Comments on the Commentaries

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Adams's suggestion that there must be one really right way of presenting the history of moral philosophy seems implausible to me, so I reject – with additional reasons – his charges against the structure of *Invention of Autonomy*. Skorupski's way of stating the 'equal moral abilities' thesis is not, I argue, very Kantian; a more Kantian version is not open to his objections. I am unconvinced by Schultz's claim that Sidgwick did not really hold that thesis. Deigh raises questions I cannot reply to here, but I do offer some texts that seem to show that Sidgwick is not guilty of the confusion about 'ought' with which Deigh charges him.

First, my thanks to the Board of Officers for proposing this session, to the Program Committee of the Pacific Division for making time for it, and especially to Elizabeth Radcliffe, whose management of the session shows again the skill she brought to the APA as its Executive Officer and gives me one more reason to be grateful to her. Second, my thanks to the commentators, for the time and effort they gave to producing their thoughtful and deeply informed comments on my historical writings. I discuss first the papers by Adams and Skorupski, which address issues raised by *The Invention of Autonomy*, and then move to those by Schultz and Deigh, which raise problems about Sidgwick and my understanding of him.

I owe a great deal to discussions I had with Robert Adams at several stages of the work on *Invention*, and I am relieved that he has not found serious flaws in my understanding of the religious aspects of the development of modern moral philosophy. Still, he raises some objections to the book. In trying to reply to them I hope I will not show myself to be like Skorupski's imagined person who did not understand gratitude.

Adams's opening question is whether I would claim that the shape I give to the history of moral philosophy 'is the best, the most appropriate or most illuminating shape it could have' (Adams, p. 124). I am inclined to reply by asking: 'best for what?' I can readily explain my stopping place, which is one aspect of Adams's query. It is of course true, as he notes, that one could end a history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophy with philosophers other than Kant. Adams suggests Bentham; Reid is another candidate; even Sade is a possibility, say for someone tracing the path of nihilism. Taken together, however, Kant, Bentham and Reid seem to me to mark a turning point in the history of moral thought. Their successors tended not to look to earlier modern thinkers for the problems they discussed. Hobbes was not

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studied seriously, and Hume's ethics was ignored, until late in the nineteenth century. The moral philosophies of Wolff and Crusius, and of Pufendorf and Leibniz, dropped even more completely out of sight. As Jonathan Israel has shown, Spinoza was a huge influence on the radical underground Enlightenment, but he did not get taken up in the philosophical circles I consider until toward the latter part of the eighteenth century, and even then it was not his specifically moral thought that seemed vital. Political and moral problems themselves took on new forms in the early nineteenth century. Bentham, Reid and Kant seemed pertinent to the new issues as earlier modern moral philosophers did not. But much has been done about the history leading up to Bentham, and the background to Reid has also been explored. Considerably less was available to English-language readers on Kant's predecessors. I picked him as my *terminus ad quem* for this reason as well as because of his historical philosophical importance.

Adams might consider that these are subjective grounds. If so, I would ask: Does Adams think there is one objectively warranted stopping point or best narrative? Is there one for histories no matter what their subject, or only for histories of philosophy? My narrative was meant, as I said, to illuminate Kant's very difficult moral thought. I do not understand how a particular narrative's claim to be 'the best' would be warranted except in terms of the purposes it serves.

Adams gives more substance to his worry about the shape of my narrative by questioning the way it is divided into parts. Why not three parts, he asks, one on empiricist voluntarists, one on rationalist intellectualists, and one on Kant, reconciling the different camps? Why are Gassendi and Nicole and Shaftesbury and Hutcheson and Butler and Hume and all those other folks lumped together in Part III?

This part does not indeed fit Adams's tripartite scheme, but then I am trying to get away from writing the history of modern moral philosophy in terms derived from the conventional epistemologically based division of schools. My Part III thinkers can perhaps be sorted out as Adams sorts them if we use his own distinction between theological and meta-ethical voluntarism. (His own line-up, however, has problems: Shaftesbury was not an empiricist voluntarist, but a Platonist who was deeply opposed to voluntarism.) Adams certainly makes that distinction sound good to our ears. But I do not think it is sensitive to the concerns of the period.

