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SIDGWICK’S COHERENTIST MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Abstract

I discuss the ideas of common sense and common sense morality in Sidgwick. I argue that, far from aiming at overcoming common-sense morality, Sidgwick aimed purposely at grounding a consist code of morality by methods allegedly taken from the natural sciences, in order to reach also in the moral field the same kind of “mature” knowledge as in the natural sciences. His whole polemic with intuitionism was vitiated by the a priori assumption that the widespread ethos of the educated part of humankind, not the theories of the intuitionist philosophers, was what was really worth considering as the expression of intuitionist ethics. In spite of the naïve positivist starting point Sidgwick was encouraged by his own approach in exploring the fruitfulness of coherentist methods for normative ethics. Thus Sidgwick left an ambivalent legacy to twentieth-century ethics: the dogmatic idea of a “new” morality of a consequentialist kind, and the fruitful idea that we can argue rationally in normative ethics albeit without shared foundations.

Key words: Sidgwick, Henry; moral epistemology; common sense morality; coherentism; applied ethics

1. The first truly academic work in moral philosophy?

According to an often-quoted sentence by Brand Blanshard, Sidgwick was an attractive figure «not because he showed surprising individual traits but because he did not»¹, and an eminent figure of Anglo-American ethics such as John Rawls declared that *The Methods of Ethics* was «the first truly academic work in moral philosophy which undertakes to provide a systematic comparative study of moral conceptions, starting with those which historically and by present assessment are the most significant»². Bart Schulz’s recent biography has turned this image upside

¹ Blanshard, 1974, p. 349.

² Rawls, 1981, p. v.

down by presenting Sidgwick as a troubled, problematic, and even disquieting figure, somewhat closer to a *fin-de-siècle* sceptic and cosmic pessimist such as Friedrich Nietzsche undoubtedly was than to Rawls's idea of the modern professional moral philosopher³.

I will discuss how Sidgwick's ambivalent attitude, somewhat in between that of a positivist and that of one more death-of-God mourner has much to do with many of his own uncertainties on quite central points of ethical theory, namely: (a) the nature and method of philosophy in general and moral philosophy in particular; (b) his ill-defined notion of "common sense", (c) his even less defined idea of a "common sense morality", (d) his invention of a straw-man named "dogmatic intuitionism". But I will argue also that, the positivist self-image of his own work and the pessimist and sceptical conclusions he reached on the possibility of a rationally justified normative ethic notwithstanding, Sidgwick's discovered one important idea that he left as a legacy to David Ross, John Rawls, and Beauchamp and Childress, namely the idea of coherentist procedures for amending, improving, and reconciling contrasting moral judgements with each other.

2. *The decisive and most important task of philosophy*

The Methods of Ethics is a strange book that has been interpreted in almost opposite ways, either as a classical utilitarian work or as the modern formulation of ethical intuitionism. In order to find a way out of such opposite interpretations I suggest that we should try reading it from the starting point provided by Sidgwick's pre-comprehension of his own task. While reconstructing the biographical path that had lead him to *The Methods of Ethics* he says that as a young man he started feeling that traditional moral rules he had been taught exerted «external and arbitrary pressures»⁴ and were «doubtful and confused»⁵. Such traditional morality seemed to him to be identical with the one Whewell presented in his *Elements of Morality* and the compulsory reading he had to do of the work as a Cambridge student left him with the impression that «intuitionist

³ Schultz, 2004.

⁴ Sidgwick, 1907, p. xv.

⁵ *Ibid.*

moralists were hopelessly vague (in comparison with mathematicians) in their definitions and axioms»⁶.

