



Sidgwick's utilitarianism in the context of the rise of Idealism: a reappraisal

Catherine Marshall

► To cite this version:

Catherine Marshall. Sidgwick's utilitarianism in the context of the rise of Idealism: a reappraisal. *Revue d'études benthamiennes*, 2013, 12, <10.4000/etudes-benthamiennes.678>. <hal-03794533>

HAL Id: hal-03794533

<https://hal.science/hal-03794533v1>

Submitted on 12 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Revue d'études benthamiennes

12 | 2013 :

Varia

Dossier Sidgwick

Sidgwick's utilitarianism in the context of the rise of Idealism: a reappraisal

CATHERINE MARSHALL

Résumés

FrançaisEnglish

L'ouvrage célèbre de Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), avait pour objet de trouver un fondement intuitionniste à l'utilitarisme. Les six conférences qu'il donna à la Société Métaphysique (1869-1880) sur pratiquement le même sujet permettent de mieux comprendre le cheminement des idées de Sidgwick sur ce point à l'aune des changements religieux, scientifiques et politiques de la période. Sa critique de ce qui allait devenir l'Idéalisme britannique et les critiques dont il fut l'objet par un idéaliste tel que Bradley eurent des incidences sur les révisions successives de cet ouvrage. En essayant de concilier utilitarisme et intuitionnisme – deux méthodes éthiques opposées – il tentait de défendre une forme d'utilitarisme nouveau, à savoir un utilitarisme dans lequel serait incorporé une forme de moralité discrète. Le fait qu'il échoua n'est pas important en soi car il tenta de trouver des solutions à ce qui lui paraissait être irrécyclable dans l'utilitarisme et les six conférences qu'il donna à la Société Métaphysique permettent d'en saisir toute la portée et de comprendre sa définition de l'utilitarisme.

Henry Sidgwick's great work, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), was an attempt to give Utilitarianism an Intuitionist basis. The six papers he gave at the Metaphysical Society (1869-1880) on nearly the same subject throw a new light on his ideas and how he revised his work several times in the light of religious, scientific and political changes which were taking place at the time. His criticism of what was to become Idealism and the criticism he was subjected to from an Idealist such as Bradley were also of influence on his work. By trying to bring together Utilitarianism and Intuitionism – two opposed ethical methods – he was seeking to defend a revamped form of "utilitarianism", that is

a form of utilitarianism which would incorporate a self-effacing morality. That he failed to do so is not the point, but he did try and the six papers he gave at The Metaphysical Society help to understanding his own version of utilitarianism.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Sidgwick, utilitarisme, Société Métaphysique (1869-1880), Idéalisme, Bradley, éthique, science, foi, empirisme, intuitionnisme.

Keywords : Sidgwick, utilitarianism, Metaphysical Society (1869-1880), Idealism, Bradley, ethics, science, faith, empiricism, intuitionism.

Texte intégral

- 1 Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) is not very well-known in France and is mostly remembered for being « the last of the Utilitarians ».¹ In itself, such a description does not help to understand who Sidgwick was and what he stood for. Independently from the fact that it wrongly purports the idea that Utilitarianism died out after Sidgwick, it mostly focuses on one aspect of his work – mainly his understanding of ethics – and tends to set aside the other parts (on politics, on society, on science and on morality especially) which were equally interesting.
- 2 In the same way, British idealism has suffered the same fate in France and, apart from the works of some French philosophical scholars and of Professor Jean-Paul Rosaye, very few scholars in our field of studies – that is British studies, in France – have been interested in it. France and the French have either refused or ignored idealism. In our country, it is mostly in the field of philosophy that British Idealism² has attracted some attention. That mostly philosophers have been interested in the subject is also another part of the problem because the methodology used to study Idealism too often sets aside the context of the second and late half of the 19th century in which Idealism came to be. This has been part of the work attempted by Jean Paul Rosaye to present an author like F. H. Bradley in context whilst questioning the role and methodology of the history of ideas.³ This is precisely what this article will attempt to do by explaining the work of Sidgwick in the context of the period spanning from 1869 to 1880 – that is, at the time of the papers he gave at the Metaphysical Society (1869-1880) and as British Idealism was about to blossom into a full philosophy.
- 3 The Metaphysical Society was formed in 1869 by a group of eminent Victorians who felt that the discoveries of science and faith should be discussed, in a spirit of openness and discretion, in order to find in both these fields a common ground. Debate was supposed to help the 62 members⁴ understand each other and find a new authority on which to stand on. These 62 eminent Victorians came from all fields of thought, some were agnostics, others atheists, but most came from many different religious backgrounds. This unique debating experiment only lasted for eleven years, but the members produced 95 papers which give an insight into the struggle to find a middle ground – or none at all, as was the case – on the members' ideas pertaining to faith, ethics and science.
- 4 Henry Sidgwick gave six papers throughout the life span of the Metaphysical Society and at a time when he was writing *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). Therefore, Sidgwick wrote all his papers for the Metaphysical Society at the

time when he was either writing or revising his most famous work, *The Methods of Ethics* (which was revised seven times up to 1907 – another edition was published in 1981 with an introduction by John Rawls) and one can see the changes in his opinions and ideas through the papers. Sidgwick was also writing at a time when he was openly opposed to Idealism (even though he was close to T. H. Green) and was attacked by F. H. Bradley for what Bradley believed was a defence of utilitarianism in *The Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick revised *The Methods of Ethics* after F. H. Bradley's 1877 criticism of his ideas in the critical work entitled *Mr Sidgwick's Hedonism: An examination of the main argument of The Methods of Ethics*⁵.

