

Guest Editors's Preface

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In the following pages the reader will find the first part of a collection of essays devoted to themes from the thought of Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), mainly focused on his masterpiece, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874).¹ The work of Henry Sidgwick has had certainly a peculiar fate in the philosophical debate of the twentieth century. As lamented by Bart Schultz in the *Foreword* to his classic collection *Essays on Henry Sidgwick*, published in the early nineties, the attention paid to Sidgwick's work is not comparable to the attention received by the great British thinkers of the past. We still do not have critical editions of his work, nor do we have many volumes dedicated to him (there are relatively few indeed if compared to the studies available on Hobbes, Hume or Mill). Finally, at least at the time when Schultz was writing, Sidgwick's books, with the exception of the *Methods of Ethics* and the *Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers*, were unobtainable.²

It is interesting to note however that in spite of the scant attention received in academia,³ Sidgwick greatly influenced some of the most important moral and political philosophers of the twentieth century. Philosophers like George Edward Moore, John Rawls and Derek Parfit all acknowledged their debt to him, so that it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Sidgwick played a formative role in setting the agenda and the methodology of our current discussions on metaethics and normative ethics.

¹ A second group of contributions will follow in the next issue of *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics*.

² Schultz 1992.

³ One of the reasons usually produced to explain the scant attention received by Sidgwick is his writing style, which most people seem to find pedantic and rather dull (see Broad 1930, pp. 143-144; Selby-Bigge 1890, p. 93). For a different opinion see Blanshard 1984, p. 21; Rashdall 1885, p. 200.

This view seems to be confirmed by two other prominent figures in the contemporary debate in moral and political philosophy, David Gauthier and Stephen Toulmin, both of whom argued that Sidgwick, rather than Moore, can be considered the real father of contemporary moral philosophy, since it is in *The Methods of Ethics* that the distinction between normative questions and questions about the meaning and the nature of judgments (which marks the beginning of contemporary metaethics) was explicitly defended for the first time.⁴

This however is not the only reason why Sidgwick can be said to have created “the prototype of the modern treatment of moral philosophy;”⁵ or, in Rawls’ famous words, “the first truly academic work in moral theory, modern in both method and spirit”.⁶ Sidgwick is arguably the first philosopher who treats ethics as an autonomous area of investigation, not depending for its conclusions on the acceptance of a particular metaphysical system. In the *Methods of Ethics* he starts instead with the ordinary beliefs of individuals belonging to a specific place and time, and then proceeds by way of a reflective dialogue between these beliefs and some of the most important ethical principles advanced in the history of moral philosophy. The idea underlying this approach is that moral principles can only be founded in the reflective worldviews of the agents who have to recognize and endorse them.⁷

Nussbaum correctly traces back this approach to Aristotle,⁸ which is certainly a plausible interpretation, since Sidgwick himself presents his work as an attempt to “imitate” Aristotle’s examination of “the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him but as what ‘we’ – he and others – think, ascertained by reflection”.⁹ However it is only with Sidgwick that it is clearly stated for the first time (at least in the modern era) that the only way to reach an adequate justification in ethics is by a systematic comparison between the different conceptions of morality and the different

⁴ See Gauthier 1970, p. 7; Toulmin 1986, pp. VII-XX, Hurka 2003. For a different view see Cremaschi 2006.

⁵ Schneewind 1977, p. 1.

⁶ Rawls 1980, p. 341.

⁷ It is controversial whether this approach can be said to anticipate Rawls’ method of “reflective equilibrium”. For a criticism of this view see Singer 1974.

⁸ Nussbaum 1986, pp. 10 and 424, footnote 16.

⁹ Sidgwick 1981, p. xxi.

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methods that these conceptions presuppose. Hence Sidgwick's attempt to reduce all possible moral theories to three fundamental models: egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism.

It should be noticed that in Sidgwick this idea is closely connected to another idea; namely the belief that all moral problems can be reduced to fundamental moral questions. Once they are so reduced, according to Sidgwick, moral theories will provide an answer to these problems. This view has been thoroughly criticized by the so-called anti-theorists,¹⁰ but is still widely shared by most moral philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition.

These are all reasons that bolster Schneewind's conclusion that "Sidgwick gave the problems of ethics the form in which they have dominated British and American moral philosophy since his time"¹¹, which is in turn echoed by Eugenio Lecaldano's observation "that in the same way in which we can look at Adam Smith – with many simplifications – as the founder of scientific economics, we can look at Sidgwick's work as the first attempt to provide a completely rational and scientific study of ethical conduct".¹²

To this we should add that *The Methods of Ethics* offers a series of insightful theses about the nature of moral judgments and moral concepts,¹³ the concept of justice,¹⁴ the critique of moral naturalism and the analysis of hedonism (to name but a few). These theses will constitute a constant point of reference for the contemporary debate. The same is true for Sidgwick's particular formulation of utilitarianism, which is widely acknowledged as the clearest and most sophisticated version of the classical doctrine,¹⁵ and is still one of the most influential in the current debate.¹⁶

¹⁰ See for example Williams 1985; Hampshire 1983 and 1989; Baier 1985; Taylor 1985; Larmore 1987.

