SYMPOSIUM ON J. B. SCHNEEWIND'S PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

ELIZABETH S. RADCLIFFE
Santa Clara University

The following symposium was featured at the seventy-seventh meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association on the occasion of J. B. Schneewind's retirement from the Chair of the Board of Officers. It was my honour to serve as the chair of this session on 28 March 2003.

The Chair of the APA's Board is elected from among the three divisions' past presidents, typically those individuals who have left their mark on the profession through their innovative contributions to the field. J. B. Schneewind's work on the moral philosophy of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made rather obscure names like Crucius, Cumberland and Pufendorf familiar and important to historians of philosophy, and those of us who work in these periods have felt compelled to read philosophers whom we had before largely ignored. Schneewind has published scores of articles and has edited numerous collections, including his *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* in two volumes with Cambridge University Press. This symposium features two of Schneewind's books that have had a major impact on the way we interpret the history of moral philosophy: *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1998, and *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, published by Oxford University Press in 1977 and reprinted in paperback in 1986.

In *The Invention of Autonomy*, Schneewind offers an interpretation of how the central notion of morality as self-governance unfolded in Kant's philosophy as a response to the moral philosophy of the preceding two centuries. In Schneewind's interpretation, the history of moral philosophy culminates in the invention of the idea of autonomy, in which rational beings are subject to a moral law *because* it derives from them. Schneewind's discussion also explores the religious dimension of morality in the opposition between the voluntarists and the intellectualists in this period – that is, between those who considered morality founded on the will of God and not subject to reason, and those who considered it founded in features of the universe

© 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0953820804000482
Utilitas Vol. 16, No. 2, July 2004
Printed in the United Kingdom

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000482 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discoverable by human (and divine) faculties and prior to any of God's commands. Yet, he maintains that both camps wanted to keep God as essential to morality in some way, and Kant, of course, did so by requiring belief in the existence of God as a practical postulate of the meaningfulness of a moral system. Schneewind's book has prompted much dialogue in the few years since its publication and has been translated into French, Portuguese and Romanian.

Robert Adams's essay, 'Voluntarism and the Shape of a History', poses some intriguing questions for Schneewind's project in *Invention*. The first is whether Schneewind's interpretation of the history of moral philosophy with its climax in Kant is a story that Schneewind thinks justified by its explanatory power, or whether it was one prompted by Schneewind's own interest in Kant. So, Adams asks whether there are other possible ways in which the history of modern moral philosophy might be seen to unfold – as culminating in Bentham, or later in Hegel or Mill or Nietzsche. Second, Adams asks whether Schneewind might accept the history of moral philosophy framed in terms of the voluntarist debate, but in the following way – with Kant as the synthesis of empiricist voluntarism and rationalist intellectualism in a position called 'rationalist voluntarism'. Schneewind's Kant is not a voluntarist, but Adams offers a distinction to make sense of his proposal – one between voluntarism in theology and voluntarism in metaethics. Voluntarism in metaethics is the position that the action of a legislator or the valuing faculties of an intelligent being constitute moral properties. Kant's theory is thus voluntarist, and some moral sense views of the eighteenth century that define obligation in terms of the pleasure and pain faculty are as well. Adams then speculates that the absence of a treatment of the ancient notion of *eudaimonia* in the history of modern morality is related to this broadly voluntaristic metaethical strategy, since voluntarism tends to offer subjectivist conclusions about personal well-being. Adams inquires whether this lack is a consequence of Schneewind's interpretation or whether there was in fact a breach in the history of moral philosophy at this point.

John Skorupski, in his, 'Morality as Self-governance: Has it a Future?', agrees with Schneewind that the concept of self-governance in moral thought is very attractive. But he wonders whether contemporary perspectives on morality, which are largely naturalistic, can account for it. Schneewind's analysis of self-governance contains two principles: (1) that we all have complete knowledge of our moral obligations by our own insight and (2) that we are all absolutely morally competent. But (1) is questionable by contemporary standards on two counts, argues Skorupski: It seems to imply a kind of moral subjectivism. And it seems to be inconsistent with many recent theories which base the notion of the right on notions of the good (or good

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000482 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consequences) that require empirical data to assess. Kant avoids these problems by adopting an 'individual constructivist' view of morality and by rejecting goodness-based conceptions of the right. He accounts for our equal moral competence by transcendentalist theory. But what can naturalists say? Skorupski argues that while a conception of the good cannot enter into constituting obligation, it is possible for it to play a part in knowing our obligations: Considerations deriving from a theory of the good could defeat our intuitions about the moral permissibility of particular acts. And he suggests that naturalists redefine the issue of equal moral competence in terms of respect due to those who conscientiously *try* to understand and act on moral obligation. Still, Skorupski wonders whether even this more 'down-to-earth' version of autonomy is appealing in an age when concern lies not in obeying strict dictates of inner conscience but in something more like outer self-expression.

