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CRITICAL STUDY

SIDGWICK’S ETHICS

BY JOHN SKORUPSKI


I

Broad thought Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics* “to be on the whole the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written, and to be one of the English philosophical classics” (*Five Types of Ethical Theory*, p. 143). There has been a period in recent philosophy during which that judgement would have been found absurdly hyperbolic; but I suspect that at present an increasing number of moral philosophers see no great reason to quarrel with it.

Nevertheless, as Professor Schneewind remarks in his preface, there is—or has been till the present publication appeared—no major historical or philosophical study of Sidgwick’s moral philosophy. Schneewind sets out to fill the gap, and in many ways succeeds admirably. Certainly his book must be indispensable reading for students of Sidgwick or of 19th century British moral philosophy; but it also deserves the serious attention of anyone interested in the central and profound questions of moral theory which Sidgwick treated with such penetrating care.

Schneewind’s study falls into three parts. Part I deals with the development of Sidgwick’s thought, and of British moral philosophy, up to *The Methods of Ethics*. Part II is an extensive commentary on *The Methods of Ethics*. Part III provides some account of the moral theory of Sidgwick’s contemporaries—evolutionist and idealist—and of Sidgwick’s view of the history of ethics.

Of these, Part I traces in brilliant summary the writings of a multitude of moralists—Scottish and Cambridge intuitionists, utilitarian early and late, from Reid and Bentham to Sidgwick’s time. I learnt a lot from this part of the book, as I think most readers (at any level) would, and have been encouraged to explore many of the less known writers further. The material on Sidgwick’s earlier development, and his later exchanges with contemporary theorists, also contains many useful things. Sidgwick’s polite but implacably measured and comprehensive demolition of the productions of Spencer or Green is an awesome spectacle, of which Schneewind gives us some salutary glimpses. Altogether, it seemed to me that these parts of Schneewind’s book could hardly be bettered.

That leaves us with Schneewind’s commentary on the *Methods*. Scrupulous and careful as this is, I must say I found it disappointing—though the disappointment, it is true, was relative to the standard of the other parts of the book, and the goal Schneewind sets himself.

The goal is to show that Sidgwick’s book has a central line of argument and an “architectonic coherence [which] rivals the work of Kant himself” (Schneewind, p. 422). It seems to me, as it does to Schneewind, that the
Methods has a central structure of argument, that this central structure is coherent, powerful and profound, but that it is obscured by a mass of minute examinations of widely varied topics—often interesting in detail, but disorienting in their total effect. Moreover, the greatest admirers of Sidgwick—even Broad—could hardly claim for his masterpiece the qualities of perspicuous presentation or expository flair. Nor are the difficulties simply those of overloaded detail or inadequately focused presentation. Sidgwick is himself, I think, ultimately unclear on some of the central features of his own position.

A commentary may of course restrict itself to following, explaining points of detail in, and summarizing the text. But given that Schneewind’s aim is to bring out the underlying argument of the Methods, it becomes a weakness of his account that it stays too close to the sequence and even the manner of Sidgwick’s exposition. Schneewind makes no claim to provide a critical study—in fact he explicitly disavows it, on the ground that proper criticism would require the elaboration of a structure as profound and wide-ranging as Sidgwick’s own. But such clashes of systems are not the only critical mode. If what I have said about the Methods is right, then what is required where the object is to bring out Sidgwick’s central arguments is critical exposition; and that also means, at certain points, “rational reconstruction”—explicitly distinguished where it is necessary, of course, from exact interpretation as such. The important features of the Sidgwickian scene are all present in Schneewind’s presentation, but they often stand out no more clearly, and sometimes, through sheer labouring of the point, less clearly, than in Sidgwick’s own. In fact the curiously muffled quality of Sidgwick’s exposition is regularly matched by Schneewind’s commentary on it.

