

ON SIDGWICK'S RECONCILIATION OF ETHICAL THEORIES

The burden of the present paper is to examine Sidgwick's attempt to reconcile the differences between ethical intuitionism and hedonism on the one hand and egoism and utilitarianism on the other. Sidgwick reduces all ethical theories to three, namely ethical intuitionism, ethical egoism and utilitarianism. The present paper deliberately avoids the discussion concerning how he reduces all ethical theories to three, because this will form the basis of my different papers.

On the question as to whether the rightness or wrongness of a conduct is ascertained on the basis of the goodness or badness of the consequences of a conduct, there are two answers. According to one answer, the rightness or wrongness of a conduct is ascertained on the basis of the fact as to whether or not it conforms to certain unconditionally binding rules.¹ It strictly avoids the suggestion that the rightness or wrongness of a conduct is ascertained on the goodness or badness of its consequences. This means that the goodness or badness of the consequences of a conduct does not form the part of the definition of its rightness or wrongness. For instance, a man who speaks the lie intends to produce false belief in the listener. But it is held that the characteristic of falsity in lying is only taken into consideration to decide the rightness or wrongness of this act. Besides this, there are other characteristics also, e.g., undesirableness of the consequences. But the latter does not form any part of the definition of lying. This theory is known as deontology; Sidgwick sometimes calls such theory also intuitionism.

According to the second answer, the rightness or wrongness of a conduct is ascertained on the basis of the goodness or badness of its consequences. It strictly avoids the suggestion that the rightness or wrongness of a conduct is ascertained on the basis of the fact as to whether or not it conforms to certain unconditionally binding rules. This means that the goodness or badness of the consequences of a conduct forms part of the definition of its rightness or wrongness. For instance, when a man speaks the lie, he intends to produce false belief in the listener. But it is not the case that the characteristic of falsity in lying is taken into

consideration to ascertain its rightness or wrongness. On the contrary, the undesirableness of its consequences forms part of the definition of its rightness or wrongness. This theory is known as teleology; and hedonism is a form of it. Hedonism maintains that the pleasantness of the consequences of a conduct determines its rightness and painfulness its wrongness.

Again, on the question as to whether the greatest pleasure or happiness of the doer determines the rightness or wrongness of his conduct, there are two answers. According to one school, a conduct will be right if it produces the greatest pleasure in the doer and wrong if it does not. We may define it negatively and say that even for the slightest increase in the happiness of the agent, the maximum happiness of others can be sacrificed. This theory is known as egoistic hedonism.

The other school maintains that the maximum amount of happiness for the maximum number of people determines the rightness of a conduct. This theory lays much stress upon the fact that the total results must be the greatest amount of happiness. Sidgwick points out that the net balance of pleasure over pain is to be sought; for him it is immaterial whether it is obtained from the increase of the happiness of the agent or from the increase of happiness in others. This theory may justify the fact that if an increase of pleasure in a peasant gives rise to the increase of pleasure in the balance and such an increase in a king does not do that, then the farmer is to be preferred to the latter. This theory is known as utilitarianism.

Sidgwick makes an attempt to reconcile the rival claims between intuitionism and hedonism, and also between egoism and utilitarianism. In what follows, I shall present in short his arguments and then go on to examine them.

He takes up the case of ethical intuitionism and hedonism and suggests that duties and virtues which the former claims to be self-evident are not so. They, on the contrary, are derived from certain ultimate and absolute ethical principles, and those principles, according to Sidgwick, are self-evident. These are principles of prudence, benevolence and justice. The principle of prudence states that it is the duty of a man to obtain one's greatest good rather than to obtain his lesser good. The principle of benevolence states that each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other

individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him. The principle of justice states that 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' He again explains the principle of justice as follows: First, 'It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment.' Second, 'We cannot judge an action to be right for A and wrong for B, unless we can find in the natures or circumstances of the two some difference which we can regard as a reasonable ground for difference in their duties.'

