

Sidgwick on Practical Reason¹

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1. *How many methods?*

In *THE METHODS OF ETHICS* Henry Sidgwick distinguishes *three* methods of ethics but (he claims) only *two* conceptions of practical reason. This may seem surprising. What is the difference between methods of ethics and procedures of practical reason supposed to be? Isn't the proper method for ethics the use of practical reason? John Skorupski addresses these issues with several interesting claims, and concludes that there is no dualism of practical reason: if practical reason is construed broadly there is pluralism; if construed narrowly there is a single principle.

As a preliminary to this argument Skorupski comments on Sidgwick's views of intuitionism. Sidgwick denies that intuitions provide practical reasons not because he thinks they must be common-sense judgements. On the contrary, he sees that the intuitions that would be most important for ethics would be not merely *underived* (which judgements of common sense are) but also immediate, clear, precise, even a priori and above all self-evident (which common-sense judgements are not) (7, 32). Skorupski suggests that Sidgwick thought that there is no principle of practical reason corresponding to intuitionism because there are no intuitions of this more fundamental sort. Seemingly this should resolve the problem of Sidgwick holding that there are three methods

¹ All notes are given parenthetically, with edition and page number, and are to Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1981). This edition, which contains a foreword by John Rawls, is a facsimile of the 1907 seventh edition, which contains the prefaces of all editions of the text.

of ethics but only two principles of practical reason. But the discrepancy between *three* methods and *two* principles of practical reason may arise because the intuitionist does not derive moral claims from anything else, so gets by without needing any principle of practical reason. This thought seems plausible because practical reason, whatever else it may be used for, supports derivations. It would be redundant if ethics could draw on underived intuitive claims, whatever their source. Intuitions may (if they exist) provide a method of ethics, but they do not do so by providing a form of practical reasoning.

However, this neat resolution does not fit with much else in Sidgwick's text. For it seems that the difference between the egoist and the impartialist (the utilitarian) also may not be a difference about practical reason. Egoist and impartialist alike can, it seems, accept a principle of practical reason, namely the principle that 'whatever is right for me is right for all persons in all circumstances' (7, xvii). As Skorupski points out, this suggests that there is just one method of practical reason, shared by egoist and impartialist alike, so yielding *three* methods of ethics (intuitionism, egoism and or impartialism (utilitarianism)), but *one* principle of practical reason.

Yet unless egoism and impartialism are given very weak interpretations, they conflict, and if they agree about practical reason, that conflict will not be susceptible of rational resolution. Egoists and impartialists will find themselves uncongenial passengers on the same boat: neither will be able to persuade the other on disputed points. The antinomy (Kant) or dualism (Hegel) of duty and self-interest, of virtue and happiness, of morality and nature is not dispelled by practical reason.

What differentiates the egoist and the impartialist is then not their view of the principle 'whatever is right for me is right for all persons in all circumstances', which Sidgwick calls 'the Kantian maxim' and thinks 'fundamental, certainly true and not without practical importance' (7, xix). It is their view of the good. As I read Sidgwick, he does not use the Kantian phrases 'practical reason' and 'pure practical reason' to refer to the various claims about the good which distinguish different methods of ethics, but to a common core that all methods of ethics apart from intuitionism deploy. That is why he concludes that

'the Kantian maxim' cannot determine which method of ethics we have reason to adopt, and (reluctantly) that utilitarianism too must have its basis in intuition. In the Preface to the sixth edition of *The Methods of Ethics* he confesses: 'I was then a Utilitarian again, but on an Intuitional basis' (7, xxi-xxii). For Sidgwick, practical reason guides the process by which those who are committed to one or another view of the good reach claims about obligation and duty. It cannot supply reasons for adopting any specific account of the good, and so is not or at least is only part of a method of ethics. If Sidgwick's account of practical reason cannot tell us which conception of the good to adopt, what does it provide?

2. *Practical reason in The Methods of Ethics*

It is by no means easy to be sure in the complex argument of *The Methods of Ethics* how much Sidgwick offers by way of an account of practical reason. Perhaps the easiest point to be sure about is his view of the *function* of practical reason. He holds that a method of ethics is 'any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ought to do' (7, 1). Ethics is essentially practical: 'an attempt to ascertain the general laws or uniformities by which the varieties of human conduct ... may be *explained* is essentially different from an attempt to determine which among these varieties of conduct is *right*' (7, 2; cf. 7, 5; 7, 15). Practical reason is reasoning deployed *assuming some method of ethics* (an account of the good) to identify the right, and 'wrong conduct is essentially irrational' (7,23; cf. 7,35). (There is in my view some tension between this central aim and the comparativist ambitions which guide the composition of *The Methods of Ethics*.)

Ethics 'as the study of what is right or what ought to be' (7, 4) will differ depending on which view is taken—'ends accepted as ultimate or paramount', or whether it is independent of such ends. It is the diversity of possible ends 'accepted as ultimate' which explains how there can be a plurality of methods of ethics: 'to every difference in the end adopted at least some difference in method will generally correspond'

(7, 8). In short, on Sidgwick's account, methods of ethics, although not differentiated by the conception of practical reason they deploy, are distinguished but by the end(s), which they view as ultimate and paramount (7, 8). We may view either happiness or excellence (perfection) as the ultimate end, and if we think happiness is paramount we may then differ over whether universal or individual happiness should be preferred. In principle Sidgwick thinks that there might be a lot of methods of ethics (but not, contra Skorupski, lots of principles of practical reason). In practice he doubts whether there are serious contenders other than intuitionistic perfectionism, egoism, and impartialism (utilitarianism).

