Sidgwick's Conception of Ethics

JOHN DEIGH
University of Texas at Austin

J. B. Schneewind's *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* surpassed all previous treatments of Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* by showing how Sidgwick's work follows a coherent plan of argument for a conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason. Schneewind offered his interpretation as the product of a historical rather than a critical study. This article undertakes a critical study of Sidgwick's work based on Schneewind's interpretation. Its thesis is that the conception of ethics for which Sidgwick argued is incoherent. As a result, it is argued, the coherent plan of argument in the *Methods* that Schneewind disclosed masks a deep incoherence in the argument itself.

Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* places great demands on its reader.[1] It is a comprehensive study of ethics, and to follow and understand it more than superficially requires tremendous concentration and retention. C. D. Broad memorably captured the frustrating experience of reading the work when he wrote in his chapter on Sidgwick in *Five Types of Ethical Theory*:

> [Sidgwick's] style is heavy and involved. . . . He incessantly refines, qualifies, raises objections, answers them and then finds further objections to the answers. Each of these objections, rebuttals, rejoinders and surrejoinders is in itself admirable, and does infinite credit to the acuteness and candour of the author. But the reader is apt to become impatient; to lose the thread of the argument; and to rise from his desk finding that he has read a great deal with constant admiration and now remembers little or nothing.[2]

Broad's summary keenly displays the problem that confronts many readers of Sidgwick's masterpiece. They cannot see in its wealth of analyses, criticisms, arguments and constructions any overarching argument that would organize these different exercises into a coherent whole. For many readers, then, the book has seemed more like a reference work to be consulted on specific topics in ethics than a philosophical essay that defends a general account of the field.

This, at any rate, was a common problem before the publication of Jerome Schneewind's marvellous treatise on the *Methods* and its place in nineteenth-century British moral philosophy.[3] It was Professor Schneewind's express aim to correct this problem, and his success in

[1] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (1907; reprint edn., Indianapolis, 1981).
[2] *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London, 1930), pp. 143–4.
[3] J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, 1977).

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doing so has not only added immeasurably to our understanding of Sidgwick's work but changed radically our view of its chief purpose. Schneewind succeeded by drawing on what, even to readers who get lost in all of the *Methods*' twists and turns, is evident in Sidgwick's treatments of specific ethical topics. For even to such readers it is evident that Sidgwick, in treating a specific ethical topic, seeks to advance our understanding of it by resolving differences among the main contending philosophical views on it, that his efforts are directed at finding a happy synthesis of those views, and that his genius lies in his ability to find some way of framing the topic's central question and some underlying concept, principle, or procedure on which the disputants on that question can agree and on the basis of which an answer seemingly satisfactory to all can be worked out. Accordingly, Schneewind proceeded on the interpretative hypothesis that the *Methods in toto* is a study of this kind: that it seeks to advance our understanding of ethics by resolving differences among the main competing philosophical systems in the field; that its development is directed at finding a happy synthesis of those systems; and that to the extent that it achieves this synthesis, it does so through an argument that exhibits Sidgwick's distinctive genius for fashioning and finding common ground among competing views. By following this hypothesis, then, Schneewind produced an original and compelling interpretation of the *Methods* on which the work advances, from its introductory chapter on the nature of ethics to its famous concluding chapter on the problem of the dualism of practical reason, an integrated and cumulative argument for seeing ethics as primarily the systematic elaboration of the fundamental demands of practical reason as applied to the circumstances of individual human beings.[4] Where previously the *Methods* had been read as a disparate collection of profoundly intelligent discussions whose most important ambition was to vindicate utilitarianism, it is now evident, thanks to Schneewind's interpretation, that one can, to the contrary, comprehend the work as a coherent whole whose primary aim is to defend a conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason.

Schneewind, in the preface of his book, describes his project as 'a historical rather than a critical study'[5] and explains that his reason for pursuing a study of this kind and not the other is that 'it seemed necessary, before criticizing Sidgwick, to have a sound historical grasp of

[4] '[T]he central thought of the *Methods of Ethics* is that morality is the embodiment of the demands reason makes on practice under the condition of human life and that the problems of philosophical ethics are the problems of showing how practical reason is articulated into these demands' (ibid., pp. 303–4).