As the symposiasts will suggest, the second book on which this forum focuses, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, advanced a new way to read a difficult and perplexing text. Contrary to former interpretations that saw Sidgwick as defending a form of utilitarianism, Schneewind's working hypothesis is that Sidgwick's project was one of finding common ground among the various conflicting philosophical theories in the field of ethics: egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism. Schneewind also argued that Sidgwick could be understood only if readers pay attention to the reasons why he emphasized egoism as a method of ethics. A method of ethics for Sidgwick is a rational procedure for determining what one ought to do. It must be a deductive system with exact, self-evident, consistent principles. Schneewind argues that Sidgwick also appeals to a further principle: that a moral system contains an axiom specifying a good to be maximized. That my own greatest happiness is a rational ultimate end for me thus qualifies. With Schneewind's guidance, readers found a new appreciation of the coherence of Sidgwick's analyses of the three standpoints. They could view Sidgwick's critique, according to Schneewind's advice, as culminating in the view that ethics consists in understanding the demands of practical reason in ordinary human life.

Bart Schultz's essay, 'The *Methods* of J. B. Schneewind', acknowledges his and other scholars' debt to Schneewind's study and their gratitude for his generous encouragement of their criticisms of his work. Schultz agrees with Schneewind's analysis of Sidgwick as profoundly influenced by Kant in his acceptance of the formal rationality of the first principles of morality, but Schultz's critical concerns focus on what he considers a narrow purview of Schneewind's work, namely, its attention to Sidgwick's moral philosophy to the exclusion of his political views. This limited perspective leads Schneewind to interpret Sidgwick as more of a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000482 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'moral Democrat' than he in fact was, argues Schultz. Schultz maintains that Sidgwick was instead an elitist about utilitarian moral reasoning and who could actually engage in it. Citing evidence from Sidgwick's essays, letters, books he read, and colleagues whose views he seemed to endorse, Schultz argues that Sidgwick seriously entertained the notion that moral expertise was distributed along racial lines – a notion which may ironically hail from Kant. Further, Schultz suggests that Sidgwick's close support of many, like John Addington Symonds, who were proponents of same-sex love among men and considered their own views to be the vanguard of a new cultural perspective, is significant for an analysis of Sidgwick's thought. Schultz proposes that both *Sidgwick's Ethics* and *The Invention of Autonomy* could be superseded by another Schneewind effort that focuses on the controversial sides of the philosophers he so sympathetically interprets in these works.

John Deigh, in his essay 'Sidgwick's Conception of Ethics', admires Schneewind's historical study of Sidgwick. He supplements it, however, with a critical study of the work, which, he argues, will reveal that Sidgwick did not entirely succeed in grounding his conception of ethics in practical reason. Indeed, Deigh maintains that Sidgwick's project has a fundamental incoherence deriving from Sidgwick's treating egoism as a method of ethics along with intuitionism and utilitarianism. A method of ethics produces cognitions about what one ought to do, and these cognitions must also give rational beings an impulse or motive to action, apart from any of their desires. However, Deigh contends, we will never find ourselves without a desire for our interest; if our desires do not conflict with moral cognitions, we have no basis for believing our motivations derive from the cognitions rather than the desires. Furthermore, Sidgwick's own arguments for taking egoism to be a method of ethics are not sound, on Deigh's view. Sidgwick at times appeals to common-sense grounds for thinking that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end, but Deigh argues that it is not irrational, for instance, to forgo one's happiness out of love for another. At other times, Sidgwick acknowledges that one's happiness is not categorically prescribed by reason, but says that adopting pursuit of one's own happiness as 'ultimate and paramount' is sufficient to make the reasoning about achieving this end a method of ethics for that person. Deigh argues that not taking the means to our ends is unreasonable, but unreasonable behaviour is not always due to a violation of a prescription of reason. He concludes that Sidgwick's notion of practical reason confuses two notions of the right that egoism as a method applies: as dictated by a categorical end and as the means to an end set by a predominant desire. Deigh's view differs from Schneewind's, whose interpretation of Sidgwick depends on Sidgwick's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000482 Published online by Cambridge University Press

treating egoism as a method that can succeed in systematizing commonsense morality.

J. B. Schneewind responds to the challenges proposed by his four commentators, revealing more about his views on the history and the future of the concept of moral self-governance and on moral elitism and moral justification in Sidgwick's ethics. His replies to his discussants certainly can speak for themselves. As the author of these two monumental contributions to our understanding of the morality of the modern era, Schneewind has surely also shaped our work in contemporary ethical theory. We look forward to seeing what his next endeavours bring.

eradcliffe@scu.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000482 Published online by Cambridge University Press