

Review of Katarzyna De Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's The point of view of the universe - Sedgwick and contemporary ethics

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The Point of the View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics by Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (Oxford University Press) £30.00/\$55.00

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In each chapter of *The Point of the View of the Universe: Sidgwick & Contemporary Ethics*, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer introduce a central idea from Henry Sidgwick's 19th Century philosophical classic *The Methods of Ethics*. The first chapter begins by describing how Sidgwick understood moral philosophy as an attempt to find a rational reasoning procedure which we could use to discover what we ought to do, in the most all-encompassing possible sense, as individual human beings. On this view, philosophers can use reason to examine and revise our often confused and inconsistent everyday ways of making decisions. The ultimate end of the rational reasoning processes would then be to guide us to do what we have most reason to do overall.

The second chapter describes how Sidgwick disagreed with David Hume about the role of reason in practical deliberation. Hume had thought that reason plays a role only in discovering what the means to our fundamental goals are – goals that are set by our will and desires. In contrast, Sidgwick believed that the faculty of reason can itself come to know which ends all rational beings are required to have irrespective of their desires. Such practical requirements of reason must be based on objective reasons provided by the world itself rather than by what goals we happen to have. This is why acting against the best reasons is irrational – it violates the dictates of reason. Sidgwick also described how moral cognitions can produce various impulses in us to act accordingly.

Chapter three introduces three stages in the development of moral deliberation. At the first stage, people rely on their immediate moral intuitions about the concrete cases they face without appealing to any rules. The problem is that different people have different intuitions about these cases, and even our own intuitions are not always consistent or confident. Because of this, we often seek more general moral principles that we could all in principle intuitively agree on. This is why at the second stage we end up with common sense moral rules that are often captured in the language of virtues. For example, the rules 'Be Truthful!' and 'Help other people!' could be suggested as belonging to the basic common sense standards of morality. Sidgwick argued that the problem is that such rules offer no guidance in the situations in which they conflict, and that if there is an agreement on these rules it is only based on contingent cultural fashions. Finally, at the third theoretical stage, we attempt to look for a deeper unified justification for the common sense principles discovered during the second stage. The purpose of such a theoretical justification is offer us a critical perspective for evaluating those principles.

In Chapter four, de Lazari-Radek and Singer introduce Sidgwick's fundamental methods of doing moral philosophy. Sidgwick stipulates four standards for evaluating whether a given moral principle is a self-evident axiom of reason that corresponds to the objective requirements of morality. Such a principle must be formulated in clear and precise terms, it must be stable in careful critical reflection, it must belong to a body of consistent principles

and it should be a principle which all equally competent rational people agree on. The argument is that the common sense rules of morality introduced in the previous paragraph fail to pass these standards.

Sidgwick famously argued that there are three axioms of practical reasoning that pass the previous test. The principle of justice says that morality requires that we treat like cases in the same way. The principle of prudence requires that we aim at our own good on the whole over our lifetime. Finally, the universal principle of benevolence claims that, as rational beings, we are required to promote the good of everyone generally.

Chapter six describes the problem these principles create for Sidgwick. The problem is that there will always be cases where promoting your own overall good will conflict with the requirement to promote the overall good from the point of view of the universe. This conclusion conflicts with the idea that fundamental rules of morality should be mutually consistent. Sidgwick himself never found a satisfactory solution to this “dualism of practical reason” problem.

In chapter seven, de Lazari-Radek and Singer offer their own solution to this puzzle. Already during Sidgwick’s own time, it was argued that practical intuitions would be unreliable if there were an evolutionary explanation for how we came to have those intuitions. This is because in that case the way in which we came to have those intuitions would not have been sensitive to what objective reasons we have. The authors then argue that there is an evolutionary explanation for why we think that we should pursue our own good, which undermines the idea that we really have objective reasons for doing so. They also argue that there is no evolutionary explanation for why we would think that we should maximize the general good from the point of view of the Universe and for that reason this requirement must be a discovery made by reason – a reliable general faculty which we evolved to have.

Chapters eight and nine then explain and defend Sidgwick’s views about what is good. Sidgwick was a hedonist – he thought that only happiness, understood as the balance of pleasures over pains, is good. According to him, pleasure furthermore consists of a feeling that the experiencer takes to be desirable. Thus, ultimately de Lazari-Radek and Singer end up with a view that our reason requires that we maximise the amount of feelings in the world that are taken to be desirable by the beings who experience them.

The final three chapters outline the logical consequences of this view. This view first turns out to offer only a criterion of rightness and not a principle that we should use in our everyday deliberation (as this would not have the best consequences). It also sets a demanding standard on what we ought to do, but this standard is defensible in the situation we are in, given that there are millions of people live in extreme poverty. Finally, the view entails that we should promote the happiness of animals and people, present and future, even if this leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that we should bring about vast numbers of them.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer succeed in explaining Sidgwick’s views in a clear and engaging way, though at times the long discussions of contemporary moral philosophy get in the way

of keeping track of Sidgwick's own line of thought. Perhaps there could have been more interpretation and structuring of Sidgwick's views.

In addition to explaining Sidgwick's central theories, this book also has two other central aims. The first one is to show that Sidgwick deserves to be considered as one of the greatest moral philosophers. I have mixed feelings about whether the book successfully achieves this aim. In the final chapters, the authors do show how Sidgwick deserves immense credit for investigating what the consequences of utilitarian thinking really are, especially with respect to future generations. It is a shame that it took almost 100 years after *The Methods of Ethics* for us to recognise how important and ground-breaking this work was.

In contrast, I fail to be convinced by this book that some of Sidgwick's other central ideas will stand the test of time. It seems like a mistake to think that moral philosophy should essentially aim at evaluating deliberation procedures with standards such as (i) how clear the terms used in these procedures are, (ii) how stable their outputs are in careful reflection, and (iii) how much there is agreement about the procedures. This book nicely explains many brilliant ideas Sidgwick had but without really stopping to consider their significance for contemporary moral philosophy beyond the authors' own interests. Among these great ideas, I would include Sidgwick's objections to relativism (that it fails to leave room for disagreements), his discussion of the principle of justice (which basically introduces the idea of supervenience to moral philosophy) and his critical discussion of virtue ethics (that it is circular).

Finally, the book also attempts to vindicate Sidgwick's views as a plausible stance in contemporary moral philosophy. The authors want to defend (i) non-naturalist realism in metaethics, (ii) maximizing act-utilitarianism in normative ethics, and (iii) hedonism as the fundamental theory of what is good both for us and universally. These defences are also a mixed bag. In metaethics, the authors fail to say much at all about their positive view and their criticism of the main expressivist alternative is badly confused. The defence of utilitarianism is much better, as you would expect from Singer--one of the leading utilitarians. The responses to the standard objections to utilitarianism are both clear and powerful. These responses deserve to be studied by both utilitarians and opponents alike. The defence of hedonism lies somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.

Overall, the book is a very interesting attempt to bring Sidgwick back. In some areas, it is very successful in this. The book shows how far Sidgwick took utilitarianism in the context of topics whose significance has only been recognised very recently. In other areas, the book is less successful. There is not much metaethicists can take home from it. This, however, should not be a surprise, given that Sidgwick's work predates all the central discoveries that were made in logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics and epistemology during the 20th century.