- 5 Sidgwick was described as the great enemy of Idealism because of his refusal to abandon utility as the ethical guide to morality. F. H. Bradley's criticism⁶ of Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* was also conducive in creating the vision of Sidgwick as the last of the Utilitarians bent on rejecting Idealism. I shall not mention Green's criticism of utilitarianism in the posthumous *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883 – Green died in 1882) because it came after the Metaphysical Society had been dissolved. However, and this will be the aim of this paper, I want to show that Sidgwick's moral philosophy is not as utilitarian as believed. I also want to show how in the light of the papers he gave at the Metaphysical Society – at the time when he was working on or revising *The Methods of Ethics* (as already mentioned) and when Bradley's criticism was published – he came to change his views slightly and adopt a form of utilitarianism which is a toned down type of utilitarianism. Others before me have already attempted this much better than I will, as J. B. Schneewind in the classic *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian moral Philosophy*⁷; Stefan Collini in an article entitled "My role and their duties: Sidgwick as a Philosopher, Professor and Public Moralist"⁸ or, even in France, much more recently, Michel Terestchenko's "Henry Sidgwick le cosmos de la moralité réduit au chaos"⁹ – but they have not studied Sidgwick's papers given at the Metaphysical Society and Sidgwick's personal evolution in their light.

- 6 In effect, Idealism could have been the adequate answer to part of the problems of the Metaphysicians and to Sidgwick's own questionings as it provided the possible reconciliation between ethics, science and faith that they were searching for. In the words of David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, British Idealism,

acted as a profound interrogation, critique and metaphysical counterbalance to the individualism of the variants of an instinctive British utilitarianism and naturalistic evolutionism. It offered a philosophy that gave the much needed orientation to social cohesiveness and the closeness of the relation between individual and collective responsibility¹⁰

- 7 In other words, this was precisely the solution to a number of the questionings of the Metaphysicians, as British Idealism was an attempt to solve the Victorian crisis of faith. Obviously, because of the variety of ideas held by the members – from evolutionary naturalism, utilitarianism, rationalism, intuitionism or positivism – such a social philosophy as Idealism could not be accepted and they did not appreciate nor could anticipate its rise (it was too early). After all, the Metaphysical Society met between 1869 and 1880, precisely when Idealism was gathering momentum, but the ideas were already in the air and by the second half of the 1870's, Idealists were defending their philosophy.

- 8 I will argue that Sidgwick was deeply affected by his loss of faith and that the development of his moral philosophy came through the confrontation to other types of philosophical currents, including Idealism, and that, in the end, utilitarianism was not perceived by him as being the best ethical theory. I shall begin therefore with Sidgwick's period at the Metaphysical Society, the papers he presented in the light of *The Methods of Ethics* and, in my conclusion, refer to the type of utilitarianism he defended in the light of the criticism of F. H. Bradley.

1. Sidgwick's position at the Metaphysical Society at the time of the writing of *The Methods of Ethics* (1874)

- 9 Henry Sidgwick cannot be described as a common Metaphysician: he was one of the few professional philosophers who had joined this debating Society and he attempted to stand above the battle which was raging between the two opposite schools within the Society: empiricism – or the fact that all forms of knowledge come from experience – and intuitionism or the fact that transcendental truths come innately. This does not mean that he had nothing to say on either, nor that he shared some of the views of the empiricists, but his papers were always aiming at standing above such quarrels and considering the diverse methods available to find the best ethical theory. As one of the professional philosophers in the Society, he tried to concentrate on the methodology required to find the basis of belief and the meaning of Metaphysics. He ploughed a different furrow compared to his fellow members as he was neither on the side of the religious believers nor on that of the scientists. As a sceptic, he had rejected religion and as a moral philosopher, he was opposed to the scientists' method based only on empirical facts. Sidgwick was in some respects a moderate and pragmatic member.
- 10 Sidgwick became a member as soon as the Metaphysical Society was created in 1869 and remained so until the end, unlike many other members who decided to resign when the Society lost its appeal (mostly in the last four years). The Metaphysical Society was founded in an age of uncertainty – 1869 – when the changes due to the industrial revolution, the fear of the extension of democracy after the Reforms Acts of 1832 and 1867, scientific developments in the light of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and a beginning of decline in religious belief were affecting not only society but also its elite. All these transformations were at the very core of thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. They raised questions as to how Christianity, how morals and ethics themselves, would survive in such a mutable world. Much worse, the religious elite were troubled by fears that the expansion of atheism – and the loss of a form of spiritual hope – would undermine society which could then descend into chaos.
- 11 At the time of the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* in 1871, one of the main criticisms voiced was that it was a dangerous work precisely because it undermined, even more than any work before it, the belief in God. The elite were concerned that the masses would demand more democracy and that the uneducated many, being no longer guided – or rather ruled – by religion,

would endanger society. In the debates taking place at the Metaphysical Society, the empiricists believed that a “basis of morals” could be founded uniquely on science and that this would be enough – and even should be enough – for society. For the intuitionists, mostly religious thinkers and all Christians, this was a heresy and they rejected such a vision because, for them, men had the ability to grasp intuitive moral truths. Therefore, at the time, the division within the Metaphysical Society was the reflection of the division which was happening within Victorian society itself.

