

Sidgwick, Origen, and the reconciliation of egoism and morality

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ABSTRACT

Many themes of late twentieth century ethics are prefigured in Sidgwick's *Method of Ethics*. In particular, Sidgwick's 'Dualism of Practical Reason' sets the scene for current debates over the demands of morality. Many philosophers agree that Sidgwick uncovers a deep and troubling conflict at the heart of utilitarian ethics. But Sidgwick's own response to that conflict is treated, not as a live philosophical option, but as a historical oddity. In the twenty-first century, few philosophers see the intimate connection between the dualism of practical reason and the investigation of psychic phenomena that played such a large role in Sidgwick's life. The aim of this paper is to investigate Sidgwick's own approach to the dualism of practical reason. Its general conclusion is that a non-dualistic morality demands less than a theistic religion, contrary to what Sidgwick worried - especially as concerns personal immortality and freedom.

0. *Setting the scene*

Sidgwick's *Method of Ethics* prefigures many themes of modern ethics. His 'Dualism of Practical Reason' sets the scene for current debates over the demands of morality. But Sidgwick's own solution is treated, not as a live philosophical option, but as a historical oddity. One reason for suspicion of Sidgwick's solution is its apparent affinity with traditional theism (although, as Sidgwick himself makes clear, his solution requires at most a general religious premise, and not a specifically theist one¹). This paper resurrects Sidgwick's solution, and explores the connections and differences between the metaphysical needs of morality and those of theism. Drawing on a heretical Christian tradition going back to Origen in the third century, I argue that the metaphysical needs of theism are greater than usually supposed; while the needs of utilitarianism are much more modest.

¹ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 507, note 1. (I owe this reference to Gianfranco Pellegrino.)

1. *Sidgwick's Dilemma*

Henry Sidgwick was both the last of the great classical Utilitarians and the first modern moral philosopher. Unlike his predecessors Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill, Sidgwick takes moral skepticism very seriously, and asks whether morality could survive without religion. This concern is both practical (Could a secular worldview play the social role of religion?), and theoretical (Does morality even make sense in the absence of religion?) Sidgwick is less optimistic than Bentham or Mill. He believes that the decline of religion both undermines non-utilitarian moral theory, and leads to a crisis for utilitarianism.

For Sidgwick, ethics must be based on reason, not on empirical observation. Sidgwick called his masterpiece *The Methods of Ethics*. A method is a very general way of deciding what to do. Methods give rise to more specific *principles* – everyday moral rules. Sidgwick isolates three possible methods of ethics: utilitarianism, egoism, and intuitionism. For Sidgwick, the main opponents of utilitarianism are intuitionists, who believe in a “moral sense” giving us infallible knowledge of moral principles. (Sidgwick distinguishes *dogmatic* intuitionism – which he condemns – from *philosophical* intuitionism – his name for his own methodology.)

Sidgwick's first task is to demonstrate the superiority of utilitarianism to intuitionism. If I had a moral sense, I would always know what to do. As I often do not know what I ought to do, I obviously do *not* have a moral sense. Indeed, no one has a moral sense. So the intuitionist method falls apart. This leaves two competing forms of hedonism: universalistic hedonism (utilitarianism) and egoistic hedonism (egoism). These tell me to maximise the general happiness and to maximise my own happiness. Each method is an independently rational first principle. Neither takes precedence over the other. Unless the universe is specifically designed to make the two methods coincide, they will often conflict in practice. Suppose I have ten dollars. I can maximize *my own* happiness by buying a movie ticket to see *Gratuitous Violence IV*, but if I were maximizing *the general happiness* I could certainly find a better use for the money. At this point, reason offers no further guidance. Sidgwick finds an irresolvable *dualism* at the heart of human reason.

To a reader acquainted with contemporary moral philosophy, Sidgwick's dualism may seem analogous to the common objection that utilitarianism is extremely demanding.² However, Sidgwick himself does not explicitly

² For an introduction to this objection, see Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism*.

worry about the *demands* of morality. Instead, he has a deeper point. His objection is not just that personal interest conflicts with the general good, or that utilitarianism is very demanding, or even that its demands are psychologically impossible. Sidgwick finds a *contradiction* in practical reason, not just a moral difficulty. Putting my own interests first is not just psychologically natural – it is also completely rational and unobjectionable. A completely selfish person commits no rational error.