On the other hand the kind of utilitarianism that had been formulated by John Stuart Mill seemed to him attractive for its earthly and empirical character, even if far from convincing mainly because of Mill's defective attempt at providing a "proof" of the principle of utility. Besides, he found good reasons in favour of intuitionism in Butler and in Kant, but also others in favour of utilitarianism in Butler himself, his intuitionism notwithstanding, and finally reasons in favour of "common sense morality" in Aristotle, Reid, and Spencer. As a remedy to his own doubts and uncertainties he resorted to the project of studying, without trying to establish the correct ethical principles first, the kind of connections subsisting between various ethical principles and their consequences. He believed that moral philosophers had made the mistake of starting with the search for correct moral principles and believed that his project resembled the purely theoretical attitude that should characterize the philosopher, or better the scientist, «the same disinterested curiosity to which we owe the great discovery of physics»⁷. The task of ethics would be then just «considering which conclusions we will rationally reach starting with certain ethical premises»⁸, that is, «to discuss the considerations which should... be decisive in determining the adoption of ethical first principles», not «to establish such principles; nor... to supply a set of practical directions for conduct»⁹.

In order to understand what he precisely meant when he proposed the adoption of the disinterested curiosity allegedly inspiring the inquiries carried out by natural scientists, it is important to reconstruct Sidgwick's idea of science, philosophy, and knowledge. His first claim is that philosophy is a kind of «*scientia scientiarum*»¹⁰; the second is that the goal pursued by philosophy is *systematisation*, a «fully unified knowledge» or a «consistent whole» of «rational human thought»¹¹; the third is that it suffers from a lag when compared with the sciences, that it is still «in a rudimentary state in comparison with the more specialised studies of those fields of

⁶ *Ibid.*; on Sidgwick and Whewell see Cremaschi, 2008.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sidgwick 1902.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

systematic knowledge that we name sciences»¹², we cannot meet the same «consensus among experts that may be found in issues of geometry, physics, botanic»¹³.

Up to now, all this sounds much like Herbert Spencer's Positivism; other claims seems to be of a rather different nature.

One is that the borderline to be established between "knowledge" (that is, a belief considered to be well-founded) and "common sense", that is, those beliefs that, even if sharing «the characteristic of general acceptance»¹⁴, yet «do not present themselves as self-evident or derived from self-evident premises»¹⁵. Philosophy has its own method, partly similar and partly different from the method of the sciences: it is based on intuition, error, and amendment of error by means of reflection (in turn consisting of consensus with other qualified individuals plus introspection and analysis of language). Sidgwick adds that he does not rule out that «philosophy may use the introspective method»¹⁶, and in fact, when faced with two alternative claims, he declares that he finds «both such beliefs fundamental» in his own thinking «with as much clarity as may be found in the process of introspective reflection»¹⁷.

Another claim quite incompatible with Spencer's Positivism is that the whole of human knowledge includes not only *theoretical* but also *normative* beliefs. According to Spencer, the sciences yield knowledge of «what exists or has existed or will exist». According to Sidgwick we cannot consistently claim that the task of moral or political philosophy is establishing the coexistence and succession of phenomena, and that we should accordingly acknowledge that philosophy in general should also treat the «principles and methods for rationally determining *what ought to be*»¹⁸. Practical philosophy is a field different and parallel to the one Spencer named "philosophy", but the «decisive and most important task of philosophy»¹⁹ is precisely solving the «problem of coordinating these two partitions of its subject and connecting *fact and ideal*»²⁰. Yet, not all of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁷ Sidgwick, 1889, p. 43.

¹⁸ Sidgwick, 1876, p. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

ethics is philosophy. casuistry, not unlike law and politics that are more “arts” than sciences, «certainly is not philosophy»²¹; the proper task of philosophy in the practical domain is «“unifying” the principles and methods of reasoning that lead to practical conclusions»²² like philosophy in the theoretical domain unifies the principles and methods of the sciences of nature.

The source whence we extract the «principles and methods» is only «common sense» or «the thought which *we all* share»²³, since we «want to preserve harmony with common sense»²⁴, and on some occasions we just cannot adopt some particular conclusion for the simple reason that we are not prepared to betray «our deepest convictions»²⁵. In other words, philosophy

uses primarily what I would call the *dialectical method*, that is, the method of *reflection* on the thought we all share, by means of symbolism we all share, that is, language²⁶.