12 Sidgwick did not consider the opposition between science and faith as the real problem, as he felt this was missing the point. What the Christian Metaphysicians rejected was not science as such but the belief, as Bernard Lightman explains, that “the only valid knowledge was derived through empirical experience of a uniform natural world”¹¹, or in Thomas Henry Huxley’s terms in *Science and Christian Tradition* (1894), “scientific naturalism”. Such a belief was dangerous because it left a very small place for ethics and practically none for faith. Part of Sidgwick’s endeavour in the six papers he gave at the Metaphysical Society was to list the different methods available to understand ethics, to question the knowledge of beliefs, ethics and metaphysics and, then only, to touch upon how a valuable ethic could arise and how one should act according to it. We will see that he was very pessimistic about such a possibility ever being fulfilled. But unlike most of the other Metaphysicians, he tried to find a method of ethics – hence the title of his famous work, published in 1874, *The Methods of Ethics*.

13 Following a number of other young doubters at the time, it is Sidgwick’s loss of faith which gave rise to his philosophy. His first doubts concerning faith took place when he was still a student at Cambridge and such doubts must have been rather distressing for a young man coming from a staunch Anglican background. Henry Sidgwick had a rigorous honesty – a trait which would characterize him not only at the Metaphysical Society but throughout his life. He moved away from his faith, as soon as 1862, to later become a sceptic who over the years, eventually, came to accept theism¹². In 1862, the term agnostic had not yet been coined: it was T. H. Huxley who, in 1869, thought it up to describe his own views at the Metaphysical Society.¹³

14 However, his loss of faith made him feel uneasy and dishonest in his own life especially as he held a fellowship and tutorship in one of the Cambridge Colleges. He felt that he could not hold a position which forced him to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles of the Anglican faith at the same time as being in real doubt about his own faith (all College fellowships were restricted to members of the Church of England).¹⁴ In all honesty of conscience, in 1869 (incidentally, the same year as he joined the Metaphysical Society), he decided to resign his fellowship and tutorship. The episode is interesting as it shows Sidgwick’s moral honesty when others at the same time were not as scrupulous as he was. His college (Trinity) – showing that they had accepted his doubts in all faith – elected him to a lectureship allowing him to carry on as before but the agony over whether or not he should resign his fellowship gave him ample opportunity to reflect on ethics. As he confessed in his memoirs: “I may say that it was while struggling with the difficulty thence arising [concerning his Fellowship] that I went through a good deal of the thought that was ultimately systematised in the *The Methods of Ethics*”¹⁵.

15 As already said, Sidgwick is often considered as the philosopher who, coming after Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, was able to present a distinct type of utilitarianism. However, such a perception does not give full credit to

Sidgwick's book mentioned in the quotation above – *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). Sidgwick was concerned with moral theory and how the principle of utility could fit in with it. It is not a book on utilitarianism but it does consider utilitarianism as one of the methods of ethics. This work did not attract all the attention it should have, especially in the first half of the 20th century – or the wrong sort of attention mainly from Bradley in the late 1870's –, but it did appeal to a number of American thinkers in the second half of the 20th century (John Rawls especially) and has received a great deal of attention in the last decade, in the form of a rehabilitation of ethical hedonism (in the works of Roger Crisp¹⁶ and Fred Feldman¹⁷). It remains a fundamental work and a classic in moral philosophy, even if the conclusion – to which I will refer later – remains non-committal and ends up doing a disservice to the ideas presented in the book

¹⁶ As Schneewind has pointed out, *The Methods of Ethics* concentrates on knowledge and not on the practice of such a knowledge. The methodology used by Sidgwick, as the philosopher explained himself in the introduction to the 6th edition, was “the Socratic induction, elicited by interrogation”¹⁸. In the book itself, Sidgwick presents three methods of ethics – rational egoism (also known as egoistic hedonism), intuitionist morality, and universal hedonism (or John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism) and deals with each one to try and reach the best and most reliable form of ethical reasoning.

¹⁷ However much Sidgwick presented himself as an advocate of utilitarianism in his other writings, in *The Methods of Ethics*, he makes clear that the search for a “definite ethical system”¹⁹ cannot be reduced to the Utilitarian empirical and egoistic *felicity calculus* of Bentham or even to the ethical hedonism of John Stuart Mill. For Sidgwick, the utilitarian *credo* “that each man ought to seek the general happiness” was understood as a “readiness for absolute self-sacrifice”²⁰. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick does not oppose intuitionism (defended by the Cambridge moralists, such as Whewell) to rational egoism and utilitarianism, but he brings into light the unsolvable reconciliation of what these philosophies purport in terms of finding a workable ethic. In the end, and even though he never said so, this ended in a dualism of practical reason as it led to the irreconcilable separation of personal desires from the general happiness of the greatest number.

¹⁸ In the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics*, published in 1874, that unhappy conclusion led Sidgwick to end on a sombre note explaining that there is a “fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct” such that “the Cosmos of Duty is thus really reduced to a Chaos: and the prolonged effort of the human intellect to frame a perfect ideal of rational conduct is seen to have been foredoomed to inevitable failure”²¹. In the following editions, this capital passage was corrected and this is what we will see now through Sidgwick's papers given at the same period and on the same subject at the Metaphysical Society.