For Sidgwick, the dualism of practical reason signals the failure of ethical theory. Moral philosophy must reconcile the two methods. This requirement is very strong, as contradiction is only avoided if every person's happiness always coincides exactly with the general happiness.

Sidgwick's dualism explains his enormous interest in psychic research. Individuals' interests do not coincide in the present life. Life after death is certainly not *sufficient* to solve the dualism of practical reason. The next world might be as unjust as this world. However, life after death is *necessary* for ethics. Unless there is another life where justice *might* be done, the attempt to systematise ethics is hopeless. Moral philosophers must examine the evidence that human beings can survive death. Sidgwick's paranormal activities are thus not an eccentric side-line. They are central to his philosophical concerns.

The most familiar solution combines an afterlife with God – who ensures that happiness and morality coincide. Sidgwick agrees that this solution would be satisfactory. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that God exists. As a result, Sidgwick's own approach is more tentative. Indeed, he offers no real solution. He merely claims that any solution must involve an afterlife of some sort.

Sidgwick's own approach to his own dualism has few contemporary followers. Utilitarians ignore the possibility that we survive death, and deny that utilitarianism is incoherent if we do not survive; while religious moral philosophy is strongly anti-utilitarian. Sidgwick's problem has been much more influential in recent moral thought than his tentative solution.

2. *Why twentieth century philosophy ignored Sidgwick*

In section 3, we see how the contemporary moral philosophical landscape is moving back to Sidgwick. The present section first shows how it moved away.

The period from Moore's *Principia Ethica* in 1903 to Rawls's *A theory of justice* in 1971 was a dark age for normative ethics. The rise of philosophical

naturalism, especially in the extreme form of logical positivism, and the rejection of traditional metaphysics, undermined both Sidgwick's question and his answer.

The linguistic turn in philosophy shifts attention from normative ethics to metaethics.³ Sidgwick's question was seldom asked. A new question became central: How do ethical facts fit into a naturalistic world view?⁴ Emotivists and prescriptivists say that there are no ethical facts. Sidgwick's question thus becomes meaningless.⁵ Naturalists, by contrast, identify ethical facts with natural facts. This move also undermines Sidgwick's own formulation of his dualism.

In twenty-first century philosophical vocabulary, Sidgwick is a *non-naturalist*. Ethical truth is not reducible to natural facts – not even facts about our desires. Moral philosophy seeks objective facts about what we ought to do. Such facts should be determinate. In any situation, there is only one rational thing to do. This is why the conflict between egoism and utilitarianism is so unacceptable. The gap between egoism and morality, although very troubling, is also not surprising. If ethical facts are autonomous, then there is no a priori reason to expect them to fit with our interests.

Naturalists may seem to face the same dilemma as Sidgwick. However, they need not be so troubled by it. If ethics is a matter of purely natural facts, then the failure of Sidgwick's a priori procedure is not surprising. If ethical facts are natural, then they can only be discovered a posteriori. So the naturalist can reasonably leave it to future empirical investigation to decide between egoism and utilitarianism.⁶

Even when mid-20th century moral philosophers did turn to normative ethical questions, they were often less ambitious than Sidgwick. Normative ethics offers advice, teases out the implications of alternative principles, compares theoretical approaches, and so on. The ambitious search for a single method is often replaced by a more piecemeal approach. 20th century

³ Darwall et al, 'Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics'.

⁴ This question – dubbed the *location problem* by Frank Jackson – is still a central preoccupation for many moral philosophers. (Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, chapter 5.)

⁵ Although emotivists and prescriptivists reject moral facts, so do confront a conflict between prudence and morality. See, for instance, Hare, *Moral Thinking*, sections 5.5 and 6.2. (I owe this reference to Gianfranco Pellegrino.)

⁶ Sidgwick himself discusses the possibility of an empirical reconciliation of prudence and morality in the concluding chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*. (I owe this reference to Gianfranco Pellegrino.)

metaethics undermined both Sidgwick's confidence in philosophical intuitionism, and his assumption that this is the only way forward for ethics.