I would not like these reservations to obscure the fact that a great deal is to be learnt from what Schneewind has to say about the Methods. A scholarly project as careful and considered as his, on a subject as interesting, requires detailed attention. If we set aside, first, the utilitarian vindication of common sense—or common sense vindication of utilitarianism—by which Sidgwick hopes to reconcile the methods of utilitarian and intuitionist, and second, the arguments for hedonism, the central structure of Sidgwick’s position can be defined by his view of the following topics: (i) the nature of practical reason; (ii) the analysis of normative concepts; (iii) the role of the “self-evident axioms”; (iv) the dualism of practical reason. Schneewind would not I think disagree. In the rest of this review, I propose to examine Sidgwick, and Schneewind on Sidgwick, on these points.

II

(i) Practical Reason

“. . . the central thought of the Methods of Ethics” (Schneewind says, p. 303) “is that morality is the embodiment of the demands reason makes on practice under the conditions of human life, and that the problems of philosophical ethics are the problems of showing how practical reason is articulated into these demands.” In a general sense, of course, that must be the central thought of any moral theory of systematic intent. If the description is to identify Sidgwick’s conception, it has to be understood in a specifically rationalist sense. That is to say, reason must be understood as “making demands” on practice in the way that was rejected by Hume.

A deliberating agent, in concluding that he should do this action, concludes that there is more reason in these circumstances for his doing this action than another. That conclusion must come from the combination of,
first, a belief about the empirical features of the action, and second, an *a priori* understanding that its possession of such and such empirical features gives him reason for doing it. (Sidgwick "argues, against the empiricists, that an appeal to intuition is a necessity in all knowledge, since without it no adequate account is possible of how we can be warranted in drawing inferences", Schneewind, p. 302.) The Humean account of what is understood *a priori* is something like this: the degree to which one has reason at a time for doing an action is proportional to the degree to which doing that action would satisfy the desires one would have at that time, given full knowledge and imaginative grasp of all relevant facts, and taking the desires as weighted by their intensity. But to acknowledge that something like that is understood *a priori* is presumably not, on the Humean or empiricist view, to recognize an essential appeal to intuition—having the idea of a reason for acting simply is having some such understanding (this way of avoiding the appeal to intuition of course poses in turn a serious difficulty for any empiricism which also adopts the doctrine that 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is').

Sidgwick's conception of practical reason differs from this in two ways. First, if what there is reason for the agent to do must stand on what the agent's desires are, then although actions can be criticized in the light of desires, or of desires under more perfect information, there can be no standpoint altogether external to the framework of desires from which desires themselves are open to rational criticism. Sidgwick thinks there is such a standpoint, from which desires can be seen as reasonable or contrary to reason. Second, the principles of practical reason which form this standpoint are not obtained simply by analysis of the notion of a reason for acting. Sidgwick's conception of practical reason is therefore Kantian in accepting that if reason is practical—and that means, if there is ever anything I should do—then there are synthetic *a priori* practical principles.

These are the epistemological implications of the *Methods of Ethics*, rather than the results of an explicit epistemological discussion. Nor does Sidgwick say anything directly on the Kantian question: how are synthetic pure practical principles possible? Something of his attitude emerges, in the *Methods* and elsewhere. A passage omitted after the first two editions of the *Methods* and quoted by Schneewind suggests a Kantian answer, or at least a Kantian refusal to embark on what a metaphysical realist would accept as an answer: "We may perhaps say that this notion of 'ought', when once it has been developed, is a necessary form of our moral apprehension, just as space is now a necessary form of our sense perception" (Schneewind, p. 235).

Complete avoidance of any commitment to moral realism is a notable feature of Sidgwick's position. As Schneewind puts it, "The objectivity of rightness is essentially due to the rationality of rightness, not to taking rightness as a property or quality to be observed" (Schneewind, p. 298). Or one could perhaps express Sidgwick's attitude by adapting to ethics a well-known remark of Kreisel about mathematics: "what matters for morality is not the existence of moral facts but the objectivity of moral statements".