¹¹ Schneewind 1977, p. 422. Some interesting remarks on the merits and defects of Sidgwick's approach to ethics can be found in Rawls 1980, pp. 314-3; but see also Rawls 1981 and 1975. A study of the affinities and the differences between Sidgwick's and Rawls' approach is yet to be produced. For some interesting ideas about this comparison see Barry 1973, pp. 4-9; M.G. Singer 1976; Schultz 1992, pp. 7, 39 and 49-51.

¹² Lecaldano 1996, p. 498.

¹³ One of the aspects of Sidgwick's thought which has received more attention is his moral epistemology, which combines a particular form of intuitionism with a sophisticated analysis of common sense morality. See Schneewind 1963; P. Singer 1974; Sverdlik 1985; Brink 1994; Daurio 1997; Pellegrino 2000; Crisp 2002.

¹⁴ According to Herbert Hart, *The Methods of Ethics* (together with Perelman's *De la Justice*) contains "the best modern elucidations of the idea of justice"; see Hart 1994, p. 299.

¹⁵ See Rawls 1981.

¹⁶ On the influence of Sidgwick's utilitarianism on the theories of Richard M. Hare, David Brink, Philip Pettit and Peter Railton see Renzo 2008.

In light of these considerations it should come as no surprise that Sidgwick's work has received more and more attention over the last twenty years. In 1996 a complete edition of his works, including two volumes of essays and reviews not previously collected, have been published by Thoemmes.¹⁷ In 1998 Sissela Bok published a new edition of *Practical Ethics*, drawing attention to the importance of Sidgwick's contribution to this area of ethics.¹⁸ Bok's volume was followed a couple of years later by another collection of Sidgwick's essays, edited by Marcus G. Singer, which highlights the importance of Sidgwick's contribution not only to ethical questions, but also to value theory in general, to moral psychology and to philosophical method.¹⁹ In 2000, for the centenary of Sidgwick's death, *Utilitas* published a special issue on his work,²⁰ while the British Academy organized a conference whose proceedings were published the following year in a volume edited by Ross Harrison.²¹ Finally, in 2006 Bart Schultz published a long-awaited biography which offers an extremely detailed portrait of Sidgwick's life and of his intellectual development, as well as of his political views.²²

Certainly this is not enough to give Sidgwick a position comparable to that of Hobbes, Hume or Mill in the Olympus of British moral philosophers. Yet the situation is clearly very different from the one described by Schultz in his *Foreword*, more than 15 years ago. Our intention in this issue is to contribute to this renaissance of Sidgwick studies by putting together a collection of articles that explores some of the most important aspects of his thought. The aim is to go beyond the mere rediscovery of a neglected author and to contribute to that mature stage of Sidgwickian scholarship, which will hopefully keep flourishing in the next decades.

Mature scholarship has among its marks a focus on puzzling aspects, rather than a concern with completeness, so we left our authors free to concentrate on those aspects of Sidgwick's thought which most interested them, without any constraint or theme assigned. In selecting the contributors to this collection however we have been guided by three main concerns. First, we wanted the collection to further our understanding of

¹⁷ Sidgwick 1996.

¹⁸ Sidgwick 1998.

¹⁹ Singer 2000.

²⁰ AA VV 2000.

²¹ Harrison 2001.

²² Schultz 2004.

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Sidgwick's ethical thought (see the contributions of Robert Shaver and Anthony Skelton, two well-known Sidgwickian scholars). Second, we wanted to investigate the relationships between his thought and the philosophy of other key figures in the history of philosophy (see the pieces by Sergio Cremaschi, Massimo Reichlin and Alessio Vaccari). Finally, we wanted to show the relevance of Sidgwick's ideas for some of the most important current debates in moral philosophy (see the pieces by Tim Mulgan and Francesco Orsi). Thus this collection aims not only to be a valuable source for those interested in Sidgwick's scholarship, but also to offer a picture of the themes in Sidgwick's philosophy that both contemporary philosophers and historians of philosophy find interesting and worth engaging with.