3. *How moral philosophy is coming back to Sidgwick*

All the elements of Sidgwick's moral philosophy have made a come-back in the last few decades. The turning-point was Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, which re-invigorated the search for ambitious, unifying theories of ethics. Non-naturalism, philosophical intuitionism, and normative ethics are firmly back on the philosophical agenda.⁷ Recent analytic philosophy has also returned to the relationship between morality and religion.⁸ I shall argue that the questions that have replaced Sidgwick's can benefit from answers analogous to his own.

Sidgwick sees ethics as somewhat like mathematics: a respectable autonomous realm of fact that can be explored a priori. (By contrast, logical positivists see mathematics as analytic tautology.) Many contemporary ethicists also explore connections between mathematics and ethics.⁹

The clash between egoism and utilitarianism remains a central ethical concern for contemporary utilitarian normative ethics.¹⁰ Developments in the world beyond philosophy, such as globalisation and climate change, give Sidgwick's question a new urgency by raising new conflicts between self and others. But Sidgwick's *answer* remains ignored.

I aim to rehabilitate that answer. While Sidgwick's claims about morality and immortality are too ambitious, contemporary utilitarians can learn from them. We must first distinguish the metaphysical requirements of morality from those of theism. The metaphysical requirements of theism

⁷ For instance, consider the theist moral realism of Robert Adams, the naturalist realism of Richard Boyd, and (especially close to Sidgwick) the non-naturalist realism of Derek Parfit. (See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*; Boyd, R., 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods, Part I'; Boyd, R., 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods, Part II'; and Parfit, 'Appendix on Meta-Ethics'.)

⁸ See, for instance, the recent work of Robert Adams, Linda Zagzebski, and John Bishop. (Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*; Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*; and Bishop, *Believing by Faith*.)

⁹ See T. M. Scanlon, or Robert Adams, who harks back to Leibniz, who also regarded both mathematics and ethics as autonomous. (Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*.)

¹⁰ For an introduction to the current debate, see Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism*, chapter one.

are seen most easily in its response to one famous objection – the argument from evil.

4. *What religion needs*

The argument from evil is central to the case against classical theism. Opponents argue that the evils of this world are inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God. In reply, the theist appeals to freedom and immortality. Evil is the price of human freedom, while an afterlife allows God to compensate the innocent victims of evil.

Theist claims about freedom and immortality can seem metaphysically extravagant. In their defence, many theists argue that morality itself makes similar claims. Theism thus involves no additional extravagance. Most famous is Kant's *moral argument*. Theoretical speculation is based on concepts designed solely for the world of experience. It cannot take us beyond that world. So it cannot tell us whether God exists, or whether we are immortal. However, morality tells me to aim for my own moral perfection and for a just world. These demands are incoherent unless their goals are possible. But they are only possible if there is an afterlife presided over by a benevolent deity. Belief in God and immortality are both practical necessities.

Sidgwick emphatically rejected Kant's argument. Given our need to systematise ethics, we have reason to *hope* that the universe is user-friendly, and a very strong motivation to seek evidence of friendliness, but this is no reason to believe that the universe actually *is* friendly. We cannot simply assume that ethics is not incoherent.

'I am so far from feeling bound to believe for purposes of practice what I see no ground for holding as a speculative truth, that I cannot even conceive the state of mind which these words seem to describe, except as a momentary, half-willful irrationality, committed in a violent access of philosophic despair.'¹¹

Even if we reject the Kantian argument, a close connection between morality and religion would clearly assist theism. (Conversely, atheists may regard such a connection as an argument against morality.) I shall argue that religion and morality are not on a par. Like theism, morality does require both (a certain) freedom and (something like) immortality. But its requirements are much more modest.

¹¹ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Book 4, Chapter 6, p. 507.

5. *Freedom*

Theist freedom needs both a certain degree, and a certain scope. Morality requires neither that degree, nor that scope.

The free will defence presents evil as a necessary side-effect of human moral freedom. God could only avoid evil by creating automatons. Despite its evils, our world is better than any world without free agents. Contemporary philosophical debate often begins with J. L. Mackie's reply.¹² For any free agent (F) and any time (t), it is possible that F does no evil at t. It is thus *possible*, however unlikely, that F *never* does evil. The same is true of all free agents. For *any* population of free agents, there is a possible world where *those very agents* never do evil. But any perfect being will naturally choose that possible world. No perfect being will ever create a free being who ever does evil. Yet there are free beings who choose evil. Therefore, there is no God.