My claim is that the religious bearing of what a moral philosopher had to say was much more salient than what Adams calls his meta-ethics. I try to avoid importing our mid-twentieth-century stresses into the thought of my earlier period. Moreover, I think that what is interesting for moral philosophy about the people in the section is not brought out by the 'rationalist–empiricist' scheme. Enlightenment

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thinkers were not all atheists, though some were. But many religious believers shared with deists, doubters and atheists a sense of the urgency of getting politics and morals as far away as possible from appeals to mystery, tradition and clerical authority. If religious warfare more or less ended on the Continent with the Peace of Westphalia and in England with the removal of the Stuarts, memories of the horrors associated with sectarian battles were enduring. The philosophers I put into Part III were carrying on a roughly common effort to show what morality could be if God was not to be invoked at every turn to explain or justify or insist on directives about daily life.

So I remain unrepentant about my Part III. And I remain equally so about my failure to say much about the topic of *eudaimonia*. That absence in my narrative is there because, as Adams himself supposes, the topic was largely avoided during the period I study. Montaigne declared himself baffled by the difficulty of getting agreement on it. Thinkers like Grotius went to great pains to devise ways of deriving laws of nature without invoking a teleology focused on any conception of the highest good. They thought they were helping to stay away from a topic that would raise religious anger, of which they had all had quite enough. I do discuss the thought of those who, like Spinoza and Leibniz, try to say something about it. They are important in my narrative because, like Wolff, they hold elitist views about moral knowledge; and such views, I argue, came increasingly to be unacceptable.

John Skorupski focuses on what I take as the most thorough eighteenth-century rejection of moral elitism, Kant's way of putting the claim that all normal adults are equally able to understand their moral obligations for themselves. I shall refer to this claim as 'the thesis'. Skorupski asks about it not in order to criticize *Invention* but to explore the thesis and to bring out some of the difficulties it faces. For Kant, he thinks, the thesis rests on views about the noumenal self. So he asks what we are to make of it in an age when we do not wish to encumber our morals with metaphysics.

In *Invention* I said little if anything to clarify the thesis, still less to try to put it into a form in which it could now be defended. Skorupski has raised a number of important questions about it. I am in agreement with much of what he says, but I will add one or two comments.

Skorupski says we may want to ground the thesis 'a priori – rather than taking it to be grounded . . . on the empirical facts about what human beings are like' (p. 134). If we bear in mind that for Kant claims about the noumenal realm must all have a basis in practical reason, the alternative will look a little different. It would seem to be more in line with Kant's own view to treat the thesis as a stance we are morally required to take when engaged in discussion of moral issues with any normal adult. Treating others as if they were as capable of

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moral reasoning as we are would be required as one way of showing them respect. Kant himself grounds the requirement of equal respect for all rational beings on the equal freedom of such beings – their ability to act from duty and to resist any empirically given desire. Skorupski says less about the grounds for the thesis than about what exactly the thesis is.

The thesis might say this: that we are to presume that anyone is as able as anyone else is to give, understand, weigh and revise reasons in moral discussion. This is compatible with the view that everyone is less than perfect at making reasoned judgements. Is the presumption rebuttable? In principle, I think that it is. But it would be hard to rebut the claim that someone of otherwise normal mental ability is *incapable* of reasoning about morals; and the presumption need not be made about those who are generally incapable of thinking.

Since I contrast moralities of obedience with moralities of self-governance, I do not want to say that the equal abilities thesis *defines* morality, even for Kantians. I think we should say instead that it is a distinctive feature of *modern* morality. The kind of moral community we now want – unlike the deferential community Locke and Wolff defended – is one where the kind of respect articulated in the equal abilities thesis is generally shown.