2. Sidgwick's papers given at the Metaphysical Society before the publication of *The Methods of Ethics* (1874)

- ¹⁹ Henry Sidgwick's six Metaphysical papers are all a key to understanding how he came to write and revise *The Methods of Ethics*. The first two entitled "The Verification of Beliefs" (n13, 27 April 1870) and "Utilitarianism" (n140, 16 Dec. 1873) were given before the publication of *The Methods of Ethics*, and are both linked to the book in the light of Sidgwick's loss of religious faith.
- ²⁰ Henry Sidgwick's first paper, "The Verification of Beliefs", was an attempt to demonstrate how to verify the certainty of a belief and ended in his description of his own scepticism. Sidgwick analysed the three main methods in use which could help verify or not belief: Intuitive or Cartesian verification, Discursive Verification allied to Inductive or Baconian verification and Social or Cumenical verification (based on common-sense). A fourth method, referred to as the Critical verification, was rejected, as it relied partly on intuition and Sidgwick could not accept that an intuition might be "indisputable".
- ²¹ If the empirical method was plainly too restrictive to verify any form of faith, the only way left was blending experience and intuition and this, in turn, could be validated by common-sense and experience. The paper was clearly written with no desire to impress – it was just very much an unaffected attempt to question his own beliefs and his search for truth. Sidgwick's appeal to different methods would then be used in *The Methods of Ethics*. It was published as an article in the *Contemporary Review* some time later, with very little amending except for the conclusion which stated the importance of combining methods in order to find a "theory of certitude".²² Another version of the article then appeared as the appendix of the essay "Criteria of Truth and Error"²³ published in *Mind* in 1900 and analysed in depth the three methods presented in the original Metaphysical Society paper. Again, in this conclusion, Sidgwick states – rather tellingly – that "the special characteristic of *my* philosophy is to keep the importance of the others in view"²⁴.
- ²² The second paper gives his understanding of Utilitarianism. He gives a clear statement of his position and qualifies his understanding of what a theory of ethics should be, just a few months before his main work was published. In so doing, he departs from the theories of both Bentham and Mill very clearly. Sidgwick describes the difficulty Utilitarians face in reconciling personal interest with public interest. Many of the momentous ideas in *The Methods of Ethics* are encapsulated in that small paper, making it a perfect introduction to Sidgwick's great work. He makes it clear that his type of Utilitarianism is "an ethical, and not a psychological doctrine." It is a "Universalistic Hedonism" which opposes "Egoistic Hedonism". He differs from Benthamism in the sense that for classical Utilitarians the good was identified with pleasure. Ideally, Sidgwick's form of Utilitarianism should, "supply a principle and method for determining the objective or material rightness of conduct", which is precisely what he tried and failed to achieve in *The Methods of Ethics*.
- ²³ The last paragraphs of the paper are used to "verify" whether what was said can be validated by experience and intuition (which is based on his reason, in his case), i.e. what Sidgwick had defined as the right method in his first paper (n18). What were perceived as opposed models of reasoning are, in his

thought, made to adjust to one another and not to oppose each other. Sidgwick concludes that Utilitarianism should lead to a “theory of right conduct,” but he is unable to go further as this would mean that a moral and political obligation could be imposed on society to subordinate their personal happiness to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This predicament is considered more fully in *The Methods of Ethics* even if he is unable to reach an adequate answer.

- 24 Already here, in these two papers, Sidgwick can be seen as searching for a theory of knowledge and a theory of ethics in the light of the development of his moral philosophy. The papers which came after 1874, were all, as we shall see, attempts to rethink these ideas in the light of the reception of *The Methods of Ethics*.

3. The four other papers in view of the criticism of F. H. Bradley (1877) and of the second edition (1877) and third edition (1884) of *The Methods of Ethics*

- 25 At this stage, what is quite striking is that neither in these two papers nor in the *The Methods of Ethics* does Sidgwick deal with Idealism. As F. Hayward wrote in a 1901 article entitled the “The True Significance of Sidgwick’s Ethics”,

In view of the influential position of Oxford thought, it is astounding that a five-edition treatise on the leading methods of Ethics should devote only a few scattered remarks (mainly footnotes) to the most important of contemporary systems, and that Idealism, so far as dealt with in the text, should be treated merely as a form, and not, apparently, a leading form of Intuitionism. For every other system he has a word of praise; every other system he treats with seriousness and respect; his treatment of this by means of a few *en passant* strictures, is perfunctory and inadequate. No reader of the “Methods” unacquainted with contemporary events would imagine that, at the time Sidgwick wrote, Idealism in Britain was a powerful, growing and apparently victorious system of thought; the inference would rather be that the prevailing system was a crude Intuitionism, after which, as a good second, came Egoism. To the students of the future, Sidgwick’s book will therefore convey an altogether wrong impression on nineteenth century thought, and the error will not be removed by an examination of the same author’s “Outline of the History of ethics” in which the work of Green is represented by less than two pages of exposition.²⁵