Accordingly, what philosophy can afford in the practical domain is:

- (i) finding “intuitions” that may be justified;
- (ii) reflecting on the body of beliefs “we” share;
- (iii) detecting inconsistencies in such body of beliefs;
- (iv) looking for inconsistencies between the above and the whole of natural sciences as a body of knowledge with which the beliefs of common sense should be made compatible²⁷.

And yet, how much real “knowledge” may actually be produced in this way is one of the points about which most of Sidgwick’s doubts concentrate.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²³ Sidgwick, 1902, p. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁷ For more detailed discussion see Cremaschi, 2006.

3. *What is properly Common Sense?*

The idea of “common sense”, frequently mentioned by Sidgwick, is an idea with a respectable traditional philosophical pedigree dating back to the Stoics and Cicero, an idea that was rescued by the Scottish philosophers, first among them Thomas Reid. Sidgwick may have met it first in William Hamilton, who had tried to combine the Scottish with the Kantian philosophy and was the target of one of John Stuart Mill’s attacks as a dogmatic thinker. Mill contended that his “introspective” method was unable to account for the genesis of common sense beliefs in as plausible a way as James Mill’s associationist theory was allegedly able to do, and accordingly empiricism was the right and “progressive” approach while all aprioristic approaches were just devious devices for confirming traditional prejudice.

The same idea was assigned a central role by Cambridge critics of utilitarianism, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Grote, John Frederick Denison Maurice, in so far as it was believed to be able to provide a justification for religion and traditional morality against the utilitarian attack²⁸.

The idea was only marginally accepted by another Cambridge critic of utilitarianism, William Whewell who emphasized instead rational (partly a priori) knowledge. He claimed, like Richard Price, that morality arises out of «intellect, not out of *Sense*»²⁹, but added also that «no system of morality may be true unless it is a system according with Common Sense of humankind»³⁰.

Common sense was rescued by Mill as a consequence of his controversy with Whewell as a means of making utilitarianism less contrasting with traditional moral doctrines³¹. In *Utilitarianism* he argued in fact that the experience of humankind has accumulated a body of moral rules that have been selected on criteria suggested by some kind of «unaware utilitarianism»³², an idea that was later taken over by Sidgwick, and indeed was still shared by George Edward Moore himself.

²⁸ See Cremaschi, 2006b.

²⁹ Whewell, 1854, p. 1

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹ See Cremaschi, 2006b.

³² Mill 1838, p. 93; see also Mill, 1861, pp. 241-246.

4. *What is properly Common Sense Morality?*

Granted the view of philosophy and its method that has been described above, Sidgwick gives a rather consistent answer to the question: what can philosophy do in the practical field? The answer is as follows:

- (i) singling out “intuitions” which may be eventually justified;
- (ii) reflecting on the body of beliefs that “we” share;
- (iii) hunting for inconsistencies *within such a body of beliefs*;
- (iv) ferreting out inconsistencies also *between the above* and the whole of results of the natural sciences qua body of well-founded and consistent beliefs with which the beliefs of common sense should be harmonized.

The first part of the task was believed by Sidgwick to be quite easy. In fact he writes:

it only requires a little reflection and observation of men's moral discourse to make a collection of such [the intuitionists' formulae] general rules, as to the validity of which there would be apparent agreement at least among moral persons *of our own age and civilisation*, and which would cover with approximate completeness the whole of human conduct. Such a collection, regarded as *a code imposed on an individual by the public opinion of the community* to which he belongs, we have called the Positive Morality of the community: but when regarded as *a body of moral truth*, warranted to be such by the *consensus* of mankind, – or at least of *that portion* of mankind which combines adequate *intellectual enlightenment* with a serious *concern for morality* – it is more significantly termed the morality of Common Sense³³.

