

Ethics, Utilitarianism, and Positive Boredom

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A MORAL PHILOSOPHER who has the distinction of dying in 1900 is liable to bear a heavy burden of retrospective wisdom about nineteenth-century moralism in general. And Henry Sidgwick is in any case well qualified to serve as an exemplar. He was one of the chief mourners at God's long Victorian funeral, and he conducted himself, on the whole, with the kind of laboriously agonised seriousness which most of us, I suspect, find enviably impressive and touchingly ludicrous at the same time. As an old-fashioned moralist, Sidgwick comes true to type.

Stefan Collini has expressed well-founded doubts about the idea that the dynamics of Sidgwick's intellectual milieu were governed by a single uniform process of 'professionalisation'.¹ He voiced them some years ago in *Public Moralists*, and he has now elaborated the point with the very helpful suggestion that Sidgwick's sense of professional duty is better explained in terms of the several different 'roles' he found himself playing on the Victorian intellectual scene: as 'philosopher' and 'professor' principally, and to some extent as 'public moralist' as well. Each of these roles, Collini argues, entailed different duties, and their mutual interference was responsible for Sidgwick's complicated if not contradictory attitudes to the new forms of academic life, from his reservations about specialisation within the university (p. 21) to his

¹ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 199–205.

concerns for the authority of the 'academic person' outside it (p. 21). These preoccupations, Collini thinks, together with Sidgwick's activities in various Ethical Societies, in the Charity Organisation Society and in the movement for higher education for women, refuse to fit in with any simple idea of professionalisation.

But in one way Collini seems to have grown closer to the professionalisation hypothesis over the years. There was just one place in *Public Moralists* where he alluded to the fact that Sidgwick 'was not a thrilling speaker',² but he now listens out for his drone with all the attentiveness of a parent listening for an infant's crying. He suggests, indeed, that in the twenty years leading up to his death at the age of 62 Sidgwick became 'so heart-sinkingly boring' (p. 43) that one has to wonder whether he 'felt it a positive obligation as a professor to write such dull books' (p. 43).

I have not spent as much time as Collini tuning in to Sidgwick's longueurs, but I venture to suspect that he has not quite got the measure of them. For one thing, Sidgwick was not an exceptionally boring writer, at least by the prevailing standards of British philosophy; and it is worth remembering that he was noted for a habit of sprinkling his speech—which was often impeded by a stammer—with a characteristic kind of verbal frivolity which came to be known as 'Sidgwickedness'.³ For another, it is important to distinguish between different varieties of literary boringness. Some prose is boring because it imparts its information very slowly and with no detectable expressive pulse: it is boring because of a lack of skill and self-discipline on the part of the author. But there is also prose which is boring because it has been deliberately drained of affect, as if for fear that the smallest breach in the wall of impassivity would soon lead to its total collapse and an overwhelming flood of embarrassing emotion. Such boringness—positive as opposed to negative—is the result of too much self-discipline rather than too little, and if Sidgwick was boring, it was more in the positive than in the negative style.

² Collini, *Public Moralists*, 200.

³ I have this information from a conversation with Mrs Anne Baer, daughter of a nephew of Henry Sidgwick, at the British Academy conference on Sidgwick on 18 March 2000.

Collini analyses Sidgwick's professionalism, including his professional boringness, mainly in terms of his roles as professor and philosopher. But as far as Sidgwick himself was concerned, the relevant *dramatis personae* were slightly different, as he showed in an essay of 1899 where he presented himself at one point 'as a Professor of ethics', and at another, 'as a utilitarian'.⁴ If he was subject to a conflict of roles, it may be that it depended on the difference between ethics, in the traditional and elevated sense of the word which he had perhaps once given his heart to, and the bathetic utilitarianism which is recognised as its modern nemesis.