In a work whose greatness rests in good part on the metaphysical depth with which it treats the underpinnings of hedonism, prudence and consequentialism, the absence of any sustained consideration of the general "metaphysics of morals" is noticeable: Sidgwick's views of moral philosophy always had more in common with Butler than with Kant. Now one can
perhaps admire this refusal, if that is what it is, to search after a meta-
physical foundation for the "rationality of rightness" as the wise setting
aside of a bad question. But the absence from the Methods of any distinct
statement of what Sidgwick takes the "rationality of rightness" to amount
to seems to me a limitation of the work. For example, can anyone who
explicitly and reflectively rejects moral realism be as confident as Sidgwick
is that every moral question has one and only one answer, or that anything
of that kind follows from the objectivity or rationality of rightness alone?
Again, though his disagreement with Hume is evident enough on the whole,
Sidgwick at no point clearly contrasts his conception of practical reason
with Hume's, or considers their diverging implications. Consequently, many
passages in the book are ambiguous, obscure or even inconsistent, because
Sidgwick has not finally shaken off Hume's influence. Here is a respect in
which Schneewind misses the opportunity for clarifying commentary by
following the Methods too closely. He does not bring out the opposition
between the two conceptions. It remains under the surface in his exposition,
muddying the waters even more effectively than in the Methods of Ethics.
What it is for reason to make demands "on practice under the conditions
of human life" is never clearly settled in his account.

(ii) The systematization of normative concepts

The notions of 'ought' and 'right' contain according to Sidgwick a
"fundamental notion" which (at least "as it now exists in our thought")
"cannot be resolved into any more simple notions" (Methods, 7th ed., pp.
32-3; subsequent references to this edition by page number only), but in
terms of which other moral notions can all be defined. It is the notion of a
"precept" or "dictate of reason"; as Schneewind puts it, "the notion of a
requirement which our own rationality presents to our desires and volitions"
(Schneewind, p. 221).

To fix ideas it will help to stand away a little from Sidgwick's text, and
to take the fundamental notion as a relation between an agent $A$ and an
action $x$: there is reason for $A$ to do $x$. (Cp. Schneewind, p. 417: "The starting-
point of Sidgwick's argument is the demonstration . . . that we have a
unique, irreducible concept of 'being a reason for' as it applies to action
and desire"). The relation admits of degree: 'A' ranges over agents, while
the action variable 'x' ranges exhaustively over the actions, each taken as
exclusive of any other, open to $A$ in a given situation of choice. (I ignore
various complications, concerning, e.g., the proper characterization of the
items over which the action variable ranges (it should be read as standing in
for phrases of the form 'the action of $x$-ing'), and more importantly, the
fact that the strength of a reason is relative to the strength of reasons for
doing other actions in the choice-set. In a more careful treatment it would
be preferable to take as fundamental the relation 'there is greater or equal
reason for $A$ to do $x$ than to do $y$'. A reference to time would also enter—
see below.)

Sidgwick discusses 'ought' and 'right' in some detail and with consider-
able sensitivity to diverging shades of implication, as Schneewind brings
out. However, in terms of the relation just introduced his account of the
concepts is in essence this. $A$ ought to do $x$ if and only if there is stronger
reason for $A$ to do $x$ than to do any other action. ('Ought' does not commute
with disjunction—'A ought to do $x$ or $y$' would be separately defined along
similar lines.) $x$ is the right action for $A$ to do if and only if $A$ ought to do $x$.

But the important point for understanding Sidgwick's overall argument
is his analysis of ‘good’. *Methods* I ix, in which Sidgwick discusses the concept, is one of the difficult chapters of the book, as well as one of the crucial ones. Sidgwick is in fact concerned with two concepts, without distinguishing them adequately: the good for, or of, a man, and the good. I shall refer to the former as the *good-for-A*.

Sidgwick proceeds by developing, in an extremely opaque discussion, a definition of the *good-for-A* which he will eventually reject: “a man’s future good on the whole is what he would now desire and seek on the whole if all the consequences of all the different lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately realized in imagination at the present point of time” (pp. 111-2). This looks like a perfectly “Humean” conception, and it is evident that Sidgwick at this stage had a conception of that kind in mind. (I do not mean that Hume himself would have accepted the definition: he learned otherwise from Butler.) Nevertheless Sidgwick’s interpretation of the definition diverges from a purely “Humean” view; for he takes it to embody or presuppose the requirement that “an equal regard for all the moments of our conscious experience—so far, at least, as the mere difference of their position in time is concerned—is an essential characteristic of rational conduct” (p. 111). We are to take it as an assumption, in other words, that every desire which *A* accurately foresees and imaginatively realizes generates a present desire that it should be satisfied of equal intensity to itself: *A* has no pure time preference. But this is merely the psychological correlate of a categorical rational requirement, precisely of the kind rejected in the Humean conception of practical reason—the definition understood in this way is not, as Sidgwick supposes, purely, if ideally, “factual”.

