruining your fancy new outfit.³¹ It also appears to entail that we ought to do much more to relieve the pain, the serious discomfort and the poverty of those living in distant foreign countries, especially where the calamities are not foreseen. This suggests that at least in this case Sidgwick's utilitarianism is very far from being "tame and sleek" or "uncritical" of common-sense morality.³²

³⁰ Ibid., p. 436.

³¹ This case and others similar ones are outlined in, among other places, P. Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, New York, Random House, 2009, pp. 3, 13-5; and P. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 1972, pp. 229-43, at p. 231; P. Singer, "The Singer Solution", in *The New York Times Magazine*, September 1999.

³² For evidence that his radical views failed to translate into radical actions, see S. Collini, "My Roles and their Duties: Sidgwick as Philosopher, Professor, and Public Moralist", in *Henry Sidgwick. Proceedings of the British Academy*.

Indeed, his endorsement of this view is a notable instance in which he seems to correct common-sense morality. He says at one point that he is not sure that the utilitarian view is “*not* the principle of general Benevolence, as recognised by the common sense of mankind”.³³ However, in his final evaluation of common-sense morality, he notes that it admits

that we have a general duty of rendering services to our fellow-men and especially to those who are in special need, and that we are bound to make sacrifices for them, when the benefit that we thereby confer very decidedly outweighs the loss to ourselves; but when we ask how far we are bound to give up our own happiness in order to promote that of our fellows, while it can hardly be said that Common Sense distinctly accepts the Utilitarian principle, it yet does not definitely affirm any other.³⁴

The practical principle that Sidgwick endorses is both much stronger and much more definite than what common sense accepts. Therefore, it is not implausible to conclude that his utilitarian programme is more radical than some critics suggest, at least when it comes to the reduction of (unforeseen) poverty. It requires not only that we help others in special need when the benefit to them “very decidedly” outweighs the cost to us, but when the benefit to them is greater than the cost to us.

Sidgwick repeatedly refers to himself as a utilitarian in his *Practical Ethics*.³⁵ He relies on the view in his *The Elements of Politics* and *The Principles of Political Economy*.³⁶ These treatises outline the utilitarian view

³³ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 252; italics in original.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 348-9.

³⁵ See H. Sidgwick, “Public Morality”, in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 30-6; see also H. Sidgwick, “The Ethics of Religious Conformity”, in *Practical Ethics*, p. 73.

³⁶ For a detailed and helpful analysis of these works, see Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe. An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

of the matters with which they deal. But should we accept the utilitarian view for the purpose of reasoning about practical moral issues? Should we accept Sidgwick's claims about the moral demands of pain and serious discomfort? There seems to be a good reason why we should not. The practical ethical pronouncements of a utilitarian are only as good as the argument for utilitarianism itself. Sidgwick claims that the problem for the dogmatic intuitionist is that her intuitions fail to satisfy the tests for self-evidence. His acceptance of the claim that utilitarianism is justified implies that he thinks that the philosophical intuitions that he argues provide utilitarianism with a foundation do satisfy the tests. This is contestable.

Recall that Sidgwick says of the dogmatic intuitionist's intuitions that "so long as they are left in the state of somewhat vague generalities... we are disposed to yield them unquestioning assent... 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".³⁷ This is a charge that can be made against his philosophical intuitions. Consider the intuition pertaining to the main element of utilitarianism, that "as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally, – so far as it is attainable by my efforts, – not merely at a particular part of it".³⁸ So long as it is left in this vague state, it seems to garner agreement. It is agreed to by the ideal utilitarians G. E. Moore and Hastings Rashdall and by deontologists like W. D. Ross who argue that we have obligations of beneficence. But once the intuition is made more precise so that it really does reveal the utilitarian idea that one ought, as a rational being, to aim *only* at general good, and never at a particular part of it, then it no longer garners universality of acceptance, since Ross will deny it.

³⁷ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 342.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

In addition, once the notion of good is made clearer and more precise, agreement with the ideal utilitarians will disappear. Sidgwick thinks the more precise principle enjoins rational agents to aim at aggregate happiness or pleasure, and though the ideal utilitarians Moore and Rashdall agree that we ought to aim at good generally, they reject the idea that happiness or pleasure is the only good. For example, Rashdall thinks that we ought to aim at virtue, intellectual activity, various kind of affection, and pleasure generally.³⁹ *A fortiori* even if Sidgwick does manage to get agreement on the claim that we ought to aim at happiness generally, agreement breaks down when happiness is understood to consist in pleasure and the absence of pain, since the notion of pleasure is often defined differently by different philosophers. Sidgwick himself seems to give various different definitions of pleasure.⁴⁰ Therefore, we have no reason to accept Sidgwick's utilitarianism for the purpose of reasoning about practical moral matters.