[5] Ibid., p. vii.

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the problems he was trying to solve as well as a clear understanding of the solutions he offered'.[6] This explanation makes good sense in view of the character of Sidgwick's solutions, for they are, as I noted, typically syntheses of the views of his predecessors and to criticize them without regard to these origins would invite misunderstanding, while criticizing them in tandem with an attempt to understand them through regard to their origins would be unmanageably complicated at best. At the same time, the decision to pursue a historical study over a critical one meant giving an interpretation that was intentionally uncritical, and such an interpretation does have a definite drawback. Being uncritical, it risks leaving the impression that Sidgwick succeeded in giving a coherent argument for his conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason when whether he did succeed is an open question. For although Schneewind's interpretation, by laying out the *Methods*' argumentative structure, shows the plan of argument that Sidgwick followed, it does not establish the coherence of its execution. The worry, then, is that since the interpretation is itself a complex argument for reading the *Methods* as having this argumentative structure, its cogency and success can easily lead one, in the absence of criticism of Sidgwick's argument, unjustifiably to believe that this structure is sound, that Sidgwick's argument is fully coherent. Indeed, the very brilliance of Schneewind's interpretation may tend to obscure the defects in Sidgwick's argument that render it incoherent. The irony in that case of a decision to pursue a historical study over a critical one would be that the study ended up obscuring factors that would help explain why readers of the *Methods* have trouble seeing how the work's various discussions fit together into a coherent whole at the same time as it provided relief from that trouble.

None of these observations, I hasten to point out, is meant to be a criticism of Schneewind's interpretation. The interpretation, in my view, is unsurpassed in its excellence, and I do not, in making these observations, mean to suggest that it could be improved or that a better one is available. Rather, in making them I mean to introduce an issue that the cogency and success of the interpretation raises but that lies beyond the scope of Schneewind's study. It is an issue that belongs instead to the sort of critical study that Schneewind decided to forgo. The issue is whether Sidgwick, in giving the argument that according to Schneewind's interpretation structures the *Methods* from beginning to end, succeeded in giving a coherent argument for his conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason. Sidgwick, on Schneewind's interpretation, appears to have constructed a powerful argument for

[6] Ibid.

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this conception, one that philosophers with a similar bent toward understanding ethics as the product of practical reason should find attractive. It is my contention, though, that the argument fails to establish this conception and that, after examining its construction and despite the impetus Schneewind's interpretation gives us to see it as coherent, we should conclude that the argument is not coherent. Indeed, we should conclude that the argument is deeply incoherent.

Of course, Sidgwick himself admitted that an incoherence existed in his final account of ethics. What he called 'the dualism of practical reason' is, after all, an admission of the possibility of an irresolvable conflict between deliverances of practical reason each of which follows from the application of one or another of the *bona fide* methods of ethics to which he had reduced the field. It is an admission, in other words, that ethics, regarded as realizable through each of the rational procedures for 'determin[ing] what individual human beings ought . . . to do'[7] that Sidgwick identified as methods of ethics, is not necessarily free of encompassing contradictory judgements. And plainly, if an account of ethics leaves open this possibility, then it has failed to explain the discipline as a fully coherent study. But the account's failure in this regard does not mean that the conception of ethics behind the account is flawed. Sidgwick's conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason, which is to say, his conception of ethics as realizable through rational procedures for determining what an individual ought to do, may be perfectly sound notwithstanding the failure of the account he developed from it. For under a different specification of what rational procedures counted as methods of ethics it might support an account of ethics as a fully coherent study. That is, under a different specification, the sets of procedures that count as methods of ethics might be ones whose deliverances were always and necessarily consistent with each other, and if they were, one could then give an account of ethics based on Sidgwick's conception that did not entail the (or any) dualism of practical reason.

The incoherence in his final account of ethics does not, therefore, entail an incoherence in either the conception of ethics behind that account or the overarching argument of the *Methods* that gives that conception its force. Nonetheless, this incoherence in the account may have its source in an incoherence in either the conception or the overarching argument that gives it its force. The dualism of practical reason may be a symptom of a knot Sidgwick got himself into in formulating the conception or developing the argument. And one thing suggesting this possibility is Sidgwick's having formulated

[7] *Methods*, p. 1.