Sidgwick in any case proceeds to reject this quasi-Humean definition of the *good-for-A*. His own account of the “ultimate good on the whole for me” is this: “what I should practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason, assuming my own existence alone to be considered”. And he adds the following account of “ultimate good on the whole”: “what as a rational being I should desire and seek to realize, assuming myself to have an equal concern for all existence” (p. 112).

How is one to understand the phrases ‘assuming my own existence alone to be considered’ and ‘assuming myself to have an equal concern for all existence’? Not in the sense of conditionalizing, in a Humean way, what one has reason to choose or desire to some ultimate desire, project or concern. For what could that concern be? It could only be a concern in the first case, to *promote my own good*, and in the second, impartially to *promote the good of all*. (I use the convenient term ‘promote’ as in T. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford, 1970.) The restrictions Sidgwick should at this point have in mind are restrictions not on the sort of *desire* on which reasons for acting are to be founded (reasons are in any case not *founded* on desires) but on the sort of *information* on which they are to be founded. In the first case one is to consider information only as it regards one’s future states. Eliminating the inessential reference to desires gives the following account:

1. A state of affairs is *good-for-A* just to the extent that there is reason for *A* to do whatever promotes it for *his own sake*.

What is the parallel account of “ultimate good on the whole”? There are three possibilities I think it important to consider.

2. A state of affairs is *good* just to the extent that there is reason for anyone to promote it.
(3') A state of affairs is good just to the extent that there is reason for $A$ to promote it.

(4) A state of affairs is good just to the extent that there is someone (anyone) for whose sake there is reason for anyone to promote it.

(4) is the closest to Sidgwick's thought, inasmuch as he regularly seems to think of "my ultimate good" and the "good on the whole" as the notions of the egoist and the universalistic consequentialist respectively. But this tendency is connected with an unclarity which goes deep in the _Methods of Ethics_—and obscures a series of different points.

It seems evident that Sidgwick means his accounts of "my good" and "good on the whole" to be definitions. Schneewind interprets his intentions this way, as does Broad. But as Schneewind also notes, Sidgwick thought an analysis of practical, or normative, concepts should show them to be neutral in a certain sense as between moral systems. What Schneewind does not point out is that if (1) and (4) are taken as definitions they yield concepts which are not neutral in the required sense. A person who self-abnegatingly considers that there is no reason to promote his own good may be wrong, but he has not simply failed to understand the meaning of words, as adopting (1) as a definition would imply. (Assuming that 'there is reason for $A$ to do $x$ for $B$'s sake' entails 'there is reason for $A$ to do $x$.') More conspicuously, adopting (4) as a definition makes true, by definition, the principle that something is good if and only if there is anyone for whose sake there is reason to promote it—a principle which takes one a considerable distance, if not all the way, to one species of universalistic consequentialism.

However, Sidgwick's account of normative concepts can be modified in a way which is consistent with, and indeed clarifies, the general structure of the _Methods_. 'The good-for-$A$', in the sense of what is in the interests of $A$, must be taken as a basic notion, not defined in normative terms. (It is explained substantively, by specifying what human interests are.) (1) is then a pure but synthetic principle. On the other hand there is the normative notion of 'good', which must be (i) neutral, and (ii) definable in terms of the basic normative notion. But there is a further complication. There are two crucially different versions of the normative notion of good. One is captured by taking (2) as the definition: I shall call this "absolute good". The other requires an alteration in (3') as follows:

(3) A state of affairs is good-relative-to-$A$ just to the extent that there is reason for $A$ to promote it.

The notion defined in (3) I call "agent-relative good" or "relative good" for short.