Sidgwick appears prepared for these objections. In *Practical Ethics*, his view is that resolving practical moral issues seems *possible* only if we "give up altogether the idea of getting to the bottom of things, arriving at agreement on the first principles of duty or the Summum Bonum".⁴¹ In particular, we need to refrain from appealing to positions that remain mired in "fundamental disagreements".⁴² He advocates beginning with what those who disagree on fundamentals can agree on, namely, "the particulars of morality".⁴³ The point of departure is the "broad agreement in the details of morality which

³⁹ See Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, 2 volumes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1907.

⁴⁰ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 127, 131, 402.

⁴¹ See H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 5.

⁴² See H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 24 and 25; see also H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7; see also H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 25-6.

we actually find both among thoughtful persons who profoundly disagree on first principles, and among plain men who do not seriously trouble themselves about first principles".⁴⁴ The object of the broad agreement is referred to as the "region of middle axioms".⁴⁵ The so-called axioms are, roughly speaking, the rules of common-sense morality surveyed in Book III of *The Methods of Ethics*, including rules regarding benevolence, veracity, good faith and just treatment, among others.⁴⁶ In part, Sidgwick's move away from appeal to controversial or disputed elements of moral theories or outlooks is driven by the recognition that astute, well-meaning, impartial inquirers can be led to fundamentally different conclusions about the ultimate requirements of reason.⁴⁷ These constitute "fundamental controversies"⁴⁸ or "fundamental disagreements".⁴⁹

His very own attempt to "frame a perfect ideal of rational conduct" he concluded was "foredoomed to inevitable failure".⁵⁰ The failure results from the fact that he finds both rational egoism and utilitarianism to be equally plausible (but ultimately conflicting) claims about the ultimate demand of reason. He thinks it is "reasonable" to hold either view.⁵¹ His remarks in *Practical Ethics* make it

⁴⁴ See H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 6; see also H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ See H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ See H. Sidgwick, "Public Morality", in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 33, 42-3.

⁴⁷ See H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 6; see also H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ See H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ See H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 1st ed., p. 473; see also H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed., pp. 496-509.

⁵¹ See H. Sidgwick, "Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies", in *Mind*, 14, 1889, pp. 473-87, at p. 486.

plausible to hold that he thought something like this of other views as well. Note that Sidgwick is not it seems advocating that we abandon moral theories or fundamentals altogether. He seems to advocate that we refrain from appealing only to the elements upon which people do not converge. So, for example, if appeal to utilitarian considerations is agreed upon, the appeal is uncontroversial.

Now, no specific solution follows from the recognition of fundamental and seemingly intractable disagreements. One option, of course, is to engage in a war of attrition. But this is not Sidgwick's strategy. He notes that to employ a moral theory or outlook in light of disagreement about it would be to invite "the grave drawbacks of sectarian rivalries and conflicts".⁵² To remain fixed in one's favoured moral theory means impeding progress in solving important practical moral questions and refusing to cooperate.⁵³

Instead, he maintains that appeal to controversial fundamentals is a problematic way to approach practical ethics, since it is expressive of "onesidedness".⁵⁴ The mark of a "thoughtful" or "moral" person – or a person embodying the "spirit of justice"⁵⁵ – is a willingness to take an impartial stance to cooperate and forge lasting practical policies, "to compromise... even when the adjustment [policy] thus attained can only be rough, and far removed from what either party regards as ideally equitable".⁵⁶ The spirit requires "reciprocal admissions",⁵⁷ making any practical ethic that unfairly benefits some at the expense of others objectionable. He holds

⁵² See H. Sidgwick, "The Aims and Methods of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 25.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 24; see also H. Sidgwick, "The Scope and Limits of the Work of an Ethical Society", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 6; and also H. Sidgwick, "The Morality of Strife", in *Practical Ethics*, p. 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53. Although Sidgwick's main concern in the essay is to deal with the issue of war, he says that the principles for dealing with war are applicable to "milder conflicts". *Ibid.*, p. 49. My suggestion is that included among these milder conflicts are disagreements about which practical policies to adopt.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 59.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

that in cases of disagreement thoughtful people should seek compromise, not enforcement of their own principles.⁵⁸ The spirit of justice requires “sympathy, and the readiness to imagine oneself in another’s place and look at things from his point of view; and . . . the intelligent apprehension of common interests. In this way we may hope to produce a disposition to compromise”.⁵⁹