Sidgwick maintains that ethical principles mentioned above form the rational basis of hedonism. The principle of prudence forms the rational basis of ethical egoism and the principle of benevolence and justice form the rational basis of utilitarianism. With these presumptions Sidgwick claims to reconcile between ethical intuitionism and hedonism. Sidgwick writes:

"We have found that the common antithesis between intuitionism and utilitarianism must be entirely discarded: Since such abstract moral principles as we can admit to be really self-evident are not only not incompatible with a utilitarian system, but even seem required to furnish a rational basis for such a system."³

Sidgwick gives another argument to corroborate his claim of reconciliation. He argues that when a person finds himself in a fix in deciding which of the different courses of action is his duty, he does not consult the conflicting theories of duty for deciding his action, but his course of action is decided by referring to the utilities which are expected of each of the courses of action in question. He takes the case of truth speaking as an instance to illustrate this point. Usually it is accepted that it is a duty of everyone to speak the truth. But when a situation comes in which speaking of truth seems to produce a bad result then one decides his duty not by referring to the rules which prescribe duties, but by referring to the utility which the course of action in question is expected to produce. If giving an information to an ailing man is expected to give him a shock which he may not be able to tolerate, it is always thought better to give him a false report when he asks about it.

As far as egoism and utilitarianism are concerned, we have seen that the principles of these theories seem to Sidgwick to be equally self-evident. But he finds them to be mutually inconsistent. The principle of egoism says that the highest end of human life is the maximum happiness of the agent. The principle of utilitarianism, on the other hand maintains that the end of human life is the net balance of pleasure over pain whether it is attained by increasing pleasure in the agent or in others. But these two principles seem to be mutually inconsistent. In order to save his view of absolutism, which states that if two principles conflict, either one of them is to be rejected or modified in such a way that the conflict is resolved, he has to take recourse to either of these alternatives. But as both the principles are self-evident, he does not seem inclined to reject any one of them.

Hence, he examines a brand of utilitarianism which maintains that the utilitarian code is the command of God which enjoins upon men to promote general happiness. Those who obey his commands are rewarded and those who violate them are punished. Sidgwick points out that if one is convinced that there is an omnipotent Being who commands men and intends to furnish and reward them, then he does not feel the need of further inducement to plan his life on the utilitarian principle. But an enquiry into the necessity of such postulate in matter is very important, because 'by the result of such an examination will be determined as we now see, the very important question whether ethical science can be constructed on an independent basis; or whether it is forced to borrow a fundametal and indispenable premiss from Theology or some similar source.'⁴ He compares this postulate with some clear and certain moral intuitions and comes to the point that the postulate of such a Being is not as clear and certain as genuine moral intuitions. But he says :

Those who hold that the edifice of physical Science is really constructed of conclusions logically inferred from self-evident premises may reasonably demand that any practical judgements claiming philosophic certainty should be based on are equally firm foundation. If, on the other hand, we find that in our supposed knowledge of the world of nature propositions are commonly taken to be universally true, which yet seem to rest on no other grounds than that we have a strong

disposition to accept them, and that they are indispensable to the systematic coherence of our beliefs,—it will be more difficult to reject a similarly supposed assumption in ethics, without opening the door of universal scepticism.⁵

This seems to suggest that if natural sciences accept certain postulates which command universal acceptance although they are based on a strong disposition to accept them, there will be no mistake in accepting certain postulates in ethics even if they are not self-evident but are based on such dispositions.

To sum up, Sidgwick seems to suggest three arguments in settling the controversy in question. (a) Prudence, benevolence and justice which are self evident ethical principles from the linking point between ethical intuitionism and hedonism. (b) Since utility is the deciding factor of conflicts raised with regard to any duty or virtue ethical intuitionism instead of being opposed to hedonism gets support from the latter. (c) The postulate of an omnipotent Being resolves the opposition between ethical egoism and utilitarianism.

We propose to examine these arguments in the following pages.