When the distinctions between these three notions, 'good-for-$A$' on the one hand, and absolute and relative good on the other, are borne in mind, much of Sidgwick's argument comes more clearly into focus. The normative concepts of absolute and relative good are indeed "neutral" in a sense, but a sense weaker than expected. Egoism, Sidgwick will in effect argue, cannot be acceptably formulated in terms of absolute good. For this reason there is a sense in which absolute good is indeed the notion of the utilitarian, and relative good the notion of the egoist, despite the fact that they are not defined in utilitarian or egoistic terms. But it remains important to remember the distinction—not clearly made by Sidgwick—between 'good-for-$A$' and 'good-relative-to-$A$'. In these terms we have, as the basic thought of the universalistic consequentialist—the "altruist", for short—that whatever is good for some $A$ is to that extent good. The basic thought of egoism, as
it is endorsed by Sidgwick, is that whatever is good-for-\( A \) is to that extent good-relative-to-\( A \). Hedonism is the view that the happiness of \( A \) is the sole good-for-\( A \).

(iii) **The self-evident axioms**

"There is a remarkable amount of disagreement in the literature about the number of axioms Sidgwick thinks he presents as well as some disagreement about their interpretation. . . . In interpreting what he says, it seems sensible to try to find the smallest number of axioms with which the work to be done by first principles can be done" (Schneewind, p. 290).

Sidgwick says "there are certain abstract moral principles of real importance, intuitively known" and adds that "we can exhibit a self-evident element in the commonly recognized principles of Prudence, Justice and Benevolence" (p. xxxiii). Schneewind-assembles a useful list of variously formulated principles from Sidgwick's text under these headings (P, Prudence; J, Justice; B, Benevolence), singling out the following four as of fundamental importance (the numbering is Schneewind's):

J3. It cannot be right for \( A \) to treat \( B \) in a manner in which it would be wrong for \( B \) to treat \( A \), merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground of difference of treatment (p. 380).

P3. The mere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another (p. 381).

B1. The good of any one individual is of no more importance from the point of view . . . of the universe than the good of any other (p. 382).

B2. 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 (p. 382).

From B1 and B2 Sidgwick derives the "maxim of Benevolence in an abstract form":

B3. Each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own (p. 382).

Do these axioms represent conditions on any systems of practical reasoning—in particular, on Sidgwick's two systems of egoism and altruism? Or do they represent the bases from which one or both of these systems is derived? Schneewind does not make his answer altogether clear. The passage I quoted from him at the beginning of this section suggests an affirmative answer to the latter question, and he does go on to develop ways in which Sidgwick may be taken to derive altruism from B1 and B2, and egoism from P. But he also says that his interpretation of the axioms "agrees in the main with the negative and formalistic reading of them which predominates in the literature" (Schneewind, p. 305).

Let us begin by considering J. It will be useful to have another version of it also in mind:

J2. If a kind of conduct that is right (or wrong) for me is not right (or wrong) for someone else, it must be on the ground of some difference between the two cases, other than the fact that I and he are different persons (p. 379).
What is asserted in J is essentially nothing other than a corollary of the supervenience of normative concepts. In terms of the basic notion: a reason for doing an action must be grounded in, or supervenient on, some characteristic of the action and the agent which gives the agent reason to do the action—in short, supervenient on some relation, R, more or less complex, which holds between agent and action. Specifying R yields a universalizable practical principle of the form:

If A has R to x then there is reason for A to do x.

The effect of J is to rule out any essential reference to a particular person from the specification of R. E.g., if ‘N’ is an essential reference to some person then ‘A’s doing x promotes N’s good’ is ruled out. Now a person who thinks his own good is absolutely good thinks there is reason for anyone to promote it. An absolute egoist, who thinks it the only thing absolutely good, must think there is reason for anyone to promote it simply because it is his. That thought is ruled out by J, because it can be expressed only by specifying R in a way which makes essential reference to the egoist himself: A’s doing x promotes MY good. What J does not rule out is “relative egoism”—the view that each person’s good is the only good relative to him; for here R is specified thus: A’s doing x promotes A’s good. The first specification of R yields an absolute reason, the second yields an agent-relative reason. (I take this pair of concepts to be a merely logical variant of Nagel’s ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ reasons.)