The thesis as I have put it says nothing about the epistemological status of the conclusions people reach. Skorupski seems to want more than that. He takes the thesis to say that all moral agents equally have *infallible* insight into all their duties. To defend the equality part of the thesis and avoid the unwanted consequence that some people may be morally blind, we have to hold that everyone has the same obligations. Moreover, on the principle that everyone can tell without instruction from others what their obligations are, it follows, Skorupski says, that if you cannot tell that you have an obligation then you do not have it. To avoid the subjectivism to which this seems to lead, we must take the view that what makes an act right is that it seems right when one has reflected in accordance with certain conditions which one always has the ability to meet. Skorupski calls this view 'individualistic constructivism' and questions whether the infallibility claim can be defended without it. The constructivism sounds like a reasonable update of Kant's view. But what are we to make of the infallibility claim?

Skorupski is not saying that we are omniscient. Our obligations, he says, are relative to what we know about the facts. And although individualistic constructivism rules out taking consequences as the foundations of moral judgement, Skorupski thinks we can use considerations about consequences to rectify our 'intuitions' about right acts. So our moral judgements are corrigible in at least this respect. We might add

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that moral theory should leave room for us to learn from someone wiser than we in moral matters and to correct our first moral impressions. In the give and take of discussion, whose importance Skorupski rightly stresses, we can revise our initial judgements without giving reason to doubt our ability to think about morality. There seems no need here to claim infallibility for conscience (and I am far from sure Kant would have claimed it). Fallibilism here as elsewhere is compatible with enough assurance about our judgements to act on them.

The practical bearing of the thesis can be put in two ways. It tells us that we ought not to think that there is some class of morally superior persons to whose moral judgement others ought always to defer, even if the others do not understand the reasons the superiors give for their views. We ought also not to think that there is some class of persons who ought always to defer to the judgement of others in moral matters. In morality we ought to allow neither authorities nor subjects. This is compatible with granting that sometimes others may be wiser than we are. We acknowledge this when we find their reasons for some action more convincing than our reasons for a different action. The thesis tells us that in general if people have thought things over we ought not to blame them morally for acting as they see fit. To say that people ought to follow their own consciences is, on a Kantian view, to make a moral claim, not the kind of epistemological claim suggested by the term 'infallibility'.

Bart Schultz takes up the thesis in order to object to what I say about Sidgwick's views concerning it. To get his discussion going, he appeals to papers I wrote after *Sidgwick*. In them, he thinks, I attribute the thesis to Sidgwick, but in doing so I am much too kind. 'I do so wish that Sidgwick had believed that', he says, but this reading of him 'cannot work' (p. 153). I did not explicitly discuss the matter in detail in the book, or even in the papers. And Schultz is right to suggest that the claim that Sidgwick accepted the thesis might well be challenged. Still, I think there are two reasons for supposing that he did accept it.

First, on Sidgwick's view the methods that ordinary people use all give common-sense morality a major role. Everyone starts their moral reasoning from there. Sidgwick takes it that unreflective morally decent adults treat the rules of ordinary morality as if they were inherently justified. They are untheoretical intuitionists. The utilitarian sees that common-sense rules are 'not intrinsically reasonable' and is apt therefore to treat them 'as something purely external and conventional'. This attitude, Sidgwick says strongly, must be repudiated. Even the utilitarian must wholeheartedly accept common-sense morality as the starting point for reasoning (*Methods of Ethics*, IV.V.1, pp. 475–6). Since common-sense morality is equally available to everyone, there is – *pace*

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Schultz – no mystery about how Sidgwick could think people can be on a par with one another as regards the accuracy of their (fallible) moral claims.

Second, Sidgwick says that on the utilitarian method exceptions and qualifications may be made to common-sense rules. But he insists that they be such as can be incorporated into common-sense rules. They may not be so complicated that people cannot learn them and use them. And they may not 'require a greater intellectual development, or a higher degree of self-control, than is to be found in an average member of the community' (*Methods*, IV.V.2, p. 481). Sidgwick is here discussing what a utilitarian will do about reforming ordinary morality; and throughout that discussion a desire to sustain something like the thesis is plainly at work.