Not surprisingly Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason confirms its role as one of the themes to which philosophers pay most attention. Francesco Orsi provides a critical survey of the many different readings of the dualism and argues in favour of a specific interpretation according to which Sidgwick's puzzle is not only epistemic or logic, but also practical. Orsi offers an account of the dualism in which egoism and utilitarianism are logically compatible while remaining conflicting principles in terms of "all things considered" reasons. Tim Mulgan focuses on what Sidgwick considered as a possible solution to the dualism (though one he was skeptical about), namely postulating a divine moral order. Mulgan argues that, contrary to what Sidgwick thought, a non-dualistic morality does not require either absolute freedom of the will or believing in eternal survival. Accordingly, morality is less demanding than religion, and no religious premises are needed to overcome the dualism. Finally, Alessio Vaccari describes how the origins of the problem can be found in the dualist ethical theory advocated by Joseph Butler. After comparing Butler's treatment of prudence and morality to Sidgwick's treatment of egoism and morality, Vaccari considers whether the dualism could be rejected by appealing to the views on personal identity and individual rationality that Derek Parfit famously defended in his *Reasons and Persons* (1984).²³

Among the merits of J.B. Schneewind's seminal contribution to our understanding of Sidgwick is its attention to the intellectual context in

²³ The comparison with Parfit's most recent views is pursued to some extent in Orsi's paper. Orsi critically assesses the reading of the dualism advanced by Parfit in his latest manuscript *Climbing the Mountain*.

which the *Methods* was written. By shedding light on many authors that Sidgwick discussed and referred to in his writings Schneewind greatly contributed to our understanding of the *Methods of Ethics*. The same kind of intellectual history is the focus of Massimo Reichlin and Sergio Cremaschi's papers, which examine the complex relationship of Sidgwick's thought to Kant and Whewell respectively. Massimo Reichlin draws an interesting picture of the complex web of references to Kant that can be found in Sidgwick's writings. Sidgwick had a peculiar attitude toward Kant. While explicitly mentioning him as one of his main inspiration, he never paid enough detailed attention to Kant's ethical thought. Reichlin examines some fundamental misunderstandings affecting Sidgwick's (rather scattered) references to Kant's ethical thought, and suggests that they might be due both to the influence of Mill's dismissal of Kantianism and to Sidgwick's rejection of Kant's epistemology and metaphysics.

Unlike Kant, Whewell represented a recurrent presence in Sidgwick's writings. However Sergio Cremaschi argues in his contribution that Sidgwick's treatment of Whewell is more polemical than in-depth. Sidgwick took Whewellian intuitionism to be just an abstract and generic model of conservative common sense morality. He overlooked both the specific rationalist framework developed by Whewell in his *Elements of Morality* and the detailed solutions that Whewell's texts offer to many particular moral dilemmas. Again, Sidgwick here seems to follow Mill in rejecting Whewell's ethics more on political grounds than on the basis of a careful consideration of his arguments.

Another much-debated topic in Sidgwickian scholarship is the kind of intuitionism defended in the *Methods of Ethics*. Notoriously Sidgwick grounded his justification of utilitarianism on a list of fundamental moral intuitions. Scholars however diverge about the number and the formulation of these intuitions.²⁴ In his piece Anthony Skelton claims that Sidgwick's utilitarianism is grounded in six fundamental intuitions and rejects rival interpretations, which generally tend to reduce the number of intuitions Sidgwick presented.²⁵ Skelton then goes on to show how these intuitions play a role in a complex argument for utilitarianism, which dismisses both common sense morality and dogmatic intuitionism, while presenting a

²⁴ See for example Rashdall 1907, pp. 90-91, 147, 184-185; McTaggart 1906; Schneewind 1977, pp. 290, 296.

²⁵ With the only exception of Lacey 1959.

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“Millian-style” proofs of utilitarianism, where Sidgwick attempts to convince critics of utilitarianism by reliance on views that they already accept.

Today, the most pressing criticisms of utilitarianism come from virtue theorists. Sidgwick's pages anticipated also this feature of our contemporary debates. In his contribution Robert Shaver shows that, in the context of his defense of hedonism, Sidgwick's presented many different and interconnected arguments against the claim that virtue is a good (let alone the only good). This discussion appears in a chapter of the *Methods* (XIV of the book III) which Sidgwick revised many times through the various editions of his work. Shaver starts by outlining Sidgwick's main arguments and stressing the various puzzles they present. Then he argues that the best way to make sense of Sidgwick's arguments is to view them in the context of a general claim that only desirable consciousness is intrinsically good. Thus Sidgwick's argument against virtue theorists provides a way into his metaethical views of value.

Collections like the one presented in the following pages depend in fundamental ways on the generosity of their contributors. Therefore as guest editors our gratitude is mainly to them. However special thanks are also owed to Pierpaolo Marrone and the editorial board of *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics* for their patience and their encouragement.

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