In discussing egoism Sidgwick makes use of J in just this way. What is (absolutely) good about the good-for-me cannot be that it is good-for-ME. Hence if my good is absolutely good it must be because it is my good, and the good for anyone else must equally be absolutely good. (But if the egoist keeps to the claim that his good is the only thing which is good relative to him, the argument from J cannot reach him. Hence relative egoism survives as one arm of the dualism of practical reason (ep. J. L. Mackie, “Sidgwick’s Pessimism”, Philosophical Quarterly, 26 (1976)).

The sense in which J is purely “formal and negative” emerges fairly clearly from these considerations. One can state the principle in this way:

I. The mere numerical distinctness of subjects cannot constitute a ground on which differences of value supervene.

That suggests a parallel formulation of P:

II. The mere numerical distinctness of time periods cannot constitute a ground on which differences of value supervene.

It should be noted, however, that while there is in the Methods an implicit distinction between absolute and agent-relative good, no corresponding distinction between absolute and temporally relative good is associated with P. Yet just as I can claim, compatibly with I, that the good-for-me is the only thing good relative to my standpoint—by introducing the concept of agent-relative good—so I can claim, compatibly with II, that present benefit is the only thing good relative to the present standpoint, by introducing the concept of temporally relative good. I and II are both special cases of a principle of practical reasoning which in a certain sense is purely formal—stemming, as I have said, from the notion of supervenience as such, and hence operative in any moral system—viz., the principle that the mere numerical distinctness of logical individuals cannot constitute a ground on which differences of value supervene. It is important to see that relative as against absolute time preference is no more incompatible with this principle than relative as against absolute egoism is. Then it becomes clear that II is
weaker than any of Sidgwick's formulations of P: Sidgwick means to rule out pure time preference of any kind. In part, this involves ruling out brute successiveness as a value-relevant relation. Given that ban, the shift from II to P is effected the moment one thinks in terms of a notion of value absolute in respect of time. To avoid begging the question the basic notion should therefore be thought of as a triadic relation between agent, action and time: *there is reason at t for A to do x*. One can then formulate an extension of the relative egoist's principle, relativized also to time.

Let us now turn back to B1 and B2. Sidgwick makes no great point of B2. Nor need he: given his definition of good, which we noted earlier, B2 becomes a tautology. 'I should aim at whatever is good' means 'There is reason for me to aim at whatever there is reason for anyone to aim at'. Consequently, in the "derivation" of B3 from B1, B2 can be suppressed. B1 is stronger than I in the way that P is stronger than II. It adds to I the claim that *whatever is good for some A is good*.

I found Schneewind's exposition of the role of Sidgwick's "self-evident truths" difficult to follow on a number of points of detail, and hard to grasp overall. Its general aim, however, was clear—Schneewind wants to show that "We can . . . couple the negative and formal interpretation of B1 and B2, which shows how they stem from the demands of reason on action under certain basic conditions, with Sidgwick's own tendency to understand them as giving the more substantive foundation of utilitarianism" (Schneewind, p. 309). We cannot. B1 *does* contain that substantive foundation, precisely in containing *over and above* what is contributed by the formal principle, J, the claim that the good of any individual is of importance "from the point of view of the universe": i.e., that there is reason for anyone to promote it. Hence no merely "negative and formal interpretation" of B1 and therefore B3 can be right. A similar point holds for P: it is analogously stronger than II, its negative and formal ingredient. (Also, unlike II, it rules consideration of temporal order as such out of deliberation.) But this is not to say that these principles cannot be seen as purely rational demands. Sidgwick did not think that reason can lay only formal or constraining, as against substantive or positive requirements on action—a point which, as I have said, never emerges with sufficient clarity from Schneewind's account of the *Methods*.

Let us turn to Schneewind's discussion of the relation between egoism and P.