- 26 And indeed, how is it possible that Sidgwick denied Idealism its true place – especially considering his honesty in his writings and his apparent fairness towards ideas? The four other papers published after the publication of the *Methods of Ethics* give a beginning of an answer.
- 27 The four other papers are all useful to see how Sidgwick progressed in his thoughts. His third paper is the only one which was given between the publication of the first edition and the second edition of *The Methods of Ethics* and before F. H. Bradley’s critical pamphlet on Sidgwick’s ideas.
- 28 The aim of the third paper – “The Theory of Evolution in its Application to Practice” (13 July 1875, n[um]36) – was to argue that evolution cannot do more than describe the origin of ethical tensions. Once again, the main issues at

stake for Sidgwick were the fundamental questions of ethics, “the essential nature of Good or Well-being”. He takes great care to distinguish Charles Darwin’s views on the evolution of ethics (best developed in his *Descent of Man* in 1871) from Herbert Spencer’s, but ultimately concludes that neither theory, inasmuch as they are empirical, can really help us solve moral problems.

29 Sidgwick offers a perceptive analysis of the relationship between evolution and ethics, anticipating key distinctions that would be made more forcefully by later thinkers on these subjects. His main argument is that whereas an evolutionary account of the origins of morality may be interesting and plausible – and perhaps even true – such an account cannot ultimately solve the philosophical issues of ethics, since the various views of ethical theory must all be equally the product of gradual evolution. In an interesting passage, Sidgwick alludes to the problem of social inequality which was a traditional moral concern: according to some evolutionists, such as Spencer, this kind of inequality was simply a matter of the natural increase of “heterogeneity” which was the fundamental feature of evolutionary progress. As a result, such inequality was assumed to be acceptable to some (Spencer is targeted here). Sidgwick rejected this kind of “social Darwinism” by noting that some ancient societies were more socially unequal than modern ones, and that therefore social inequality, as such, is not something that evolution (or nature) inevitably progresses towards: our attitude to the best social order “cannot be determined by any deductions from the doctrine of evolution.” Ultimately, the limited influence of evolution on our ideas of the good arise because the study of evolution is an empirical science, and by definition, says Sidgwick, “all such theories relate only to what is, not to what ought to be . . .”. While Darwinists may argue that ethical standards arise because of their effect on survival, and Spencerian evolutionists suggest that they tend to maximize happiness in a population, neither school can establish the “essential nature of Good or well-being.” Sidgwick concludes that even if we were to accept Darwin’s plausible account of the evolution of morals as being the result of natural selection operating “between competing tribes” (or, as modern evolutionists would call it, group selection), we would still be left with a quandary. Individuals have a natural, evolved tendency to maximize benefits to themselves that conflicts with a natural, evolved tendency to serve the interests of their particular group. Evolution can explain the origin of this tension, but it cannot, in the end, resolve it. In this paper, Sidgwick was content to set the limits on evolutionary thought, and to preserve a space for moral philosophy to analyze and truly address the problems that science can only, at best, describe.

30 When Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics* came out in 1874, a number of reviews were published on the book and it received quite a huge amount of attention – included unwanted ones, such as F. H. Bradley’s. Bradley published his own *Ethical Studies* in 1876 in which, having had no time to fully focus on Sidgwick’s own work, he wrote four pages on it and added a note in Essay III, stating that “on the subject of Hedonism, I can not honestly say more than that he seems to me to have left the question exactly where he found it”.²⁶ Sidgwick’s very even temper was sorely tempted as can be perceived in his unusually harsh review of Bradley’s *Ethical Studies* published in *Mind* in 1876. Bradley responded, in 1877, with the very critical *Mr Sidgwick’s Hedonism: An examination of the main argument of The Methods of Ethics*²⁷.

31 Sidgwick left the confrontation with Bradley there but both in his following papers at the Metaphysical Society and in the revised edition of his *Methods of Ethics*, certain modifications took place – for one thing the famous negative

conclusion already mentioned above was removed and an attempt to solve the impossible reconciliation between classical utilitarianism and the needs of the community was tackled more clearly – but, one has to admit, just as unsuccessfully.

32 The four other papers given from 1878 to 1880, dealt with the very same problems. In his fourth paper – “The Relation of Psychogony to Metaphysics and Ethics”, 15 January 1878, n°76 (which came after the publication of the 2nd edition of *The Methods of Ethics* and after F. H. Bradley’s criticism) – Henry Sidgwick follows the same line he had presented in his previous paper, on evolution and ethics (paper n°56): the scientific study of the origins of a phenomenon cannot determine the ultimate validity of philosophical positions related to it. Here Sidgwick considers the study of the origin of the mind (psychogony) and concludes that it does not affect the fundamental questions of metaphysics and ethics.²⁸ Sidgwick’s paper is a deconstruction of psychogony and of all the types of sciences which purport to use only empirical evidence “to acquire knowledge of physical laws” and for which the only thing which matters is “the degree of dependence of mind on matter.”

33 He concludes that the vexed question of whether ideas are innate (the view of the intuitionists) or derived (the view of the empiricists) cannot be answered by the study of how either view originated. Even if a rigorous scientific demonstration could be given, “in neither case does it seem that any connection can be made out between the investigation of the origin of the belief and the establishment of its validity.” Similarly, applied to the origin of conscience, psychogony does not throw any light upon the conduct of men and therefore ends up confusing the issue when the real questions of life are addressed not by science or by using any type of historical method, but by philosophy.