Towards the end of his life, Sidgwick wrote an autobiographical sketch about how he became the person who would write *The Methods of Ethics* in 1874. As an undergraduate at Trinity College Cambridge in the 1850s, he explained, he had been trained in moral philosophy on the basis of the textbook *Elements of Morality* by the Master of his College, the overweening William Whewell. Whewell had been elected to the Knightbridge professorship at Cambridge in 1838, and immediately changed the title of the Chair from 'Moral Theology or Casuistry' to 'Moral Philosophy' and transformed the seventeenth-century sinecure into a serious educational responsibility. The professorship became a platform, if not a pulpit, for the propagation of 'Moral Truths', and Whewell undertook to formulate them 'in a definite and permanent manner' and to demonstrate that they were 'rationally connected with each other' so as to form a 'system of Independent Morality'.⁵

But Whewell's conscientious work as Professor of Moral Philosophy, and also as pioneer of the 'Moral Sciences' course, first examined in 1851, did not always have the effect he aimed at. Sidgwick recalled that the main thing he had learned from Whewell's teaching was that 'Intuitionist moralists [such as Whewell] were hopelessly loose', which made him realise that the 'moral rules' he had been 'educated to obey' might be 'doubtful and confused' or indeed 'dogmatic, unreasoned,

⁴ HS, 'The relation of ethics to sociology', *International Journal of Ethics* (1899), reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays and Addresses* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 249–69; see 256, 266.

⁵ See William Whewell, *Lectures on Systematic Morality* (London: John W. Parker, 1846), 2, 20.

incoherent'. It was then that he encountered John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, which gave him 'relief' for a while. But then he realised that Mill was unable to fend off the threat of egoism, in other words the habit of valuing one's own interest, however slight, more highly than the most vital interests of everyone else. 'No doubt it was, from the point of view of the universe, reasonable to prefer the greater good to the lesser,' Sidgwick wrote, but 'it seemed to me also undeniably reasonable for the individual to prefer his own.' (Collini reminds us that Sidgwick's reference to 'the point of view of the universe' has been mocked by a more recent Knightbridge professor, but in this context the phrase is used somewhat ironically to describe a position which Sidgwick was not sure he had the right to assume, rather than one he could arrogate to himself without qualms.)

After Mill, Sidgwick turned to Kant, but Kant too proved unable to defeat egoism. Sidgwick came to feel, as he said, like 'a disciple on the loose', in desperate need of 'sympathy and support', if not indeed of a 'master'.⁶

So it was very curious that Sidgwick should have ended up writing a book which would serve as a text for the Moral Sciences programme at Cambridge, and stranger still that he should himself take over the Knightbridge Chair of Moral Philosophy in 1883. Collini attributes the intensification of Sidgwick's boringness partly to this professorship, but he also assigns it to another source: 'somewhere along the way,' he says (p. 45), 'I blame philosophy.' In particular he blames the slyly self-denying ordinance by which philosophers have cast themselves as 'under-labourers' engaged in nothing more substantial than 'reflective analysis' of ideas devised by others, and he quotes Sidgwick's gloomy comment, in 1887, about having 'philosophised himself into a conviction of the unprofitableness of philosophy' (p. 18).

Sidgwick's doubts about philosophy are, as Collini notes, somewhat similar to those which led to a new epidemic of philosophical dullness with the rise of linguistic analysis some sixty years later. But in fact they were much less sweeping and far more subtle, for if

⁶ This account was included in the Preface to the posthumous sixth edition of *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1901), xvii–xxiii; see xvii, xviii.

Sidgwick was disappointed by philosophy's past achievements, he still entertained hopes for its future. He noted that philosophy was 'still—after so many centuries—in a rudimentary condition as compared with the more special studies of the branches of systematised knowledge that we call Sciences', but he thought that the correct response would be activism rather than despair. Whilst admitting that 'no one can hope to remove suddenly and quickly so ancient and inveterate a deficiency', he affirmed that 'it ought to be the aim of all earnest students of Philosophy to remedy this defect'.⁷

That at least was Sidgwick's assessment of 'Theoretical Philosophy'. But when he came to 'Practical Philosophy' he was less sanguine, and—contrary to what Collini seems to imply—he can hardly have imagined that he would be able to repair the defect by adopting 'Common Sense' as his master. Collini points out that Sidgwick criticised his colleague James Stuart, MP for Hackney, for pronouncing on political issues without first examining the 'accepted theories and systematic methods of reasoning' concerning them; but he is wrong to suggest that Sidgwick thought such theories and methods deserved unconditional respect. He simply thought they were matters which 'an educated person ought at any rate to show adequate knowledge of, even if he intends to banish them to Jupiter or Saturn' (p. 21).