The points deserving comment in the quote are the following: first, the shift from common sense morality to moral knowledge is made by *systematisation*; second, positive morality may be looked at as either (i) a historically determined code of conduct, (ii) corpus of moral truths; third, the consensus about such corpus is by one part of mankind; fourth, such part of mankind has been singled out because of its (alleged) intellectual and moral superiority; fifth, the problem seems to Sidgwick to be less devastating than it is in fact because of his belief in ongoing moral progress by which errors will be amended and a more consistent and comprehensive

³³ Sidgwick 1907, book III, ch. I, sect. 5.

moral view will be attained, and this implies not “just change” but “progress”.

5. *What is precisely dogmatic intuitionism?*

Sidgwick became famous in the Anglo-American world primarily for his (allegedly final) critique of so-called dogmatic intuitionism, constantly referred to as to the reason for *not discussing* any more William Whewell’s and Richard Price’s rationalist ethical theories, indeed a task to which Anglo-American moral philosophers have applied themselves with remarkable discipline for more than one century. In fact, in Sidgwick’s *Methods* no attempt is made to discuss the ethical theory of intuitionism, either in Price’s version or in Whewell’s, in a way comparable to the one in which utilitarian theory, as it had been presented by Bentham and Mill, is discussed in detail.

An important point never mentioned by Sidgwick is that for Price and Whewell – unlike other less rationalist intuitionists, for example Thomas Reid – common sense has a marginal relevance, in so far as their own intuitionist theory starts with a set of self-evident propositions which are rationally justified in so far as they may be assumed to be undeniable without lapsing into contradiction. This is an assumption rather different from the different idea, accepted by the later Stoics Cicero, Reid, Coleridge, Morice and Grote, of a set of beliefs virtually shared by mankind at all time and place.

As a consequence, Sidgwick’s undeservedly famous expression “dogmatic intuitionism” seems to connote something that is his own creation, and he never gives a precise denotation to the terms, that is, he neither makes it clear who the proponents of “dogmatic intuitionism” are nor what are precisely the claims of such doctrine.

The suspicion is not unjustified that, more than a historically given philosophical current, “dogmatic intuitionism” is for Sidgwick some kind of a figure of Absolute Spirit, or a step in the path of Sidgwick’s own intellectual career, or a partner in his dialogue with himself that he had created just in order to refute it. Instead the famous book III of the *Methods* has been revered as the alleged last word on any kind of dogmatic and absolutist system of morality to the point that the Italian translator of *The Methods*, Maurizio Mori, has written that Sidgwick

proves that, when one formulates a principle in a clear and precise way, one has to acknowledge that it always admits of exceptions. Thus he spells out for the first time the claim that there are no absolute duties, that is, in technical jargon, that all duties are *prima facie* duties³⁴.

Yet, an important circumstance is that the book is not a criticism of Price's and Whewell's theories but instead a demolition of a straw-man, filled up mainly with items taken from Reid and other common-sense philosophers, not from such rationalist philosophers as Price and Whewell. But Reid's *common sense* is not Price's and Whewell's *intellect*, and, even if also Reid may be classified as an intuitionist, he is not the proponent of the kind of ethical intuitionism that was being defended in the eighteenth-century British discussion. In other words, what Sidgwick did is having recourse to the widespread rhetorical trick of attacking one really existing partner in the discussion – in his case, Whewell – by demolishing some other weaker target that is partially resembling the real target.

7. Sidgwick's exploded project of a scientific ethic, and how to make the best of its failure

1. I started mentioning the fact that Sidgwick won in the Anglo-Saxon world a fame as the author of the «most beautiful ethical treatise» that was ever written, or at least as somebody who succeeded in «creating the prototype of a modern treatise of moral philosophy»³⁵ thus giving «to the problems of ethics the form that has been dominating in British and American moral philosophy from his time on»³⁶, of a writer with an absolute impartial and scientific attitude, and more recently of a more credible putative father of analytic ethics than Moore may be³⁷. Sidgwick's intentions were in fact different; what he wanted to carry out was first of all a refutation of Samuel Coleridge's, Frederick Denison Maurice's, John Grote's morality-based theodicy. In his anti-theodicy Sidgwick treats ethics not as a primary topic, but as a secondary topic, the primary one being the possibility of believing in a moral world-order. He did not succeed in his secondary project of founding a scientific ethic, but he apparently succeeded in his primary project of proving the non-existence of a moral world-order.