34 Sidgwick’s fifth paper – “Incoherence of Empirical Philosophy”, 14 January 1879, n°83 – concerned, once again, the usefulness of accepting the results of empirical philosophy, while noting the fundamental impossibility of proving its validity. Having evolved over the years on the question, it is not empiricism that he rejects, as he declares that he believes in “the triumphant march of modern physical investigation” as a means to understand knowledge. So what type of empiricism does he reject? His first two papers, “The Verification of Belief (paper n°8) and “Utilitarianism” (paper n°40), give a clue here as the main problem for Sidgwick is empirical *philosophy* and not empiricism as such. For him, empirical philosophy can give certain answers concerning the way in which ideas have originated in our mind, but it can never be a valid course to seek what knowledge is, as the source of all knowledge for empirical philosophy is based on experience. For Sidgwick, experience cannot be used on its own. Empirical philosophy is therefore a philosophy which “aims at establishing a general theory of what *can* be known [□] by which we may distinguish real from apparent knowledge.” This is both a mistake and a contradiction for Sidgwick for whom the first “criterion” of knowledge cannot be accepted as knowledge if it is not based on experience – the experience of something of which one cannot have had previous experience. In such a light, the only solution to find a first criterion is to follow the intuitionist school, opposed to the empirical one, which uses “General Consent.” Here, however, Sidgwick does not refer to innate ideas which are generally what the intuitive school accepts as fundamental.

35 What looked initially like a personal reflection on the validation of beliefs and the understanding of knowledge, slowly takes a new meaning. What

Sidgwick is doing in this fifth paper is to refute and deconstruct the empirical philosophy, using its own tools. He challenges empirical philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill, who use such initial questions as “what is immediately known” to defend their views, to which Sidgwick simply answers “what is immediately known”. In the end, it is a full blown attack on empirical philosophy and what it defends. For Sidgwick, there is a fundamental incoherence in the idea that something one can “immediately know” something on which to construct a system of knowledge. If this were the case, it would mean for Sidgwick that there would be those who knew, as opposed to those who did not and this would not only be morally wrong but, plainly, unacceptable.

36 More than any other, is it a staunch defence of epistemological intuition over any other school of philosophy. What comes out is the care to be given to clear and honest reasoning, based on common sense, and that this is the true path to find an ethic of conduct.

37 The reaction of those present was rather strong, as Sidgwick later related in a letter to Huxley’s son:

I remember that on one occasion when I had read to the Society an essay on the “Incoherence of Empiricism”, I looked forward with some little anxiety to his [Huxley’s] criticisms; and when they came, I felt that my anxiety had not been superfluous. He “went for” the weak points of my argument in half a dozen trenchant sentences, of which I shall not forget the impression. It was hard hitting, though perfectly courteous and fair.²⁹

38 Leslie Stephen, who had also attended the meeting, gave his side of the story to Clifford: “We had a rather good meeting at the Metaphysical, in which he [Huxley] trod rather heavily upon Sidgwick’s toes, and Sidgwick displayed that reflective candour which in him becomes at times a little irritating. A man has no right to be so fair to his opponents.”³⁰

39 Henry Sidgwick’s last paper – “The Scope of Metaphysics”, 10 February 1880, n^o2 – was given a few months before the dissolution of the Metaphysical Society. It dealt with the definition of Metaphysics but came too late for a Society which had been unable to agree on a common definition for more than eleven years. Sidgwick was obviously attempting to revive debate all over again as the Metaphysical Society was dying.

40 In this last paper, he considered “Metaphysics” as distinguished from “Physics”, “Philosophy”, “Psychology” and “Logic.” The aim of the distinction between the terms is to show how Metaphysics is understood by different schools of thinkers and what, in his view, Metaphysics is not. For Henry Sidgwick the quest for Metaphysics can only be based on a combination of methods and that none can be completely rejected, especially not “reflective observation and induction”. In fact, what Sidgwick wanted was to investigate what we can know, or what was defined years after as the work of “epistemology”.³¹

41 In the end, what was most important is that, for Sidgwick, the only way to reach certainty was to accept that intuition and experience could be both used – that intuition could be valid if verified by experience and common-sense. And this is what he most certainly did at the Metaphysical Society. But where does this leave us with Sidgwick’s refusal to give Idealism its true place? In what ways can these six papers shed a new light on Sidgwick’s thought and especially on his utilitarianism in view of the changes in society which were taking place at the time?

5. Sidgwick, a reappraisal ?

42 In his 1901 article on Sidgwick, F. H. Hayward noted that,

Though never consciously unfair to Idealism, he [Sidgwick] felt himself out of sympathy with it, though, [□] there were strong idealist undercurrents in his own mind. In his “Methods” he never did full justice, even critically, to its point of view. He occasionally refers to it: he criticizes a few of its minor characteristics, but he never faces the weighty metaphysical arguments of Green and Green’s successors.³²

43 I believe that in view of Sidgwick’s papers at the Metaphysical Society, this appears very true: Sidgwick refused to accept Idealism because it challenged his spiritual beliefs. It is all the more surprising as Green’s idealism would have helped him solve the impossible conclusion he reached in the *Methods of Ethics*.