Despite these basically teleological views, Sidgwick argues in *The Methods of Ethics* (7, ch. III) that *right* is the fundamental ethical category. He writes that 'the fundamental notion represented by the word "ought" or "right" ... [is] essentially different from all notions representing physical or psychical experience' (7, 25) (so rejecting naturalism and psychologism); that it is not generally to be identified with the idea of fitness for purpose (7, 26) (some acts are unconditionally right); that it is not to be identified with and does not express feelings of approbation (7, 27-8). He argues explicitly of "'ought", "right" and other terms expressing the same fundamental notion' that 'the notion which these terms have in common is too elementary to admit of a formal definition'. He even uses the Kantian vocabulary and makes claims about *unconditional* or *categorical imperatives* (7, 35). However, Sidgwick's use of this vocabulary is remote from Kant's thought: in speaking of certain obligations as categorical he means only that they do not depend on the existence of any non-rational desires; such obligations may yet depend on an account of the good. The Kantian vocabulary of reason is put to use in the framework of a teleological ethics.

This fact makes it puzzling that Sidgwick so often writes as if he accepted Kant's conception of practical reason. I think the reason he does this is that what he terms 'the Kantian maxim' is a startlingly weak reading of Kant's principal conception of practical reason, with wide applicability but slender implications. When Sidgwick renders Kant's principle of practical reason merely as 'That whatever is right for me must be right for all persons in similar circumstances' (7, xix; see also

379–80), he notes (quite correctly) that this principle fails to decide matters as between self-interest and duty, between egoists and universalists. He does not ask whether this is an adequate or complete account of practical reason.

What Sidgwick terms 'the Kantian maxim' is in fact no more than a principle of universal generalisation applied within ethics; it is not Kant's universalisability test. No mention here of the requirement on agents to test whether they can will principles as a universal law; no mention of the double modal structure of Kantian universalisability which *requires* that agents act only on principles which they *can* will for all. No wonder Sidgwick concluded that the Kantian principle as he understood it was too weak 'for the construction of a system of duties' (7, xix), and that it offered no reason for preferring universalism to egoism, or (more broadly) duty to happiness. Equally he realised that the missing connections would not be established by the second conception of practical reason which he accepted, for this principle is simply Kant's principle of the hypothetical imperative—a version of the principle of instrumental reasoning (7, 37), which supports claims about what ought to be done that are 'implicitly relative to an *optional* end' (7, 7).

As Sidgwick relates his difficulties in the short essay in intellectual autobiography that is included within the Preface to the sixth edition of *The Methods of Ethics*, his growing realisation of the insufficiency of practical reason led him to 'reconsider his relation to Intuitional Ethics' (7, xxi). The reconsideration led in two directions. On the one hand it revealed that even egoism requires a basis in intuition: for why should the egoist pursue self-interest at the expense of immediate inclination? Rational egoism itself had its foundation in an intuited 'Axiom of Prudence ... a self-evident principle implied in rational egoism' (386). Axioms, of course, lack derivation.

His reflections also led him to the conviction that utilitarians too could not prove their basic principle and would have to invoke an intuited, self-evident 'Axiom of Benevolence'. Utilitarianism too relies on an intuited, underived 'axiom': 'That a rational agent is bound to aim at Universal Happiness' (7, xxi). Sidgwick found himself led back to a utilitarian substantive ethics not because he showed how practical

reason could demonstrate the principle of utility, but because 'I am finally led to the conclusion ... that the Intuitionist method rigorously applied yields as its final result the doctrine of ... Utilitarianism' (7, 407), a doctrine within which his two principles of practical reason can be applied. He had found himself unable to reach any resolution of the conflicts between egoism and impartialism, let alone of the more fundamental differences between interest and duty, nature and morality.

So what is the tally? Sidgwick can, I think, indeed allow for three and perhaps for many more methods of ethics, but what differentiates these methods is not the view that they take of practical reason, but the underlying intuitions about ultimate ends on which they build. He allows for two conceptions of practical reason, and assumes (in my view wrongly) that these correspond to Kant's categorical and hypothetical imperatives. His minimal formulation of a principle of practical reason, which he thinks corresponds to the categorical imperative, ensures that his account of practical reason *taken by itself* underdetermines not only ethical judgement, but also the methods and principles of ethics. These principles can be derived only by invoking methods whose epistemological footing lies in intuitions about the good.

The lingering sadness of so many passages in *The Methods of Ethics* reflects Sidgwick's dispassionate and stoical refusal to assert claims that cannot be supported by reasons and his view that practical reason supplies no more than universal generalisation and instrumental rationality. Although his discussion of practical reason is often conducted in Kant's terminology, it is profoundly unlike Kant's. Perhaps he thought that Kant's vindication of reason was too bound up with a theism for which he could find no adequate proof. Ironically the direction of Kant's argument is in fact the converse: from a view about practical reason to a conception of reasoned hope that can (but perhaps need not) be given a theistic reading. Kant's vindication of reason, by contrast, explicitly repudiates theistic assumptions. If it had presupposed theism, his discussions of reasoned hope, and of religion 'within the limits of mere reason', would presumably have been redundant.

In seeing practical reason as universal generalisation, a principle that is as useful to the egoist as to the impartialist, Sidgwick adopts a starkly

individualistic view of reason. Like cases are to be treated alike, but nothing is said about a plurality of agents. A solitary individual seeking to impose reason on action can be guided by this principle (of course, the guidance will be weak). Kant's explicit view that practical reason asks what principles can or cannot be *willed* or *adopted* by *all agents* is missing. There is no consideration of universalisability, of the implications of the fact that reasons (whatever else they may be) must be followable by those to whom they are addressed. Of course, Kant's account of practical reason may be a failure. Its vindication may be problematic, and its power of resolution inadequate. But this is not shown by pointing out the slender implications of Sidgwick's weak reading of what he calls 'the Kantian maxim'.