This methodology leads him to take a different approach to the moral demands of poverty, pain and serious discomfort. In his essay “Luxury,” he addresses the issue of the morality of luxurious expenditure. He begins with what he regards as a difficulty: many of us live in luxury, yet we want to do what is commonly regarded as right and are aware that living in luxury is commonly regarded as open to moral censure. To make sense of the extent to which living in luxury is defensible, he draws a distinction between luxuries and necessities. On his view, luxuries involve consumption that “increases pleasure without materially promoting health or efficiency”,⁶⁰ while necessities are what one needs for one’s physical and moral well-being and for efficiency in one’s work or social role.⁶¹ He considers and rejects several different arguments against expenditure on luxury. He considers the utilitarian complaint that “a man who lives luxuriously consumes what would have produced more happiness if he had left it to be consumed by others”.⁶² He rejects it. Instead, he adopts the view that expenditure on luxuries is justified when it advances knowledge and/or “the appreciation and production of beauty”.⁶³ He appears to hold the view

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶⁰ See H. Sidgwick, “Luxury”, in *Practical Ethics*, p. 106; see also p. 101

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 99, 106.

⁶² Ibid., p. 109.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 111. He appears to think that this justifies expenditure on “literature regarded as a fine art, on music and the drama, on paintings and sculptures, on ornamental buildings and furniture, on flowers and trees and landscape gardening of all kinds”. Ibid., p. 112.

that it is permissible to use resources to purchase luxuries even when this fails to maximize happiness and even when this fails to help those who are living “hard lives”.⁶⁴ In his essay “The Pursuit of Culture”, he puts his view as follows:

it would seem to me – in view of the multiple evils of the penury around us – a clear moral duty for most persons with ample means to restrict their expenditure to the minimum necessary for the health, and the efficiency in professional or social work, of themselves and their families. The superfluity could then be spent in any of the ways of relieving distress which the Charity Organization Society would sanction... What stands in the way of this moral judgment is the widespread conviction that the lavish expenditure of the rich on the elements of culture, the means of developing and gratifying the love of knowledge and the love of beauty in all their various forms, meets an important social need.⁶⁵

This suggests a plausible standard regarding our obligations to poverty and pain or serious discomfort. It states that we ought to give to the alleviation of poverty what is not devoted to our own and our family’s necessities or to what advances culture, that is, knowledge and the production and appreciation of beauty. He appears to adopt this view because he thinks that there is a marked agreement amongst thoughtful people that culture matters.⁶⁶ This proposal is firmly rooted in common-sense morality. It is a more precise rendition of the common-sense standard that Sidgwick rejects in *The Methods of Ethics*, which is, as noted, unclear on how far we are bound to give up our own happiness in order to promote that of our fellows. This new standard tells us how far we are required to go.

There may be some worries about the view that Sidgwick puts forward. We might want him to be more specific about

⁶⁴ Ibid. For further discussion, see H. Sidgwick, *The Elements of Politics*, 4th ed., London, Macmillan and Co., 1919, pp. 159-61.

⁶⁵ See H. Sidgwick, “The Pursuit of Culture”, in *Practical Ethics*, p. 115.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 113-6.

the nature of knowledge and the nature of beauty that he thinks it worth promoting. Presumably he considers only some knowledge important. But which knowledge is important and which knowledge is trivial? In addition, we may worry that perhaps the standard he advocates is still too stringent and demanding to be agreed to. Furthermore, he has not really shown that his philosophical foes accept it. These are important worries. In reply, he might accept that the view needs to be made more precise and that we need to show more clearly that the practical view in question garners agreement without moving away from the machinery on which he relies in practical ethics and which pushes him away from his utilitarian beginnings.

So, Sidgwick appears in theory to have fairly radical ideas about our obligations to eliminate “pain or serious discomfort” or “poverty”.⁶⁷ This deflects some of the criticism according to which he is a conservative. However, he appears to be held back from advocating his utilitarian positions for the purpose of conducting practical ethics on account of the sort of practical methodology that he adopts. This makes him conservative to some extent. But his view seems like it is the right view to adopt for practical ethics. It seems the most suitable way to handle the deep disagreements that exist in ethics and with which Sidgwick was all too familiar.⁶⁸

II.