Are prudence, benevolence and justice really self-evident? Here we are reminded of the two models of the criterion of self-evidence which Sidgwick seems to apply throughout in the *Methods*. We will begin with the model of criterion which states four conditions the fulfilment of which alone makes a proposition self-evident. They are : one, terms of the propositions must be clear and precise. Two, the proposition must be distinct. Three, the proposition must be mutually consistent with other self-evident propositions. Four, the proposition must command 'universal' or 'general consent'. Let us see whether the principle of benevolence propounded by Sidgwick fulfils these conditions. For discussion's sake let us put this principle again in its form. '...each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him.'⁶

The term in which it is stated cannot be said to be clear and precise. We may ask : who is that other individual whose good

we are morally bound to regard as much as our own? It may be presumed that by this Sidgwick means every human individual, whether he be a friend or an enemy, a compatriot or a foreigner, a civilised man or a savage. He points out that it may fairly be urged that practically each man ought chiefly to concern himself with promoting the good of a limited number of human beings, and that generally in proportion to the closeness of his connection with him, but he urges that this may be done 'even with a view to universal good.' But the question is: what about animals? While examining utilitarianism, Sidgwick considers who the "all" are whose happiness is to be taken into account. He seems to give a definite statement maintaining that "all" does not exclude pleasure of any sentient being. Still, instead of this definite statement, we cannot conceive that Sidgwick would have regarded it as a self-evident proposition that we ought not to prefer our own lesser good to the greater good of a beast or bird or fish or insect, however unreasonable it might be to exclude them from the principle of benevolence. We venture to say that when he formulates this principle he does not bestow on the question of animal happiness that 'careful-reflection' which is the second condition he states of a self-evident proposition. Further, this principle does not fulfil even the third condition mentioned above. In this connection, we have to consider the relations between the principle of benevolence and the two other principles of prudence and justice, which he regards to be self-evident. He formulates the principle of prudence as 'one ought to aim at one's own good'. It is obvious that this principle is not consistent with that of benevolence without an important qualification, namely, that one ought to aim at one's own good on the whole only when it does not conflict with the greater good of someone else.

The principle of justice is stated in the form that '... it cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment. This proposition is true, but that is so because it is tautological and the truth expressed by it applies not only to rightness of acts but to all other ethical concepts. This principle is not inconsistent with the principle of

benevolence, but the latter however derives no support from it. According to the former principle, it may very well be right for each person to prefer his own lesser good to the greater good of another, although it could not be right for one and wrong for another similar person in similar circumstances to do so. Further, the principle of benevolence does not seem to command universal or general consent. Those who believe in egoistic hedonism will, at least, not give their consent to this principle of hedonism, because they think that the rightness of a conduct is decided by the maximum happiness of the agent himself. Again, those who believe in perfectionism, that is to say, those who maintain the end of life to be the perfection of the self will also not give their consent to this principle. The above analysis of different self-evident intuitions makes it abundantly clear that they do not fulfil the conditions which Sidgwick himself has put forward for a self-evident proposition.

When we judge his self-evident ethical principles on the second model of the criterion for self-evidence, i.e., unprovability, we see that in this sense such intuitions may be self-evident but in that case they may become mere dogmatic assumptions. Now, the claim of reconciliation based on such ethical principles cannot escape the charge of being dogmatic. Thus, the argument based on the self-evidence principles which work as intermediary between common sense (ethical intuitionism, ethical principles and hedonism) is not tenable. Our analysis has made it clear that these principles are mere dogmatic assumptions which, instead of helping the reconciliation, make even hedonism dogmatic.

(b) Sidgwick's argument, that utilitarianism resolves the conflict which occurs with regard to duties and virtues and so this thing instead of being opposed to ethical intuitionism gives support to it, also does not seem to be tenable. He has used the term 'utilitarianism' for a theory of universalistic hedonism. But in his analysis of the morality of common sense what he seems to prove is mere utility. Whenever common moral opinions conflict, we resolve them by referring to their utility. But just by showing that ultimately, in ethical intuitionism, appeal is made to utility, he does not establish the point that utilitarianism gives support to ethical

intuitionism and thereby concerned, instead of being universal happiness, may be social well being.