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the conception so as to include egoism as well as intuitionism and utilitarianism among the methods of ethics. For egoism, unlike intuitionism or utilitarianism, is sometimes rejected as an ethical theory, and plainly any account of ethics that counts it along with the other two as a method will necessarily yield the dualism that renders the account a failure at representing ethics as a fully coherent study. Perhaps, then, the incoherence the dualism creates is due to some incoherence or confusion in Sidgwick's having treated egoism as a rational procedure for determining what an individual ought to do that is comparable to intuitionism and utilitarianism. I will call this 'the deep incoherence hypothesis'.

Of course, egoism, as a matter of the history of the discipline, is an ethical theory and, indeed, an important one. Hence, it must correspond in some sense to a method of ethics. But the question that the deep incoherence hypothesis raises is whether egoism, on Sidgwick's conception of ethics, qualifies as a method of ethics by the same criterion by which utilitarianism and intuitionism qualify as methods of ethics. And its being historically an important theory of ethics does not show that it qualifies by the same criterion. Rather, to qualify, egoism must be a rational procedure for determining what an individual ought to do, where 'ought' is understood in the stricter ethical sense of the word that Sidgwick isolated. In this sense, 'ought' is used in judgements of the form 'ϕ ought to be done', where ϕ is an action whose performance is within the power of the individual to whom the judgement is addressed, and any such judgement is essentially a cognition of the rightness or reasonableness of ϕing. What is more, Sidgwick maintained, the cognition is such that 'in rational beings as such [it] gives an impulse or motive to action'.[8] Accordingly, he characterized it as a dictate or imperative of reason and noted that such cognitions appear most clearly as dictates of reason when some inclination or passion opposes them. Utilitarianism and intuitionism qualify as methods of ethics, therefore, because one can understand either as a rational procedure that produces this sort of cognition. One can understand either, that is, as producing, when applied to practical circumstances, cognitions of rightness that count as dictates of reason in Sidgwick's sense. The question, then, is whether one can understand egoism as a rational procedure that produces cognitions of the same sort.

Each method of ethics, on Sidgwick's account, applies an ultimate criterion of rightness or reasonableness to an agent's practical circumstances. The criterion that utilitarianism applies is the conduciveness

[8] Ibid., p. 34.

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of an action to advancing the general happiness of humankind. The criterion that intuitionism applies is the conformance of an action to duty as defined by fundamental and self-evident principles of duty. Since many and perhaps most people have neither a desire for the general happiness of humankind nor a desire for doing their duty for duty's sake, it is common for either of these two methods, being a rational procedure for determining what one ought to do, to yield dictates prescribing actions that would not satisfy any of the person's desires. Consequently, if Sidgwick were right in maintaining that the cognitions the method produced gave in rational beings an impulse or motive to action, the impulse or motive they gave would not arise, at least not wholly, from any desire. It would arise, instead, at least in part, from the cognitions themselves. For this reason, these cognitions count as categorical dictates or imperatives. They count as categorical in the sense that, if they do give an impulse or motive to action in the mind of the person who has them, as Sidgwick maintained, then they have this motivating force independently of that person's desires. The same point, however, cannot be made about the cognitions that egoism produces.

Egoism too, as a method of ethics, is a procedure for determining what one ought to do. The criterion of rightness it applies is the conduciveness of the action to advancing one's own happiness. But since almost everyone desires his own happiness, it seldom, if ever, happens that a cognition produced by the method prescribes an action that would not satisfy a desire. Moreover, one could not have evidence of the method's ever having produced such a cognition if the cognition must give an impulse or motive to action, for it would have to be an impulse or motive to promote one's own happiness that was distinct from a desire for one's own happiness, and it is hard to see what evidence one could give that identified the impulse or motive as distinct from that desire. Hence, Sidgwick's thesis that the impulse or motive to action that the cognition gives in a rational being arises from the cognition itself is problematic in the case of egoism. For unlike the cognitions that utilitarianism and intuitionism yield in those who apply these methods, one cannot adduce conflicts between the cognitions that egoism produces in those who apply it and their desires to show that the impulse or motive to action the cognitions give arises independently of those desires, since one cannot identify the impulse or motive as being distinct from the desire for happiness. Consequently, one cannot use such conflicts to support taking these cognitions as categorical dictates or imperatives. And unless there is other evidence for taking them to be cognitions of this sort, taking them as such is problematic. Thus, in the absence of such evidence, it is problematic whether egoism is a rational procedure that yields cognitions of what one ought to do in the strict ethical sense