Like Sidgwick, Singer is committed to utilitarianism. He seeks to use this view in an effort to make sense of the ultimate demands of morality. To establish the truth of utilitarianism he sometimes expresses a commitment to the sort of intuitions to which Sidgwick is wedded. In “Ethics and Intuitions”, he argues that certain of our

⁶⁷ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 436.

⁶⁸ For a defence of Sidgwick’s methodology, see A. Skelton, “Henry Sidgwick’s Practical Ethics: A Defence”, in *Utilitas*, 18, 2006, pp. 199-217.

intuitions are owed to our “evolutionary and cultural history” and should therefore be put aside in favour of those – perhaps like Sidgwick’s – that have a “rational basis”.⁶⁹ He is keen to defend Sidgwick’s claim that “the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other”.⁷⁰ He does not put forward any procedure for separating rational intuitions from those that might be mistaken for rational intuitions, and so his position is less well developed than Sidgwick’s. What he adds to the defense of Sidgwick’s intuitions, namely, that intuitions that are the “outcome of our evolutionary past” are somehow less trustworthy than those that Sidgwick puts forward, raises more controversial issues than it settles.⁷¹ Moreover, he has no procedure for determining the truth of our intuitions.

This may not trouble Singer since he appears to rely on a different sort of argument for the main conclusions of utilitarianism. In his most famous article, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, he argues for the principle that if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally speaking, to do it.⁷² This principle explains why we ought to save a child from drowning in a pond at the expense of ruining our new shoes and our fancy new outfit. It also entails that we ought to do much more for the world’s most impoverished citizens. Singer suggests that this principle implies that we ought to give to the relief of poverty until our giving makes us worse off than it makes anyone else better off.⁷³ In other words, he seems to suggest that

⁶⁹ See P. Singer, “Ethics and Intuitions”, in *The Journal of Ethics*, 9, 2005, pp. 331-52, at p. 351.

⁷⁰ See H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 382; see also P. Singer, “Ethics and Intuitions”, in *The Journal of Ethics*, 9, 2005, p. 351.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁷² See P. Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 1972, p. 231.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

he can get us to the main component of utilitarianism by appeal to our intuitions about familiar particular cases. However, it is far from clear that this argument is sufficiently robust to get us all the way to utilitarianism since there is much dispute about what counts as comparable in importance to relief of severe poverty.⁷⁴ In addition, there are worries that utilitarianism is too demanding and that it delivers injunctions that are beyond the motivational capacities of the typical individual.

In response, Singer has backed away from the utilitarian rendering of this principle. Like Sidgwick, he adopts a version of indirect utilitarianism.⁷⁵ On the basis of this view he advocates less demanding practical directives. In *Practical Ethics* he claims that advocating the utilitarian standard on the question of poverty is problematic because it may be “counterproductive”; a more modest standard will likely produce better results all things considered. He advocates that each rich person give about ten percent of their income to the relief of famine.⁷⁶ In his essay “The Singer Solution”, he argues on the same basis that the rich ought to give everything that they earn over US \$30,000.00 for the same purpose. In the book *One World* he defends the view that those who can afford it give at least one percent of their annual income.⁷⁷ In *The Life You Can Save* he defends the suggestion that those who are “financially comfortable” should give five percent of their annual income and that the “very rich” should give more.⁷⁸ In the same work

⁷⁴ For discussion, see, for example, Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; and see also T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁷⁵ For Singer’s endorsement of this view, see P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 91ff.

⁷⁶ See P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 246.

⁷⁷ See P. Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002 pp. 193, 194, and 195.

⁷⁸ See P. Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, p. 152; for the details of his proposal, see Chap. 5.

he claims that “I think we should advocate the level of giving that will raise the largest possible total, and so have the best consequences”.⁷⁹ This seems to explain why he adopts the various standards.