(c) As far as the reconciliation between egoism and utilitarianism is concerned, first, we would like to make it clear that the direct opposition of egoism is not with utilitarianism as Sidgwick thinks of, but with altruism. In order to make it clear, we may put the principles of these theories in the following form. Egoism says that the end of human life is the maximum pleasure of the agent. Even for the slightest increase of happiness of the agent, the maximum happiness of others can be ignored. Altruism holds that the end of human life is the maximum happiness for maximum number of people. Even for the slightest increase of happiness of others, the maximum happiness of the agent can be ignored. Utilitarianism, unlike these two, maintains that the end of human life is the increase of net balance of pleasure over pain. This theory is indifferent to the fact as to whether this net balance of pleasure is increased by an increase of happiness of others. Thus, an egoist holds that it is his duty to ignore the happiness of others, provided it does not affect his own. An altruist holds that it is his duty to ignore his own happiness, provided it does not affect the happiness of others. Utilitarian holds that it is his duty to consider the net amount of happiness and can ignore his own happiness or the happiness of others as the case may be. This analysis of egoism, altruism and utilitarianism shows that the direct opposition of egoism is with altruism and not with utilitarianism. Still the opposition between egoism and utilitarianism can never be denied. The conflict occurs when an egoist sticks to do something which does not tend to increase the net amount of pleasure. Hence, the problem of reconciliation between egoism and utilitarianism, although mitigated, yet exists. We have seen while discussing Sidgwick's view on the issue that he shows an inclination to accept a postulate from theology in order to surmount this difficulty. The reasoning which he gives to justify this postulate is that in natural sciences also we make certain postulates on similar grounds. Let us compare Sidgwick's postulate of a benevolent and powerful being who so commands that we are led to act benevolently, with a postulate of science, such as, 'if two apparently similar things we have differently in apparently similar

situations, there must be some difference in the things or the situations which will bring the difference in behaviour under a general law'. It is clear that if we act on such a postulate, we will look for such a difference, whereas if we act as if the postulate is false, then we shall very soon give up looking for it. Now, if we look for it, we may increase our knowledge. Thus, the justification for making postulates in science is clear. As far as Sidgwick's postulate is concerned, this cannot be justified as a means of increasing our knowledge or making our beliefs mere coherent. Instead of making our beliefs coherent, it leaves the two self-evident intuitions of prudence and benevolence as mutually inconsistent. Nevertheless, it adds to our difficulty when such a benevolent and powerful God allows such mutually inconsistent principles to be there. Hence, Sidgwick's postulate cannot be justified on the basis of increasing knowledge and theoretical coherence. If it can be justified, it can be justified only as a practical postulate. But, since in science we do not make practical postulates, the analogy of science which Sidgwick has used here does not seem to be relevant.

Thus, we may safely conclude that the transference of the idea of a scientific postulate to the postulate of ethics is not tenable.

Another point which adds to our difficulty and which is not less important than the above is the admission of a theological postulate in ethics. Here we will like to refer to Sidgwick's aims and ambitions to restore the autonomy of ethics. He starts with an ambition to safeguard this autonomy and in order to fulfil their ambition, he deliberately avoids any discussion of psychology and theology and of any other discipline. When we accept a postulate of theology and apply it to solve a knotty problem of the antithesis between egoism and utilitarianism, it is surprising how Sidgwick could then safeguard the autonomy of ethics. Ethics being an autonomous study and an independent science, as he wants to make it, becomes dependent on theology. It is just astonishing that a thinker of the stature of Sidgwick has missed this point, and if he does this deliberately, then he must be taken to be a failure at least in this matter.

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1. Sidgwick Henry : *The Methods of Ethics*; 7th edition, London, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1963. p. 96.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 496.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 507.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 509.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 414.

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