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of 'ought' that Sidgwick isolated. It is problematic, that is, whether egoism qualifies as a method of ethics in Sidgwick's sense.

Sidgwick, to be sure, did not ignore the question of whether there were adequate grounds for taking egoism to be a method of ethics in his sense. On the contrary, he gave reasons to justify his doing so. His main reason comes at the very beginning of his exposition, when he first identifies the different methods of ethics. His argument, in identifying them, consists in an appeal to what 'the common sense of mankind', to use his phrase, regards as the ultimate reasons for action.[9] 'This is . . .', as he later says, 'the starting-point for the discussions of [his] treatise.'[10] Each of these ultimate reasons corresponds to a method of ethics, and one of them is conduciveness to one's own happiness. This is, as a matter of common sense, an ultimate reason for action, for – as Sidgwick observed – we commonly take an action's being conducive to the actor's own happiness as alone sufficient for its being rational. 'We do not all look', he wrote,

> with simple indifference on a man who declines to take the right means to attain his own happiness, on no other ground than that he does not care about happiness. Most men would regard such a refusal as irrational with a certain disapprobation; they would thus assent to Butler's statement 'interest, one's own happiness, is a manifest obligation.' In other words, they would think that a man *ought* to care for his own happiness. The word 'ought' thus used is no longer relative: happiness now appears as an ultimate end, the pursuit of which – at least within the limits imposed by other duties – appears to be prescribed categorically.[11]

Accordingly, conduciveness to one's own happiness is an ultimate reason for action and therefore an ultimate criterion of rightness and as such can be used as the basis for a method of ethics.

This is not, however, a compelling argument for holding that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end. It may well be true that a person can never be criticized as irrational for pursuing his own happiness and would sometimes be criticized as irrational if he did not. But it does not follow from this that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an end, much less an ultimate one. People who pursue the happiness of another out of love and affection for that person and at a sacrifice of their own happiness do not necessarily act contrary to reason even when that sacrifice is deliberate and even when they say that their own happiness does not matter. Nor are they necessarily pursuing an end that reason has prescribed. They are pursuing an end that love has elevated above their self-interest, and it would be ludicrous to

[9] Ibid., p. 6
[10] Ibid., p. 78.
[11] Ibid., p. 7. See also, p. 119.

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suppose either that this elevation must be irrational or that reason had prescribed it. Yet if reason categorically prescribed the pursuit of one's own happiness, then one or the other of these suppositions would have to be true. That we never fault a person as irrational for pursuing his own happiness, assuming this is true, shows only that we think self-love is too strong a motive in most people's lives to be subject to abandonment through reasoning and argument, and nothing in this thought implies that reason lies behind self-love or endorses it. Indeed, we take the same view of love of another that is so deep as to lead a person to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of his beloved. We think that love in such cases is too strong a motive to be subject to abandonment through reasoning and argument, and accordingly we do not fault as irrational the lover's ignoring his own happiness in acting for the sake of his beloved's. Nor do we think that reason lies behind such love or endorses it. The point is the same as a famous observation Pascal made centuries ago and much more elegantly.[12] Sidgwick's grounds for thinking reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end would seem, then, to have no more to recommend it than the common prejudice of identifying self-love with reason rather than as a species of love.

To Sidgwick's credit, though, he did not insist on the thesis that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end. He did not think acceptance of this thesis was necessary for taking egoism as a method of ethics. It was enough that self-love was a predominant motive in human life and that people adopted their own happiness as an 'ultimate and paramount' end. Thus, shortly after first laying out the grounds on which he held that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end, he wrote:

> At the same time it is not necessary, in the methodical investigation of right conduct, considered relatively to the end either of private or general happiness, to assume that the end itself is determined or prescribed by reason: we only require to assume, in reasoning to cogent practical conclusions, that it is adopted as ultimate and paramount. For if a man accepts any end as ultimate and paramount, he accepts implicitly as his 'method of ethics' whatever process of reasoning enables him to determine the actions most conducive to this end.[13]

And two chapters later he observed:

> Here, however, it may be held that Egoism does not properly regard the agent's own greatest happiness as what he ought to aim at; but only as the ultimate end for the realization of which he has, on the whole, a predominant desire.[14]

[12] 'Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point.' ['The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.'], Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §277.
[13] *Methods*, p. 8. See also p. 77 n. 1.
[14] Ibid., p. 36.

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At bottom, then, Sidgwick thought he had adequate grounds for taking egoism as a method of ethics, whether or not reason prescribed one's own happiness as an ultimate end, for he believed egoism would still qualify as a rational procedure for determining what ought to be done even if the ultimate end relative to which one made these determinations was fixed by desire rather than reason. As long as the agent had adopted the end as ultimate and paramount, Sidgwick held, his determination of the right means to that end would still yield cognitions of the requisite sort. It would still yield cognitions that gave an impulse or motive to action that did not arise, at least not wholly, from any of the agent's desires and so a fortiori did not arise, at least not wholly, from the desire that fixed his own happiness as his ultimate and paramount end.

These cognitions must therefore, in Sidgwick's view, be judgements about what one ought to do in the strict ethical sense of 'ought' he had isolated. They must, that is, be judgements that one makes by applying to the agent's circumstances the fundamental notion of ethics, the notion that 'ought' in this sense expresses. Sidgwick says as much in a remark that follows the one about egoism I just quoted. 'But even if we discard the belief, that any end of action is unconditionally or "categorically" prescribed by reason,' he wrote, 'the notion "ought" as above explained is not thereby eliminated from our practical reasonings: it still remains in the "hypothetical imperative" which prescribes the fittest means to any end we may have determined to aim at.'[15] This view, however, leads Sidgwick into trouble.

Consider a sentence of the form A ought to ϕ. When the occurrence of 'ought' in such a sentence is hypothetical, which is to say, relative to an end whose adoption is contingent on A's desires, then the sentence expresses the judgement that A's ϕing is advisable in the circumstances in view of A's desires. By contrast, when the occurrence of 'ought' is categorical, which is to say, absolute and so without regard to any end fixed by A's desires, the sentence expresses the judgement that ϕing is required of A in these circumstances regardless of any of A's desires. This contrast suggests that the sense 'ought' has when it occurs in such a sentence depends on whether its occurrence is hypothetical or categorical. That is, the sense it has when its occurrence is hypothetical is different from the one it has when its occurrence is categorical. And the idea that 'ought' has these two different senses goes directly against Sidgwick's view.

[15] Ibid., p. 37.

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This idea should be familiar. It is at the nub of Prichard's powerful critique of the central problem of Plato's *Republic*.[16] If I promise to repay a loan by a certain date, Prichard observed, then I am bound by the obligation I have undertaken to repay it. In other words, though I may not want to repay it, though repaying it may be inconvenient or have unpleasant consequences, I ought to repay it nonetheless, and to say this is to say that I am required to repay it regardless of any desire that I have to do otherwise. Of course, seeing the disadvantages and unpleasantness I would suffer by repaying the loan, I might ask myself whether I really ought to repay it. Doesn't reneging make more sense? But to understand this question as one that I could genuinely ask even while knowing that I am bound by an obligation to repay the loan requires our taking the 'ought' in a different sense from the sense with which I would use it to express the judgement that I am bound to repay it. So too, then, when Glaucon and Adeimantus raise the question for Socrates of whether one ought always to act justly, their question, if we are to understand it as a genuine one, must be understood as arising when one considers the advantages of occasional injustice, or indeed even wholesale injustice, if one can get away with it. Thus we must take 'ought' as it occurs in our formulation of their question as expressing a different sense from the sense it expresses when we use it to declare that an act of justice is obligatory. We must take it, that is, to express the sense of its being advisable that I do a certain act rather than of my being bound to do it. Plato's error, then, according to Prichard, consisted in his thinking that a question about what it is advisable to do in view of one's desires could undermine the obligatoriness of justice, and it cannot.

Whether or not one thinks Prichard's criticism of Plato is sound, one can still see the merit of the distinction between the two senses of 'ought' on which he based the criticism. And it is the distinction that puts Sidgwick's view into doubt. How could he hold, for instance, that 'ought', when used to formulate the question Glaucon and Adeimantus raised, expresses the same sense whether one takes its occurrence in that formulation as hypothetical or categorical? The answer follows from the character of the cognition that the question solicits on Sidgwick's view. For the cognition the question solicits is one that is supposed to give an impulse or motive to action independently of any desire, so the impulse or motive it gives must be due to a recognition of something about the action in the circumstances under consideration such that the latter call for or require the former. Consequently, the sense 'ought' expresses in the question, whether one takes it hypothetically or categorically,

[16] H. A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', *Moral Obligation* (Oxford, 1949), pp. 1–17.

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is that of a requirement on action of this sort. On Sidgwick's view, then, 'ought' expresses the sense of a requirement even when it is used merely instrumentally, that is, to raise a question about what it is advisable to do in view of one's desires. Sidgwick, moreover, explained the requirement the sense of which 'ought', when used instrumentally, expresses by noting that the unreasonableness of adopting an end and refusing to adopt the necessary means to its attainment implies that reason demands that one adopt the necessary means to the attainment of an end one has already adopted. 'Practical reason', he declared, 'condemns as irrational' the inconsistency of the will that refusing to adopt such means entails, and this condemnation implies that practical reason requires that one adopt such means.[17] In other words, anyone who adopts an end but refuses to adopt the necessary means to its attainment acts unreasonably and, if unreasonably, then contrary to what reason requires.

This argument, however, is unsound. It rests on the faulty assumption that every unreasonable act is one that violates a requirement of reason. Thus Sidgwick, seeing that someone would be acting unreasonably if she adopted some end but refused to adopt the necessary means to its attainment, introduces a requirement of reason to explain the person's irrationality. But there is no need to introduce such a requirement to explain her irrationality. It is enough just to point out that the person is frustrating her own purposes. For to refuse to take the necessary means to the attainment of one's ends is plainly to frustrate one's purposes, and frustrating one's purposes is a form of irrationality and not a kind of action whose irrationality one must explain by citing a requirement of reason that the agent is violating. 'Don't frustrate your own purposes' is not a requirement of reason. It is not something reason prescribes. Someone who has to be told not to frustrate her own purposes is someone who does not know what it means to have purposes and not someone who knows she has purposes but does not know what she is supposed to do with them. And similarly reason does not require that one take the necessary means to the attainment of one's ends. There is no such requirement of reason. It is not something that reason prescribes.

Perhaps, though, I have under-described Sidgwick's argument. It is possible that Sidgwick thought the demands for consistency that reason places on practical thinking supplied the requirement on action by virtue of which the instrumental use of 'ought' qualifies as an expression of the fundamental notion of ethics and accordingly meant

[17] *Methods*, pp. 37–8.

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to base his argument on this thought. This possibility is suggested at the conclusion of Sidgwick's argument, when he writes:

> There is a[n] . . . inconsistency between the adoption of an end and a general refusal to take whatever means we may see to be indispensable to its attainment; and if, when the time comes we do not take such means while yet we do not consciously retract our adoption of the end, it can hardly be denied that we 'ought' in consistency to act otherwise than we do.[18]

But even if this recourse to consistency is Sidgwick's ultimate appeal, it still does not keep his argument from collapsing. For the demands of consistency that reason places on practical thinking cannot supply the requirement on action Sidgwick needs to show that the instrumental use of 'ought' expresses the fundamental notion of ethics. If they did, then the impulse or motive to action to which judgements in which 'ought' is used instrumentally give rise would have to come at least in part just from the thought that one would be doing something inconsistent in neither taking the indispensable means to an end one had adopted nor abandoning that end. And while there are no doubt some people in whom such thoughts are motivating, the motivation in their case is usually seen as evidence not of reason's conative power but rather of an unfortunate compulsiveness about consistency. Most people, I venture to say, are not typically motivated by such thoughts. The inconsistency of failing to take the necessary means to their ends is not typically something that worries them. What worries them, if anything, is failing to get what they want. Sidgwick, it would seem, in his effort to establish the univocality of 'ought' as it occurs in the primary judgements of egoism as well as intuitionism and utilitarianism, lost sight of what actually moves people to do what they judge they ought to do when such judgements reflect their determination of the best means to attaining the object of their desires.[19]

We now have some confirmation of the deep incoherence hypothesis that I proposed earlier. Sidgwick's argument for his conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason depends, for its coherence, on his being justified in assuming that every method of ethics applies the same notion of right or reasonable conduct when it is used to determine what an individual ought to do. This notion, if it exists, is what Sidgwick called 'the fundamental notion' of ethics,[20] and accordingly, on Sidgwick's view, when one uses any method of ethics to determine what an individual ought to do, 'ought' as it occurs in the judgements one makes

[18] Ibid.

[19] For further discussion of the difficulties in Sidgwick's account of the instrumental use of 'ought' see my 'Sidgwick on Ethical Judgement', *Essays on Henry Sidgwick*, ed. Bart Schultz (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 241–58.

[20] For example, at *Methods*, p. 25.

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from using that method expresses this notion. It has, in other words, the same sense no matter what method of ethics one uses. Sidgwick's argument for his conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason therefore depends, for its coherence, on there being one and only one sense of 'ought', the strict ethical sense, in which the word occurs when it occurs in the judgements one makes from using some method of ethics to determine what an individual ought to do. Yet this condition, as we have seen, fails in the case of egoism once Sidgwick allows that egoism would qualify as a method of ethics even on the supposition that the adoption of one's own happiness as one's ultimate and paramount end was due to a predominant desire for happiness rather than a prescription of reason. For on this supposition the judgements of what an individual ought to do that one makes from using the method are judgements in which 'ought' occurs with a different sense from the sense it has in the judgements one makes from using a method in which the agent's ultimate end is prescribed by reason or the ultimate criterion of rightness is conformance to a principle of duty. In either of the latter methods, the sense 'ought' has in the relevant judgements, judgements of the form that A ought to ϕ, is the sense of A's being required or bound to ϕ, whereas in the former the sense it has in the relevant judgements is that of its being advisable for A to ϕ in view of A's desires. Sidgwick's argument for his conception of ethics as grounded in practical reason thus contains at its base a confusion about the notion of right or reasonable conduct that egoism applies when it is understood as a method whose determinations of what ought to be done are judgements about the means to attaining an ultimate end whose adoption is due to a predominant desire rather than a prescription of reason.

Of course, you may well ask, 'What is the connection between this confusion and the incoherence in Sidgwick's final account of ethics that the dualism of practical reason creates?' After all, the incoherence arises when egoism is understood as a method of ethics whose determinations of what ought to be done are judgements about the means to attaining an ultimate end that reason prescribes and therefore it arises when egoism applies the same notion of right or reasonable conduct as utilitarianism and intuitionism. Indeed, this understanding of egoism is plainly the one Sidgwick favoured. So whatever confusion he fell into as a result of holding that egoism is still a method of ethics even when its determinations of what ought to be done are judgements about the means to attaining an ultimate end whose adoption is due to a desire, it does not explain the dualism of practical reason. Hence, it cannot be a deep source of the incoherence in Sidgwick's final account of ethics that the dualism creates. What bearing, then, can it possibly have on the explanation of that incoherence?

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The bearing it has comes, I believe, not from any logical connection between it and the incoherence but rather from Sidgwick's reasons for taking egoism as a method of ethics. Thus, while it is true that the notion of right action egoism applies, on Sidgwick's favoured understanding of the method, is the same as the notion of right action that intuitionism and utilitarianism apply, it is also true that Sidgwick thought his argument for taking egoism, on that understanding of it, as a method of ethics, which is to say, his argument for holding that reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate end, was less than compelling. Consequently, to justify his taking egoism as a method of ethics, he either had to give a stronger argument or show that egoism would still qualify as a method even if reason did not prescribe one's own happiness as an ultimate end. And lacking a stronger argument, he took this second option. That is, he expounded egoism according to his favoured understanding of it, not because he thought there was a compelling argument for doing so, but because he believed that even if the argument he gave was rejected, he could still justify his taking egoism as a method of ethics by falling back to the alternative understanding of it on which adoption of one's own happiness as an ultimate end is due to a predominant desire rather than a prescription of reason. To fall back to this alternative, however, means giving an account of ethics on which the dualism of practical reason and the incoherence it creates not only remain in the study but are also the result of there being two distinct and possibly conflicting notions of right conduct that the study must recognize as fundamental. In other words, it means giving an account of ethics on which Sidgwick's confusion of distinct notions of right conduct is the deep source of the incoherence the dualism creates. Sidgwick's final account of ethics avoids this result, then, because his fallback position gives him latitude to present egoism as more closely aligned with intuitionism and utilitarianism than he has sound reason to hold. But because of this, one must see his presentation of egoism according to his favoured understanding of it as developing in the shadow of the alternative understanding, and thus the reason we see no connection on his final account of ethics between his confusion and the incoherence the dualism creates is that we view the account as if it were standing in sunlight.

At this point, my reading of Sidgwick's *Methods* appears to have significantly departed from Schneewind's. For an important part of Schneewind's interpretation is that Sidgwick saw egoism as, like utilitarianism, a method of ethics that could complete and systematize common-sense morality. As such, the method must have as its fundamental notion of right conduct, the same notion as the method whose product it completes and systematizes, and that, of course, is

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intuitionism. In addition, though, it must also be a method corresponding to which is a principle that can serve as a first principle from which the principles of duty according to common-sense morality follow. And since those principles, being the first principles of intuitionism, are intuitively self-evident, any principle from which they follow must be, as their first principle, 'supreme in validity as well as in certainty' and therefore intuitively self-evident as well.[21] Clearly, egoism, on Sidgwick's favoured understanding of it, satisfies these conditions, for if reason prescribes one's own happiness as an ultimate and paramount end, then the prescription could serve as such a first principle. But on Sidgwick's alternative understanding of egoism reason does not prescribe one's own happiness as an ultimate end. As a result, it appears that on this understanding of the method there is no principle corresponding to it whose validity is intuitively self-evident and that can therefore serve as a first principle from which the principles of duty that common-sense morality contains follow. And if, as I read Sidgwick's *Methods*, he expounded egoism according to his favoured understanding of it in the shadow of this alternative understanding, then it is questionable whether he regarded it as a method that could serve to complete and systematize common-sense morality.

To be sure, Sidgwick allows that one could also understand utilitarianism as a method of ethics whose ultimate end is fixed by a predominant desire rather than a prescription of reason. So one might think that his alternative understanding of egoism is no more of a difficulty for Schneewind's reading of the *Methods* than the analogous understanding of utilitarianism that Sidgwick also acknowledged. And perhaps this is right. At the same time, one could read Sidgwick, in light of the place that his demonstration of how utilitarianism completes and systematizes common-sense morality has in the *Methods*, as regarding this analogous understanding of utilitarianism as a mere abstract possibility and not a genuine alternative. By contrast, he appears, in view of his argument for taking the merely instrumental 'ought' as also expressing the fundamental notion of ethics, to regard his alternative understanding of egoism as a genuine alternative and not a mere abstract possibility. Consequently, he could not argue for egoism as the method that completes and systematizes common-sense morality with the same certainty as he expresses in making that argument for utilitarianism. And indeed one could say, to bring out my departure from Schneewind's reading of the *Methods*, that what indicates a deep incoherence in the work's argument is its exposition of egoism as companionate with intuitionism.

[21] *Sidgwick's Ethics*, p. 264.

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Be this as it may, even to see the possibility of a deep incoherence in the argument of the *Methods* that Sidgwick's alternative understanding of egoism implies requires seeing, in the first place, how that argument brings significant coherence to the work. And that we can now see this argument and how it unifies the different parts of the work is due to Jerome Schneewind's extraordinarily clarifying and path-breaking book.

jdeigh@mail.law.utexas.edu

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