Schultz, however, takes it that Sidgwick's views about utilitarianism and secrecy show that he could not have accepted the thesis. If a claim about equal moral abilities requires holding that everyone has equal *knowledge* of what morality requires, this may be correct. The utilitarian who sympathizes with the moral aspiration behind the equal moral abilities thesis therefore has reason to formulate it in terms like those I have suggested. Equal ability to take part in moral discussion does not entail equal knowledge of the facts pertinent to the discussion. Sidgwick's views about utilitarianism and secrecy, however, rest on claims to superior knowledge possessed by the moral reformer. The question then becomes not simply whether utilitarianism entails these views about secrecy but whether Sidgwick held that ordinary people would be incompetent to engage in discussion of moral reform even if they had the knowledge the expert allegedly has. To the best of my knowledge Sidgwick does not argue for this claim in *Methods*.

In his forthcoming book Schultz provides more evidence than he gives here to support his agreement with Bernard Williams's charge that Sidgwick is an elitist 'government house utilitarian'. He also provides more material intended to show that in Sidgwick racism, though not homophobia or crude sexism, is not far beneath the surface. Perhaps then Schultz could show that Sidgwick himself does hold strong views about the moral incompetence of 'the vulgar'. I have to plead guilty to his accusation that I neglected all or most of this in *Sidgwick*. There are indeed numerous aspects of Sidgwick and his views that it never even occurred to me to investigate. (Of course if I had not been so negligent Schultz might not have had a book to write.) But I want to raise two questions about Schultz's interesting new material.

First, he finds much that is objectionable in Sidgwick's thought, published and unpublished. Do these disagreeable or reprehensible features reveal simply personal failings in Sidgwick himself, or do they emerge

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or at least get cover from systematic problems or moral weaknesses within the kind of utilitarianism that Sidgwick accepted? Schultz presents evidence to show that they tell us something about Sidgwick's moral and political thought. But I think he needs to say much more about how Sidgwick's failings are of philosophical interest and how they take us beyond the gratification of mere curiosity about him as an individual. If Schultz thinks that the failings reveal problems with utilitarianism, he needs to explore the resources that the utilitarian has for responding.

Granting cheerfully that Schultz has produced a far more comprehensive study of Sidgwick than I did, my second question concerns the bearing of the new material on the arguments presented in *Methods*. To improve our grasp of a philosopher's arguments seems to me to be the first responsibility of the historian of philosophy. It was certainly my main aim in *Sidgwick*. It is also important to see the work we study in as many contexts as are needed to illuminate what the author is doing in it. Writing as a philosopher and for philosophers, however, I concentrated on the arguments. The *Methods* was written before the works on politics and social issues, which is why I did not appeal to them to clarify the earlier material. I sought explanations from considerations other than the arguments mainly where the arguments left me with unanswered questions. Schultz rightly thinks there are many more unanswered questions about Sidgwick's life and work than I saw, and so he brings in more contextual material to help answer them. I can only welcome this. No one's historical narrative is final. But I wish that Schultz had done more to show exactly how his new material bears on the arguments of *Methods*.

John Deigh has presented a complex paper whose important reflections on the relation of rational demands on action to egoistic views I cannot here adequately consider. Like Schultz he thinks I present too strong a case for Sidgwick. I make it look as if Sidgwick succeeds in working out his view that morality is practical reason applied to our universal condition. Deigh thinks Sidgwick fails. Sidgwick's position, he argues, is ultimately incoherent because Sidgwick cannot justify including egoism among the methods of ethics. The 'ought' that egoism uses is not the same as the strict ethical 'ought' the other methods invoke. First, Deigh says, it cannot be shown that the egoist's 'ought' is not supported by desires, and the egoist's end is not itself required by reason. Second, there is no rational requirement to use the necessary means to an end you actually have, so reason cannot enter into egoism by way of the rationality of the means. The best 'ought' an egoist can produce is a hypothetical one, but the other methods use a 'categorical' ought. And, Deigh says, 'the idea that "ought" has these two different senses goes directly against Sidgwick's view' (p. 176). It is 'the

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distinction between the two senses of "ought" . . . that puts Sidgwick's view into doubt' (p. 177).

Deigh is quite right in his account of why I did not criticize Sidgwick's theory in my book. When I wrote the book I did not mean to advocate Sidgwick's view, however, nor would I advocate it now. Its failure, as I have thought all along, comes not from the sort of incoherence that Deigh finds, but from an assumption about what is required for a moral belief to be well supported by reason. The assumption is that a well-supported moral belief must ultimately rest on reasons that are logically conclusive.