To develop the egoistic theory . . . we concentrate on P3 and ignore B1 . . . we must form a notion of good on the whole which provides only the sentient being whose good it is with reasons for desiring. Following Sidgwick's suggestion that the egoist is concerned not with universal good but with his own good, we may call the concept so constructed the concept of own-good. If something is good in the sense of universal-good, then its goodness is a reason for any rational being to desire or aim at it; if it is good in the sense of own-good, then its goodness is a reason for only the rational being who will possess it to desire or aim at it (Schneewind, pp. 363-4).

Own-good can be used just as easily as universal-good in interpreting B2. When own-good is used "there is no difficulty in seeing how we can obtain a maximizing egoistic consequentialism from P3 and B2" (Schneewind, p. 363).

'Universal-good' is obviously what I have been calling 'absolute good'
(absolute in respect of agents). But 'own-good' conflates, I think, the distinguishable notions of 'good-for-A' and 'good-relative-to-A'. One can define neither as in the passage from Schneewind: (i) because if something is good-for-A it certainly does not follow by definition, and may not be true, that no one else has reason to promote it; (ii) because if something is good-relative-to-A it does not follow that no one else has reason to promote it—it only fails to follow that anyone else does; (iii) because something may be good-relative-to-A without being a thing A will possess, or that is good-for-A.

If we replace 'good' by 'the good-relative-to-me' in B2 we again get a tautology. If we replace it by 'the good-for-me' on the other hand, we do get a principle with substantive content—since 'good-for-me' is not normatively defined. Moreover, there is no difficulty, as Schneewind says, in seeing how a "maximizing egoistic consequentialism" might be obtained from this principle together with P if they are taken as the sole pure practical axioms. But does this interpretation capture Sidgwick's line of argument? I think not. The egoist's principle is to the effect that his own good is the sole good-relative-to-him; it surely strains B1 or B2 if either is interpreted along these lines. Sidgwick does not in fact designate an axiom which does for egoism what the axiom of benevolence does for altruism, although he occasionally gives the appearance of thinking that the axiom of Prudence plays that role. But, as he also explicitly puts it, Benevolence is "required as a rational basis for the Utilitarian System", is "the really clear and certain ethical intuition" which provides "the fundamental principle of Utilitarianism", whereas the axiom of Prudence "is a self-evident principle, implied in Rational Egoism as commonly accepted" (pp. 386-7). The difference between these phrases is not, as Schneewind (p. 306), noting it, suggests, unimportant.

(iv) The dualism of the practical reason

It might be thought that egoism and altruism, as endorsed by Sidgwick, can both be true so long as something like the following is true:

D. A's doing x maximizes A's good if and only if A's doing x maximizes the good for subjects in general.

D is admittedly indeterminate until 'the good for subjects in general' is spelt out. But still it is plausible that any reasonable spelling-out will make a possibly true (and probably false) proposition of D. Sidgwick's position is nevertheless already a difficult one; for if egoism and altruism are both a priori then so must D be. This leaves one with either the implausible claim that D is necessarily true, or the conclusion that D is contingent but a priori. But the position is more difficult yet. It is clear from Sidgwick's discussion that utilitarianism is to be understood as holding not merely to the truth-functional principle that there is reason for A to do x if and only if doing x promotes someone's good, but something stronger, from which that follows, viz., that the one and only thing that gives an agent A reason for doing x is that A's doing x would promote someone's good. On the other hand egoism holds that the one and only thing that gives A reason to do x is that A's doing x would promote A's good. These two theses about the ground on which reasons for acting supervene are directly contradictory.

In somewhat similar vein, Schneewind proposes that the basic axioms of egoism and altruism can be formulated thus (Schneewind, p. 373):

Maximizing the agent's own good is an ultimate right-making characteristic.
Maximizing the universal good is an ultimate right-making characteristic.

But an amendment is required in these axioms if they are to state the positions of egoist and altruist fully—‘the’ must replace ‘an’. And now again the two axioms are in direct opposition. What would free the dualism of contradiction, actual or potential, is some such formulation as this:

Promoting the agent’s own good is (for the agent) an ultimate reason-giving characteristic.

Promoting the good-for-anyone is (for everyone) an ultimate reason-giving characteristic.