³⁴ Mori, 1995, p. xxi.

³⁵ Schneewind, 1977, p. 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 422

³⁷ Gauthier, 1970, p. 7.

It is strikingly that he ignored, albeit while mentioning often its author, the different answer given by Kant to the same question. This answer carried the impossibility of any theodicy, the necessity of the moral law and, as a condition of possibility of the moral law, a solution to the problem of theodicy based on rational faith or on the postulates of practical reason.

2. Sidgwick's fame of impartiality and objectivity is undeserved, since he was "impartial" in the rather limited way a sceptic may be, in so far as his way of proving his own claims is the rather devious device of throwing down – how effectively is a different question – the claims he takes as his own targets one after the other. This image of Sidgwick's work depends partly on the editorial aspect of his main work, that is, on its systematic structure following the model of the scientific treatise that was becoming fashionable in the age of Positivism. Besides, it may depend on the very fact of being a terribly boring book, as Sidgwick apparently knew too well in so far as he declared that it could not «fail to be somewhat dry and repellent»³⁸. Adoption of such a model, far from being anti-rhetorical, was itself a cunning rhetorical move. It amounted to saying: I present my argument without any rhetorical flourish because I am a scientist, unlike my predecessors who were rhetoricians.

3. The book, besides being far from impartial and objective, is more an *essay* than a *treatise* in so far as, far from covering systematically all the topics of such as an established subjects as Ethics, it develops instead an argument on one point (*i.e.*, theodicy on a moral basis). One might add that it is far from well-documented and exhaustive on the theories it discusses, first of all intuitionism. This does not depend on unfairness or *parti pris*, but simply on the circumstance that his target was not discussing in a fair and comprehensive way what he believed to be the competing ethical doctrines of his time, but a different one, namely examining the promises and failures of common-sense morality.

4. The proposal advanced by David Gauthier and others to date back analytic ethics to Sidgwick's time needs be carefully considered. There are a number of reasons for under-stressing Moore's originality vis-à-vis Sidgwick and for thinking that *The Methods* is in a sense a treatise in metaethics. But there are also reasons for refusing such presumption of fatherhood in favour of Sidgwick. One is that also Kant's *Foundation* and *Critique of Practical Reason* are pure metaethics, and accordingly Kant

³⁸ Sidgwick, 1906, p. 295.

should be recognized instead to be the true father of analytic ethics. Another is that those anti-empiricist elements which mark the break between Mill and Sidgwick and give the latter's work its meta-ethical flavour are borrowed first from Whewell, and to a lesser degree from the British neo-Hegelians (in both cases without due acknowledgement), and the very idea of a "philosophy of morality" is Whewell's own idea, which would imply that it is Whewell, not Sidgwick, who should be acclaimed as the father of analytic ethics.

5. An odd legacy left by Sidgwick's war on intuitionism is the idea of "common sense morality", a recurrent idea in analytic ethics that has been showing up in two different versions: a) the version adopted by those who, like Peter Singer, argue the case for a "new morality" and stress the inadequacy of "common sense morality", its inability in providing solutions, and the non-existence of unconditionally valid precepts; b) the opposite one adopted by those who, like David Ross and John Rawls, stress the idea that the data of ethical theory are what "we" (the writer and the reader) "know" and that a theory holds if it succeeds in systematising already shared "intuitions"³⁹.