44 In the end, by not letting go of his desire to establish his ethics on a form of empirical basis, by the impossibility to reconcile personal interests with the common good and by refusing to consider an appeal to a greater Absolute, Sidgwick ended his *Methods of Ethics* in a very negative way – even a dispirited one. What is most surprising is that Idealism could have been a solution to his predicament because, as I have attempted to show in this paper, Sidgwick’s philosophy was challenging classical utilitarianism and hard-edged empiricism.

45 Idealism also offered a form of optimism which is lacking in Sidgwick’s work. One cannot help wondering why, in view of the numerous and penetrating exchanges between Sidgwick and Green, Sidgwick did not accept Green’s charge that his universal Hedonism was implausible.³³

46 As Jerome Schneewind concludes on Sidgwick’s thought:

The *Methods* centers on an examination of the accepted moral opinions and modes of thought of common sense. It involves a rejection of empiricism and dismisses the issue of determinism as irrelevant. It emphasizes an attempt to reconcile positions seen by utilitarians as deeply opposed to each other. It finds ethical egoism as reasonable as utilitarianism; and it concludes with arguments to show that, because of this, no full reconciliation of the various rational methods for reaching moral decisions is possible and therefore that the realm of practical reason is probably incoherent.³⁴

47 I would be less severe and say that perhaps Sidgwick’s greatest challenge in the *Methods of Ethics* and in his papers given at the Metaphysical Society was to try and give Utilitarianism an Intuitionist basis. By bringing together these two ethical methods, which were opposed, he was seeking to defend a revamped “utilitarianism”, that is a form of utilitarianism which would incorporate a self-effacing morality. That he failed is another problem, but he did try and his six papers display his agony in turning the problem around over and again.

48 The insolubility of the fundamental problem of ethics hunted Sidgwick in the dualism of practical reason. In a letter to his friend Dakyns, he explained:

□ You know I want intuitions for Morality; at least one (of Love) is required to supplement the utilitarian morality, and I do not see why, if we are to have one, we may not

have others. I have worked away vigorously at the selfish morality, but I cannot persuade myself, except by trusting intuition, that Christian self-sacrifice is really a happier life than classical insouciance”.³⁵

49 His inability to find a path between classical virtue, Christian morality and universal hedonism did not make him turn to Idealism because it went against “the historical search for the first principles of right action” – which is precisely what Sidgwick was attempting to do. Idealism presented – in its different forms – such a radically new kind of moral theory that it confined Sidgwick to a Victorian quest for moral philosophy, a very conservative one, no longer suited to the new demands of a changing society.

50 In the end, Sidgwick altogether abandoned the idea of finding an ethical theory and in a very dispirited letter to his friend Dakyns, wrote:

Ethics is losing its interest for me rather, as the insolubility of its fundamental problem is impressed on me.³⁶

51 Nevertheless – and in spite of that very pessimistic reflection – Sidgwick still deserves to be read by both utilitarians and their critics for the sophistication of his “toned-down” utilitarianism but always bearing in mind that he was, in a way, the first of the true Victorian Philosophers and the last of the *Victorian* Utilitarians.³⁷

Notes

1 Catherine Audard has made the work and ideas of Henry Sidgwick available to a larger audience in France, see: Catherine Audard. *Anthologie historique de l'utilitarisme. L'utilitarisme Victorien : John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick et G. E. Moore* (1838-1903). Paris : PUF, tome 2, 1999, pp. 159-233. See also : Catherine Audard, “La tradition utilitariste : Bentham, Mill et Sidgwick”, chapitre 2 dans Alain Renaut (ed.). *Les critiques de la modernité politique*. Paris : Calman-Lévy, 1999, pp. 93-102.

2 Sébastien Gandon □ Mathieu Marion, “L'idéalisme britannique : histoire et actualité”, *Philosophiques*, Volume 36, numéro 1, spring 2009, pp. 3-34.

3 Jean-Paul Rosaye. *F. H. Bradley et l'idéalisme britannique. Les années de formation (1865-1876)*. Arras : Artois Presses Université, 2012.

4 Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, Henry Alford, Walter Bagehot, Arthur James Balfour, Alfred Barratt, Alfred Barry, Matthew P. W. Boulton, John Charles Bucknill, Campbell George, William Benjamin Carpenter, Richard William Church, Andrew Clark, Rev. Robert Clarke, William □ Clifford, Rev. J. D. Dalgairns, C. J. Ellicott, Alexander Campbell Fraser, James Anthony Froude, Francis Aidan Gasquet, William Ewart Gladstone, Alexander Grant, Sir Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff, William Rathbone Greg, George Grove, Sir William Withey Gull, Frederic Harrison, James Hinton, Shadworth Hodgson, Richard Holt Hutton, Thomas Henry Huxley, James □ howles, Robert Lowe, Sir John Lubbock, Edmund Lushington, William Connor Magee, Henry Edward Manning, James Martineau, Frederick Denison Maurice, St George Mivart, John Morley, J. B. Mozley, Roden No□, Roundell Palmer, Mark Pattison, Frederick Pollock, Charles Pritchard, George Croom Robertson, John Ruskin, Lord Arthur Russell, John Robert Seeley, Henry Sidgwick, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, Leslie Stephen, James Sully, James Joseph Sylvester, Alfred Tennyson, Connop Thirlwall, William Thomson, John Tyndall, C. Barnes Upton, William George Ward.