The first of these is of course a logical consequence of the second; but the two principles are to be considered independent and autonomous (perhaps incommensurable) rational requirements—and the only ones. A position which in this way offers to mitigate the alarmingly gruelling implications of straight utilitarianism has attractions. But is self-interest an autonomous rational requirement?

Why did Sidgwick think it was? He wrote, as Schneewind effectively shows, in a tradition of moral philosophy which gave a special status to the rationality of self-interest. It is a fixed point in his book, with which other doctrines must be harmonized. (Hence, perhaps, no axiom of self-interest.) Two other points are worth noting. First, if one makes no distinction between the good-for-A and the good-relative-to-A one lends an implicitly tautological self-evidence to the principle that nothing other than the good-for-A is good-relative-to-A. Second, there is the fact that Sidgwick never completely frees himself in the Methods from the influence of a Humean conception of practical reasoning.

On that conception, of course, there are no categorically rational requirements, and so in particular, self-interest is not categorically rational: "'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me" (Treatise, p. 415). But if a man does desire his own good then there is to that extent reason for him to promote it. Moreover, the idea that all reasons are relative to the agent and the time of his deliberation is a corollary of the Humean view. It is true that in a limiting case in which every agent was possessed exclusively by an impartial desire for the good of any subject at any time, reasons for acting would be, not categorical, but nevertheless absolute in respect of person and time. But given that "there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to oneself" (T. p. 481), reasons must be agent-relative. And given that we take a greater interest in our nearer than our most distant prospects, reasons must be relative to the time of deliberation. In short, if human beings are motivated by self-love and limited sympathy, and if they think of their lives from a temporal perspective with limited time horizons, then their reasons for acting must be expressed in principles of relative self-interest and relative (what Broad called "self-referential") altruism.

I know of no non-question-begging argument which could refute the claim that relative self-interest—or any other agent-relative maxim—is a categorical requirement on action. It just seems to me that what conviction the claim carries derives entirely from the fact that for most people considerations relating to their own interests, or the interests of persons related to them in various ways, do have a special motivating force. On the Humean
view of practical reasoning this does indeed directly imply that they also have a special, underived—but not categorical—rational claim. On the rationalist view, however, it is simply irrelevant, except in indirect (though crucial) ways associated with the costs of acting against strong inclinations, and the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. What remains is some such thought as this: that the mere existence of a subject, with interests which can be affected by my actions, gives me reason—whatever I may want—for reckoning with those interests. And this at least presents itself as a purely rational requirement.

If this is right, then the dualism of absolute altruism on the one hand and relative egoism or altruism on the other, of which Sidgwick’s dualism is a special case, appears as a dualism of conceptions of practical reason. Although both conceptions cannot be correct, it can be argued that both are implicitly present in our ordinary thought, and that their co-presence underlies a feeling many people have—that reasons for acting relate to disparate “points of view”, “prudential” and “moral”, incurably incommensurate, even when the latter is allowed in some way to “override” the former. But there is no single view of practical reasoning from which absolute altruism and relative egoism appear as equal and autonomous rational requirements, and no view from which egoism appears as a categorical “dictate of reason”, or (given the actualities of human nature) absolute altruism as a conditional one.

There is a dualism inherent in what common sense is ready to recognize as reasons for acting, which Sidgwick perceived and preserved. But this dualism is connected—not demonstratively, to be sure—with two opposed conceptions of how reason bears on action at all—how it can “make demands on practice”. It is evident enough that Sidgwick’s conception is the rationalist one. He showed the possibility of egoism within that conception. But though the rational egoist can be accused of no incoherence, the rationalist conception nonetheless effectively cuts off his support. Consequently, to resolve the philosophical dualism is to resolve, effectively if not demonstratively, the practical dualism.

Whether or not there is a connection of the kind I am suggesting between the philosophical and the practical dualism is matter for a critique, or further development, of the Methods of Ethics, rather than for a commentary of the kind Schneewind set himself to provide. Still, anyone who does want to embark on it, though he will certainly find Schneewind’s book indispensable, is likely I think to feel that it would have been even more useful if Schneewind had been able, by standing back a little from the text, to provide a sharper and more perspicuous outline of its overall structure.

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