This assumption is needed for what I called Sidgwick's dependence argument – the argument to show that common-sense moral rules or principles require a deeper foundation than they can supply. The rules of common-sense morality, Sidgwick argues at length in Book III, all have exceptions and qualifications. There is no way of making all of these explicit while holding on to the general assent to the rules that makes them part of common sense. But without a full statement of qualifications and exceptions, no rule can give a conclusive reason for a particular conclusion. For all we know, the case at hand might be one of the as yet unspecified exceptions. But then, Sidgwick holds, the rule fails to give *any* reason for the conclusion. There must in principle be a way of showing that the case at hand is not an exception. To do this we need a principle which itself has no exceptions or qualifications. The utilitarian principle is one such principle; the principle that what is right in one case must be right in any exactly similar case is another; and the principle of egoism – so Sidgwick thinks – is yet another. Common-sense rules yield reasons that prove a moral conclusion only if a strictly universal principle certifies that the case at hand does not escape their jurisdiction. Hence ordinary morality depends for its validity – for its reason-giving force – on the validity of some universal principle or other.

Sidgwick's ideal is that of a deductively warranted system of rules. But we need not accept such an ideal. We can take open-ended common-sense rules as establishing a burden of proof on those who would make an exception. If you think you need not tell the truth in this case, it is up to you to give a reason why. (We might or might not accept Sidgwick's requirement that such reasons be capable of being incorporated into a useable public morality.) Unless you give a reason for not following a common-sense rule, the weight of the reason coming from the common-sense rule is decisive and you should follow the rule. We are left with the possibility that at some point a reason for not telling the truth might turn up. But in practical matters we simply have to live with this risk. It would be unreasonable to require that a decision wait until we check every conceivable exception to the rule.

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If we take morality in this way, we will not think of universal principles as the ground or foundation of less general rules. We use them to help us in cases not adequately covered by those rules. What Sidgwick's systematization argument suggests is that we ask of universal principles that they articulate the general sense of our particular accepted rules and enable us to extend that sense to new areas. I find this a more convincing and useful way of understanding the relations between universal principles and more specific rules than Sidgwick's deductivist model gives. And it is for this reason that I find the main argument of *Methods* unpersuasive.

Deigh's own main criticism seems to me not to be wholly convincing. He notes that Sidgwick says that the basic ethical notion is utterly simple. In *Sidgwick* I describe the basic notion as that of a requirement to act or feel for which a justifying reason can be given. I think that Deigh must suppose that the nature of the reason enters into the *meaning* of the basic notion. If egoism cannot rest on a requirement of reason, as Deigh argues, it must rest on desires. Then egoistic reasons would be desire-based, unlike the reasons for categorical 'oughts' as invoked by utilitarians and intuitionists. If the reason becomes part of the meaning, then clearly the egoist's 'ought' differs from the intuitionist's or the utilitarian's. But Sidgwick denies that this is how reasons relate to the 'ought' that they justify. In a passage in one of his essays, Sidgwick says that the Utilitarian 'does not – or ought not to – mean by the word "right" anything different from what the anti-utilitarian moralist would mean by it' (*Sidgwick*, p. 227). He would thus deny Deigh's charge that he is himself invoking two senses of 'ought'.

It is worth pointing out that even if there were a hypothetical sense of 'ought' this would not bother Sidgwick as long as the egoist's end were itself prescribed by reason. He thinks, after all, that the egoist uses a sense of 'good' in which it refers only to the aggregate of his own good across time. The egoist refuses to use the word as referring to universal good, or good summed across persons. And Sidgwick thinks that there is no convincing reasoning that will lead the egoist to switch to the universal sense. That is why there is the fundamental dualism. So even if the egoist's 'ought' carried only a hypothetical directive it would be a reasoned 'ought' which the egoist would have no reason to give up in favour of the categorical 'ought'. Ethics would still be based on practical reason although reason would be divided against itself, as Sidgwick says it is. But as Deigh has made clear, this division is not the debilitating incoherence with which he taxes Sidgwick's position.

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