5 F. H. Bradley. *Mr Sidgwick's Hedonism: An examination of the main argument of the Methods of Ethics*. London: Henry S. □ng, 1877.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Jerome B. Schneewind. *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (1977). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

- 8 Stefan Collini, "My role and their duties: Sidgwick as a Philosopher, Professor and Public Moralist" in Rodd Harrison (ed.). *Henry Sidgwick*. Oxford: OUP, 2011, pp. 9-50.
- 9 Michel Terestchenko, "Henry Sidgwick le cosmos de la moralité réduit au chaos", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 2004, 1, n°41, pp. 101-28. See also: Rozenn Martinoia, "Une triste fin pour un si grand travail" La révision de l'utilitarisme par Henry Sidgwick, *OEconomia*, 2011, pp. 171-93.
- 10 David Boucher & Andrew Vincent. *British Idealism: a Guide for the perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012, p. 4. On British Idealism and Idealists, see also William Mander. *British Idealism: A History*. Oxford: OUP, 2011.
- 11 Bernard Lightman, 'Science at the Metaphysical Society: Defining Knowledge in the 1870s', in *The Age of Scientific Naturalism: John Tyndall and His Contemporaries*, ed. Michael Reidy and Bernard Lightman (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014) (yet unpublished).
- 12 The Theist, as opposed to the Deist, does not refuse to believe in God, but, for him, the demonstration of any form of revelation is subordinated to belief. It is often a very detached form of religion.
- 13 See Huxley's explanation for the coining of the term in the following article: T. H. Huxley, "Agnosticism" in: T. H. Huxley. *Science and Christian Tradition*. London, Macmillan, 1894, p. 239.
- 14 The Universities Tests Act of 1871 allowed non-Anglicans to take lay academic degrees and to hold lay academic or collegiate offices. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge Act of 1877 later established that clerical restrictions on the tenure of almost all headships and fellowships of colleges was no longer a requirement. See Albert Venn Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion during the 19th Century* (London: Macmillan, 1919), Appendix, note III, "University Tests, (A) Movement for Abolition from 1772".
- 15 Arthur Sidgwick and Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick. *Henry Sidgwick: a Memoir*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1906, 38.
- 16 Roger Crisp. *Reasons and the Good*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- 17 Fred Feldman. *Pleasure and the Good Life. Concerning the Nature, Varieties and Plausibility of Hedonism*. Oxford: OUP, 2004.
- 18 Henry Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics* (7th edition). London: Macmillan and Co, 1907, p. xix.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Henry Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1874, p. 473.
- 22 Henry Sidgwick, "Verification of Beliefs," *Contemporary Review* 17 (July 1871), pp. 582-90.
- 23 Henry Sidgwick, "Criteria of Truth and Error," *Mind* 10 no. 33 (January 1900), pp. 8-25. Also reprinted in Henry Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Kant and other Philosophical Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1905), pp. 430-60 and the appendix, pp. 461-7.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 467.
- 25 F. H. Hayward, "The True Significance of Sidgwick's Ethics", *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 11, n°2, Jan. 1901, p. 177.
- 26 F. H. Bradley. *Ethical Studies*. London: H. S. Long, 1876, footnote 1, p. 114 ; see also pp. 114-7.
- 27 F. H. Bradley. *Mr Sidgwick's Hedonism: An examination of the main argument of the Methods of Ethics*. London: Henry S. Long, 1877.
- 28 For Sidgwick, the term refers to the work of G. H. Lewes, in his book *The Physical Basis of Mind*, the second series of which had just been published in 1877. G. H. Lewes, *The Physical Basis of Mind. Being the Second Series of Problems of Life and Mind* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877). Lewes spelled the neologism as "psychogeny."
- 29 Leonard Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1900), vol. 1, p. 345.

30 Frederick William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1906), pp. 333-4.

31 This paper was never published but it led to another paper given by Gasquet two months later entitled “The Relations of Metaphysics to the Rest of Philosophy” (paper n°94) – the last paper to be read at the Metaphysical Society.

32 F. H. Hayward, “The True Significance of Sidgwick’s Ethics”, *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 11, n°2, Jan. 1901, pp. 176-7.

33 On the link between Green and Sidgwick, see: David O. Brink. *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T. H. Green*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 114-24.

34 Jerome B. Schneewind, “Sidgwick and the Cambridge Moralists” in Bart Schultz (ed.). *Essays on Henry Sidgwick* (1992). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 p. 94.

35 Arthur Sidgwick & Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick. *Henry Sidgwick: a Memoir*. Macmillan and Co., 1906, p. 90

36 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

37 He was also, in line with his moral philosophy, interested in all kinds of subjects relating to the life and death of men. His interest in psychic manifestations and supernormal phenomena revealed another side of Sidgwick – a side which was developed fully when he founded the Society for Psychical Research in 1882.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Catherine Marshall, « Sidgwick’s utilitarianism in the context of the rise of Idealism: a reappraisal », *Revue d’études benthamiennes* [En ligne], 12 | 2013, mis en ligne le 10 décembre 2013, consulté le 09 décembre 2017. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudes-benthamiennes/678> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudes-benthamiennes.678

Auteur

Catherine Marshall

Université de Cergy Pontoise, IEP Grand Paris ouest, laboratoire CICC EA 2529

Droits d’auteur

Droits réservés