The now standard theist reply is due to Plantinga.¹³ Plantinga does not deny that there is a possible world where free agents never do evil, nor that such a possible world is better than any where evil is done. But he denies that God could choose *that* very possible world. A free being chooses what to do without any outside determination. This is what freedom *is*. It thus makes no sense to say both that F is free, and that God chooses what F will do. Suppose the Fs are a species of genuinely free being. God can create the Fs, but God cannot choose between different possible worlds where the Fs do different things. God can only create the Fs, and then wait and see (like anyone else) what they actually do. God cannot guarantee that free agents never do evil. If free agency is sufficiently valuable, God will create free agents who might do evil. God and evil are thus not incompatible.

Plantinga requires what I call *contra divine free will* (CDF). A creature has CDF if and only if God cannot create that creature and choose its choices. Let F2 be the most valuable freedom that is not contra divine. Plantinga must claim that a world where creatures with F2 always do the right thing (w1) is worse than one where creatures with CDF sometimes do the wrong thing (w2).

¹² Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, chapter nine.

¹³ Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, chapters five and six. For a recent summary of his position, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 458-499.

The comparison between CDF and F2 is crucial. The creatures in w1 do not lack freedom. For all anyone knows, they may have something we would recognize as genuine freedom. In the first place, it is not obvious that every creature with libertarian freedom must also have CDF. (Given our limited understanding of the metaphysics of both libertarian freewill and divine action, we cannot be certain that God could not control the actions of a creature with libertarian freedom.) If libertarian freedom is logically distinct from CDF, the creatures in w1 may enjoy libertarian freedom. On the other hand, any compatibilist freedom is clearly not CDF. (If my freedom is compatible with determinism, then it is also compatible with divine control over my actions.) Therefore, if compatibilism is the correct account of human freedom, the creatures in w1 will have everything we value about our own freedom (such as moral responsibility), even without libertarian freedom.¹⁴

Let us concentrate on horrendous evils inflicted by one human being on another.¹⁵ Suppose x suffers horrendous evil in w2, while no-one in w1 suffers any horrendous evil. Won't a benevolent God create w1 instead of w2, and spare x that evil?¹⁶

¹⁴ For an introduction to the recent debate on freedom, and definitions of compatibilism and libertarianism, see Fischer et al, *Four Views on Free Will*.

¹⁵ I borrow the term 'horrendous evil' from Marilyn Adams. (Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.)

¹⁶ One obvious complication is Derek Parfit's *non-identity problem*. (Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, chapter 16.) If the differences between w1 and w2 are essential to the identity of particular individuals, then w2 is not worse than w1 for anyone – as everyone in w2 would not have existed at all in w1. For ease of exposition, I put the non-identity problem to one side in the text. There are several justifications for this. First, it is obviously desirable for theism to avoid reliance on non-identity arguments, as any such defence of theism is vulnerable to attack from moral theories that can attribute moral responsibility in non-identity cases. This is especially relevant in the present case, as Parfit's original point was that utilitarian accounts cope comparatively well with non-identity situations.

Second, non-identity is very unlikely to arise for God's choices. Parfit's original argument only claims that, *as a matter of fact*, I would not have existed if things had been different. He admits that, for many of the factors that affect my identity, there is a possible world where I exist without that feature. If my parents had never met, then I *would* not exist. But there are possible worlds where I exist even though my parents never meet. (Perhaps my genetic material is brought together in a laboratory, or by magic.) We cannot bring about such worlds – but God could.

Finally, Parfit's discussion also assumes a secular account of personal identity. My identity depends (perhaps inter alia) on my genetic identity. Perhaps this account could yield a non-identity problem for God. (If my genetic makeup somehow entails that I

The freewill defence concerns the freedom to inflict horrendous evils. In w2, *this* freedom must be *contra divine*. Otherwise, God can prevent those evils. Conversely, w1 can include wide-ranging CDF – everywhere *except* when contemplating horrendous evils. Even if w1 creatures enjoy full CDF when choosing between *competing goods*, God can still ensure that w1 contains no horrendous evil.