I believe that both alignments create more troubles than they are able to settle, and that the right thing to do would be getting rid of the very notion, since, once taken out of the context of the eighteenth-century British discussion, "common sense morality" does not denote anything, or better, it connotes in an undue way *something* that is quite familiar but may do without such an odd name. It is a *thing* that sociologists and anthropologists had started examining precisely in the decades between the first and the seventh edition of the *Methods*. Such an examination yielded in the first decades of the Twentieth century a discussion on cultural relativism that would have been unconceivable for euro-centric Victorian philosophers. The *thing* studied by anthropologists in fact was not just one thing, but instead it consisted of several different things, namely the moral codes of various societies. The "new anthropology", that is Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski, realized that the distinction – an obvious one for such Sidgwick's contemporaries as Edward Tylor and James George Fraser – between "more advanced" and "less advanced" societies or cultures is less obvious than the Victorians used to believe and that differences in moral codes adopted by different societies depend on more complex reasons than "advancement". One discovery was that such codes are dependent on

³⁹ As noted in Singer, 1974.

constellations of factors, namely economy, family, religion and more. Another was that accordingly they are, in a sense, all of them functionally justified and, to a point, “rational”⁴⁰. They are not the result of an accumulation of mankind’s experience, as the Victorians, including such opposite camps as Samuel Coleridge and his followers on the one hand, and John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer on the other, tended to believe. In fact all the Victorians shared, albeit for different reasons, the uncritical belief that what comes *after* unfailingly succeeds in replacing what came *before* and that what humankind needs is just some more time, so that *either* divine revelation *or* empiricist philosophy and the positive sciences may carry out their own job of progressively *enlightening* it.

6. Moral “intuitions”, if they exist, exist in at least two different senses, that is, either as *axioms*, for example such principles as a duty to keep promises that needs no justification besides the fact that it is in the very nature of a promise to be kept, or as *considered opinions* accepted in reflective equilibrium, for example such principles as religious freedom or some more or less equalitarian criterion of distributive justice. It is as well to note that neither *axioms* nor *considered opinions* have much to do with “common sense morality” or with the historically given moral codes of different societies.

7. And yet, while following a path that he believed would lead toward a solution to the problem of theodicy, Sidgwick made a couple of suggestions for settling issues that are indeed relevant to ethics, and I would say more relevant than any answer to the unanswerable questions of theodicy.

First, Sidgwick worked out a coherentist procedure for overcoming moral disagreement; second, he even discovered something rather close to reflective equilibrium. The useless ballast with which he overloaded both discoveries was made of such typical nineteenth-century paraphernalia as introspection, belief, common sense, scientific truths.

What we can do of Sidgwick’s discoveries is *not* using coherentist procedures for building a *rational*, or even worse a *scientific*, ethics, as Sidgwick wanted to do. We may use them for a more modest and somewhat different project, the project of defining, if not “methods of ethics” at least “procedures of applied ethics”. These are procedures for arguing and reaching virtuous compromises between partners who have reached partially

⁴⁰ See Cremaschi, 2007.

different ethical conclusions on general issues, and yet still share at least some moral judgements on particular subjects.

The discovery of such procedures is the great discovery, or the obvious platitude, or the Columbus's egg on which applied ethics rests. This discovery works comparatively well when it is not overloaded with theoretical assumptions or with attempts at proving general theoretical truths that may be left for further discussion, for example such claims as that there are no unconditional duties, or that old morality is useless, or that ethics is more healthy without religion.

To sum up, not unlike Cristoforo Colombo who first believed he had discovered *Catai* and was disappointed later on in discovering he had not, also Sidgwick, after sailing in search of the moral world order, at the end of his own voyage reached the disheartening conclusion that «any attempt at framing a perfect ideal of rational conduct» is «foredoomed to inevitable failure»⁴¹. In fact he could have been a little bit more euphoric, since he had discovered, if not a new continent, at least Columbus's egg of applied ethics.

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⁴¹ Sidgwick, 1874, p. 473

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