Sidgwick's treatment of 'the Morality of Common Sense' in Book III of *The Methods of Ethics* is also less complacent than Collini suggests. He reproaches him for assuming 'that there is more consensus in the "common thought" of mankind than is really the case' (p. 45) and implies that Sidgwick always interpreted clashes of opinion as if they were simply the effects of 'misunderstanding or lack of clarity'. And after noting that Sidgwick defined philosophy in terms of 'the Dialectical Method', meaning 'the method of reflection on the thought which we all share, by the aid of the symbolism which we all share, language', he asks rhetorically what Sidgwick could do if it turned out that "'we" do not "all" share the same "thought"?'⁸ (p. 13).

⁷ HS, *Philosophy, its Scope and Relations*, published posthumously (London: Macmillan, 1902), 13.

⁸ *Philosophy*, 49.

But Sidgwick was not assuming that we all think the same thoughts, any more than that we all speak the same language. He made it clear in his autobiographical sketch that Book III of *The Methods of Ethics* had been written in conscious imitation of Aristotle, whose discussion of the moral virtues was, he thought, no more than an idealised transcription of 'the Common Sense Morality of Greece'. The task he set himself in Book III, he explained, was simply 'to do the same for *our* morality here and now'.

The upshot was not an unthinking endorsement of common-sense morality, but on the contrary an access of 'fresh force and vividness' for Sidgwick's perception that common sense was full of 'doubtfulness and uncertainty'. He had managed, with a certain amount of hermeneutic bullying, to show that the morality of common sense pointed in the same general direction as utilitarianism, but he knew that it also contained the elements of the loose dogmatism which, as a young man, he had found repellent in Whewell. And even if it now approximated to the two great principles to which he now subscribed, namely Kant's version of the golden rule (that 'whatever is right for me must be right for all persons in similar circumstances') and Mill's version of utilitarianism (that we 'should act in such a way as to promote universal happiness'), it did not always and necessarily do so. When confronted with better arguments, according to Sidgwick, common sense would always have to yield.⁹

The real and excruciating difficulty for Sidgwick was that he did not think that decisive arguments about the fundamental methods of ethics would ever be found. Even if common sense tended to converge on utilitarian conclusions, egoism still remained a theoretically viable option. The three methods—egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism—thus constituted 'alternatives between which ... the human mind seems to me necessarily forced to choose'.¹⁰ Practical philosophy here reached its *ne plus ultra*, and the one certainty about the foundations of ethics was that they would always be uncertain.

Collini recounts a shocking story about the young Alfred Marshall

⁹ See *Methods*, 343, n. 1, and Preface to sixth edition, xxi–xxii.

¹⁰ *Methods*, 12.

reproaching Sidgwick for failing to inspire his students with moral fervour in the manner of T. H. Green. It was an extraordinary impertinence, but Sidgwick was large enough to regard it as 'interesting', noting that the reason for his comparative failure was simply that he thought there were no grounds for the kind of passionate conviction that made Green's lectures legendary: 'the deepest truth I have to tell', as he wrote in his journal, 'is by no means "good tidings"'. If that made him boring, he could not help it, for beneath his unyielding exterior he still suffered from the wounds of his discovery that the 'Moral Truths' propounded by Whewell were groundless, and of his subsequent realisation that the virtues prized by the various moralities of common sense do not always exactly coincide with the prescriptions of utilitarian calculation. If he was cold, it was not from a lack of inward passion. Rather like John Stuart Mill, he kept himself under severe control for fear of being overwhelmed by intellectual grief.

In an early essay on J. R. Seeley's *Ecce Homo*, Sidgwick had affirmed the need for 'magnanimity' in place of the 'resentment' that so often characterised Christianity,¹¹ and over the years he certainly managed to make himself magnanimous. He had no patience with the exquisite theatricality of Matthew Arnold's sadness, but he would surely not have resented having to share the distinction of dying in 1900 with another great moral philosopher, equally exasperating and no less anguished, who had also been shattered by his contact with utilitarianism. Sidgwick would surely have found it 'interesting' that Friedrich Nietzsche acknowledged the extraordinary achievements of 'utilitarian Englishmen' in their special field of endeavour, which of course was none other than 'boringness'. The English utilitarians should be encouraged, Nietzsche explained, because 'to the extent that they are boring, their utility can hardly be exaggerated'.¹² Nietzsche died on 25 August, Sidgwick three days later—both of them escaping at last from the terrible violence wrought by their philosophical intelligence on the consoling platitudes of morality.

¹¹ HS, 'Ecce Homo' (1866), in *Miscellaneous Essays and Addresses*, 1–39; see 33.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), Vorrede §4, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Vol. 5, 250–51 and *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §228, *ibid.*, 165.