But he sometimes gives a different reason for more modest proposals. In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, he suggests a weaker version of the principle discussed above on grounds that some might balk at its demands. The weaker principle says that “we should prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we... [have] to sacrifice something morally significant”.⁸⁰ He seems to think the weaker principle is more likely to garner agreement. A similar view is expressed more robustly in more recent writings. In *The Life You Can Save* he writes of hoping to arrive at a reasonable public standard for giving aid. He suggests that we “use praise and blame to influence behavior, and the appropriate standard must be relative to what we can reasonably expect most people to do”.⁸¹ He argues that this has not only to do with the typical utilitarian reasons that he and Sidgwick provide. It has to do with the fact that the more modest/less demanding public standard is agreeable to or might reasonably be assumed to be agreeable to other non-utilitarian philosophers and to those who are not philosophers but who care about doing the right thing. He notes that in theory he rejects those philosophical views which do not endorse the utilitarian implications regarding our obligations to the impoverished. However, in practice he thinks that the disagreements are less important than the agreements. As he puts it: “Against the background of

⁷⁹ Ibid.; see also P. Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, p. 192.

⁸⁰ See P. Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 1972, p. 241; see also p. 231.

⁸¹ See P. Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*, p. 154.

a world in which most affluent people give only a trivial proportion of their income, or none at all, to help the poor, the agreement among the four of us [Singer, Richard Miller, Brad Hooker and Garrett Cullity] that we all have, at a minimum, moderately demanding obligations to help the poor is more important than the differences between us”.⁸² He appeals to these views to help “in answering... [the] practical question” of what standard ought to be publicly advocated.⁸³ He also notes that non-philosophers agree on the sort of standard he goes on to argue for: “Surprisingly, Americans earning less than \$20,000 a year actually give a higher percentage of their income – a substantial 4.6 percent – to charity than every other income group until we get to those earning more than \$300,000 a year”.⁸⁴ He might also note the general agreement about the particular cases he discusses and the weaker version of his initial principle, which imply that we have relatively robust obligations to those in desperate need. Singer thinks this agreement can function as the basis of a “realistic approach” to the relief of famine.

This seems for Singer to be a new and distinct approach to justifying his claims about our obligations to the most impoverished citizens of the world. It is reminiscent of Sidgwick’s approach, since it calls for agreement among philosophers, moral experts, and plain people who are concerned to do their duty. Its implication is that Singer advocates a less radical view than one might expect, one that calls for modest amounts of money and effort aimed at achieving a set of goals to do with poverty reduction that all see to be both realistic and compelling for their own distinct reasons. But this means that Singer is therefore in some sense more conservative than is often suggested. However, as in the case of Sidgwick,

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

the conservatism seems to be an implication of a reasonable and plausible approach to practical moral issues that is the outcome of hoping to achieve lasting agreement and meaningful results.

It might appear that Singer has adopted this sort of framework only in the case of poverty. I do not think that this is true. Although I do not have the space to defend this claim, I think the view is operative elsewhere. It could plausibly explain why he advocates the policy that parents have authority over whether or not to euthanize a defective or severely disabled newborn with no future of value, and why he advocates that the sum total of sustainable carbon emissions should be divided up equally amongst the world's citizens.⁸⁵

It must be admitted at this point that the evidence for attributing something like Sidgwick's view to Singer is not conclusive. However, there is a difference between appealing to utilitarian reasoning for modest practical proposals and appealing to agreement of the sort at issue here for the same purpose. It is indeed noteworthy that Singer gravitates toward consensus amongst moral philosophers/experts and those who are seriously concerned to do their duty rather than some other mechanism. The appeal to consensus seems to have a certain plausibility and authority in the case of practical ethical thinking; it entails that the policy can be justified to others on grounds that they accept. That Singer makes this appeal is perhaps an unconscious recognition of this fact. At any rate, Singer would do well to heed Sidgwick's advice about how best to do practical ethics. It seems to be the only way to make progress in practical ethics in the absence of a universally agreed upon moral framework.

⁸⁵ See H. Kuhse and P. Singer, *Should the Baby Live? The problem of handicapped infants*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985; and see P. Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, p. 43.

Utilitarian Practical Ethics: Sidgwick and Singer

To conclude, in this paper, I have attempted to argue that Sidgwick is more radical about practical moral matters than he is often given credit for. In his defense of utilitarianism, he appears to advocate radical departures from common-sense morality on the issue of the relief of poverty. He departs from such radical pronouncements in his *Practical Ethics* because of the plausible practical methodology on which he relies. This methodology aims for agreement on practical moral policies amongst those who disagree on moral fundamentals. In a series of books and articles Singer has argued for a more radical moral view on the issue of the relief of poverty. However, more recently he has advocated more conservative proposals. This has to do in part with the fact that he appears attracted to something like the practical methodology on which Sidgwick relies, which may provide a mechanism for gradual but compelling moral change.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ I wish to thank Meena Krishnamurthy and Peter Singer for helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper.