

GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE. SIDGWICK AND THE UNIVERSE: AN INTRODUCTION

A SYMPOSIUM ON KATARZYNA DE LAZARI-RADEK AND PETER SINGER, *THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE: SIDGWICK AND CONTEMPORARY ETHICS*

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It has taken 140 years, but the Victorian era philosopher Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, first published in 1874, has finally received a full-scale and truly formidable defense of its central claims about the rational basis of ethical judgment, a hedonistic account of the good, and act utilitarianism—Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). To be sure, many brilliant philosophers, including those who contributed essays to this symposium, have celebrated the *Methods* as a masterpiece of philosophical ethics. And de Lazari-Radek and Singer certainly recognize this and give credit where credit is due:

In this book, we have followed the main lines of Sidgwick's thinking about ethics, and tested his views both against our own reasoning and against the best of the vast body of recent and current philosophical writing on the topics he addresses. The overarching question we have sought to answer is whether Sidgwick's form of utilitarianism can be defended. In most respects we believe it can be. Parfit's claim that, in the long tradition of ethics, 'Sidgwick's book contains the largest number of true and important claims' stands up well. (p. 379).

But neither Parfit, a great Sidgwickian if ever there was one, nor any of the other contributors to this symposium, all of whom are distinguished Sidgwick scholars, has ever defended Sidgwick on all three counts—the rational, objective basis of ethical judgment, hedonism, and act utilitarianism. In academic philo-

sophical circles, it was not so very long ago that any such project would have been deemed utterly hopeless, Quixotic in the extreme.¹ But now, with the appearance of *The Point of View of the Universe*, it must be deemed cutting-edge. De Lazari-Radek and Singer have published what is clearly the most significant statement and defense of objective, hedonistic act utilitarianism since the 19th century, and they have done so in a work that engages with the most advanced, state-of-the-art philosophizing in the world today.

Indeed, the book is so packed with important, live arguments and issues that a symposium of this nature is bound to seem too limited, and one can only hope that the longer reception of this work will continue to fill in the picture and shift the terms of discussion in moral philosophy. The contributors to this symposium have justifiably concentrated their fire on what are clearly some of the core arguments of *The Point of View of the Universe*, particularly its distinctive claim to be even more Sidgwickian than Sidgwick himself by overcoming the “dualism of practical reason” –what Sidgwick took to be the fundamental conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarian Impartialism, Own Good v. the Good of All—in favor of Impartial reasons, the Point of View of the Universe, as Sidgwick’s famous phrase put it. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer explain:

Although Sidgwick thought that utilitarianism could be grounded on self-evident axioms, he was troubled by the fact that the axiom of benevolence is in conflict with a different principle that seemed to him difficult to deny, namely that, for every individual, ‘his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other’. This principle, Sidgwick saw, led to egoism, and so practical reason seems to endorse both egoism and utilitarianism. Sidgwick held that this ‘dualism of practical reason’ showed that reason cannot, after all, be a complete guide to what we ought to do. Moreover, if we always have sufficient reason to do what is in our own interests—so that acting in our own interests would always be rational, but not rationally required—then that seems to sharply diminish the importance of an ethical theory like utilitarianism, based as it is on the idea of acting with impartial concern for others. Sidgwick’s inability to overcome the dualism meant that he was una-

¹ Even by me, as the introduction to my *Essays on Henry Sidgwick* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) might suggest. Fortunately, by the time I published *Henry Sidgwick, Eye of the Universe* (New York: 2004), the horizons for reconstructing Sidgwick’s positions had already widened considerably. And as the many readers of Peter Singer will recognize, this book represents the most thorough restatement and revision of his views. Gone are his longstanding commitments to R. M. Hare’s prescriptivism and to a preference or desire satisfaction account of the good.

ble to conclude that utilitarianism is the only rationally defensible way of deciding what we ought to do. Egoism survives as an unattractive, but still possible, alternative.... If we can overcome the dualism of practical reason we are left with the axiom of universal benevolence that tells us to maximize the good, impartially. The final step Sidgwick would then need to take would be to argue that this good is happiness, for then he would have reached his goal of finding a rational procedure that can tell us what we ought to do. (pp. xi-xii).

Those, of course, are the very steps taken by de Lazari-Radek and Singer, who marshal some of the latest work in evolutionary theory to try to show that Rational Egoism can be “debunked” as an artifact of human evolution, while the axiom of benevolence defies such debunking, and that classical hedonism, which has been pronounced dead even more often than utilitarianism itself, has risen from the grave with the help of, among others, some Nobel Prize winning economists and psychologists, not to mention recent neuroscience. Preferences are out, and pleasures are in. The Neo-Kantianism that John Rawls loosed upon the world was, it transpires, right to take utilitarianism as its leading opponent, but very, very wrong in thinking that Sidgwick was a mere ghost of the past.

Some may think that this is just the latest turn of a (very) naive unfinished Enlightenment Project, in the never-ending struggle among the champions of the modern, the premodern, and the postmodern. But they should look again. This form of classical utilitarianism is no tool of the Panoptical, Surveillance State, or of “Enlightenment Blackmail,” or of neo-Imperialism or neo-Liberalism, or of consumerism and the ideology of growth, etc. etc. Indeed, even in Sidgwick’s work, there were complex weavings of the premodern, modern, and postmodern—vast debts to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, along with what can only be called Nietzschean forebodings about the shape of things to come. Both Sidgwick and Singer have done their time with Hegel and Marx. *The Point of View of the Universe* does not come to its positions as a result of any failure to appreciate or acknowledge the critics—to the contrary, de Lazari-Radek and Singer are advancing a form of philosophy that can more fully and critically address the global challenges of today, from climate change and loss of biodiversity to population policy, poverty, and bioethics. In defending Sidgwick, they are in effect releasing the deep, and no doubt surprising, potential of his work to help overcome enormous social problems that Sidgwick himself could scarcely have foreseen, but which are defeating the best efforts of the leading alternatives.

Like Sidgwick, de Lazari-Radek and Singer are careful and cautious in their claims, not at all given to overstatement. They acknowledge that much work remains to be done. But the fact remains that their book is claiming to have at long last possibly overcome one of the greatest of all ethical challenges, in some respects the very challenge that Glaucon and Adeimantus put to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, and to have done so in a manner uniquely relevant to the life or death challenges we face today.

The great champion of the non-violent civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., titled his last book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* In that work, King was explicit in expanding the range of his concerns to larger issues of social justice, to the issues of war and poverty. As events in the U.S. and across the world demonstrate, King's question and concerns are as important as ever. Racial justice remains an aspiration, and community a dream. What King did not appreciate or anticipate was the degree to which a secular philosophy such as Sidgwickian utilitarianism could support such movements as that for effective altruism, which he would have celebrated, or for animal liberation, which his leading influence, Gandhi, would have celebrated. That foundational work in academic moral philosophy could produce such social movements, and a consciousness of and concern with "the life you can save," would have delighted King, and perhaps made him reconsider the potential of a secular philosophical ethics in advancing the "beloved community." In any event, it should certainly make people today reconsider the meaning and message of the Sidgwickian utilitarianism defended in *The Point of View of the Universe*.

What should, however, be admitted in this connection is that King might well have appreciated Sidgwick's deep, tormented struggles with religious belief, the way in which his agnosticism was reluctant and represented a genuine feeling of loss, in a way that de Lazari-Radek and Singer are reluctant to recognize, at least beyond a certain point. In this respect, the *Methods*, in connection with the broader concerns of Sidgwick's life and work, may harbor yet more riches to reap.² It can speak to an Anthony Kenny, whose work on one of Sidgwick's favor-

² For a more developed statement of this point, see my "A More Reasonable Ghost: Further Reflections on Henry Sidgwick and the Irrationality of the Universe," available at <https://roundedglobe.com/html/34a3e7ff-778f-48d5-bca0-ed4e10132715/en/A%20More%20Reasonable%20Ghost%20Further%20Reflections%20on%20Henry%20Sidgwick%20and%20the%20Irrationality%20of%20the%20Universe/> Also my *The Happiness Philosophers: Lives of the Eminent Utilitarians* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

ite poets Arthur Hugh Clough reveals a deeply Sidgwickian sensibility concerning religion,³ as well as the stauncher skeptics.

Thus, admittedly, the contributions to this symposium do not exhaust the possibilities for engaging with either Sidgwick or de Lazari-Radek and Singer's *The Point of View of the Universe*. But they clearly do zero in on topics of undeniable importance to anyone interested in either. Can Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason be overcome in the way de Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest, with an evolutionary "debunking" argument? Is act utilitarianism really the best position to construct out of his axioms, or what his axioms entail? What about such alternatives as a more constrained, non-maximizing form of impartialism, perhaps one that does not extend to all sentient beings? Or the type of pluralism grounded on prima facie duties championed by W. D. Ross, or the rule consequentialism that has attracted so much attention of late? Should Sidgwick's position be interpreted in terms of what we have most reason to do, period, or as a conflict between moral and non-moral reasons? The essays below, by some of the leading lights of Sidgwick studies, present these problems in compelling form, and the replies by de Lazari-Radek and Singer tackle the problems posed with the discernment and judiciousness of Sidgwick himself.⁴

³ See Kenny, *Arthur Hugh Clough: A Poet's Life* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007).

⁴ My deepest thanks to all of the contributors, for their fine work and patience as this project unfolded. And a special thank you goes to Pier Marrone and the other editors of *Ethics & Politics*, who appreciated the importance of this symposium and facilitated its appearance.