The freedom to choose between goods is at least *as valuable* as freedom to choose between good and evil. Even if we need *some* CDF, CDF to choose evil is redundant. The additional freedom in w2 is an unnecessary – and disastrous – distraction. Indeed, choices between goods are *more* valuable. To defend this stronger claim, I present an argument that draws on the Millian utilitarian tradition, on recent work on incommensurability, on Joseph Raz’s work on freedom, and my own earlier work.¹⁷

Our own lives include choices between competing goods, and between good and evil. We face many non-metaphysical barriers to freedom, such as sanctions, threats, or imprisonment. If these only prevent us from choosing evil over good, they do not impact on our morally valuable autonomy. Suppose I know that inflicting horrendous evil will be severely punished. This would not compromise my autonomy. Inflicting evil is not something I need to be free to do. By contrast, constraints that interfere with choices between valuable goods do reduce our well-being – sometimes quite severely. In w1, moral life centres on the choice between competing goods. w2’s *only* distinctive feature is that *some* lives centre on the choice between good and evil – with some people opting for evil. The freedom enjoyed in w2 has wider scope; but this simply is not a way that w2 is superior to w1 *at all*.

This argument does not assume that autonomy has merely instrumental value. Liberal utilitarians can accord autonomy *intrinsic* value. What the argument does claim is that the intrinsic value of autonomy is found only in

have CDF, then I could not exist without CDF.) But alternative, non-secular, accounts make personal identity itself depend explicitly on God’s will. For instance, Stephen T. Davis suggests that the fact that God wills that a certain future person is me is sufficient (in the right circumstances) to make that person my future self. (Davis, *Risen Indeed*, p. 119.) On this view, God cannot face a non-identity problem. If God says that x in possible world 1 is the same as y in possible world 2, then this makes it so. Given our uncertainty over personal identity, how could we ever know that God could not have brought it about that x, who actually has CDF, had F2 instead?

¹⁷ Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*; Mill, *On Liberty*; Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*; Raz, “Incommensurability and Agency”; Mulgan, *Future People*.

choices between competing goods. Or, to be more precise, once we have a choice between competing goods, *then* the *addition* of a choice between good and evil does not *increase* intrinsic value. (For the purposes of the present argument, we could thus remain agnostic whether a choice between good and evil has more intrinsic value than no choice at all.) Of course, one can imagine an extreme libertarian who holds that adding the choice between good and evil does increase intrinsic value. The liberal utilitarian rejects this extreme position as intuitively implausible.

Liberal utilitarians see a shift from a focus on good and evil to a focus on competing goods as moral progress. This is not naive or optimistic. Liberal utilitarianism does not deny the role of evil in human life: it regards that role as regrettable. W1 is better for its inhabitants than W2. A benevolent God has no reason to choose W2 over w1. The horrendous evils in W2 are gratuitous.

This is an explicitly liberal utilitarian argument. It is thus not surprising that it finds support in Sidgwick's moral philosophy. Sidgwick famously defends a compatibilist account of freedom.¹⁸ Our freedom is perfectly compatible with determinism. Sidgwick also argues that this freedom is sufficient for all moral purposes. Our lives as moral agents, our everyday decisions, and our investigations as moral philosophers require the ability to discern, weigh up, and respond to reasons. But this ability is fully compatible with our actions being ultimately determined by physical processes.

Theists typically make three claims about freedom:

1. *The Actual claim*: Human freedom is incompatibilist.
2. *The Moral claim*: Morality requires incompatibilist freedom.
3. *The Value claim*: The extra value of incompatibilist freedom outweighs the disvalue of human suffering.

Sidgwick's compatibilism rejects all three. Compatibilism itself is the denial of the actual claim. Actual evil can be justified only by our actual freedom. It is not sufficient that God might create a world containing evil. Theists must show that God might create *this world*. Sidgwick also denies the moral claim. Morality does not require incompatibilist freedom. It follows that theodicy is metaphysically more extravagant than morality. Finally, Sidgwick rejects the value claim – the heart of the free will defence. It is not sufficient that we have incompatibilist freedom, nor even that such freedom is necessary for morality. Incompatibilist freedom must also outweigh the evils of the actual world. Sidgwick is a hedonist. The only ultimate value is “*desirable consciousness*”. As a hedonist, Sidgwick places great

¹⁸ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, book 1, chapter 5.

value on human suffering; while, as a compatibilist, he believes that compatibilist freedom has all the value we need.

Although logically distinct, the three claims are obviously connected. Our knowledge of the value of freedom comes from introspection on our own lives and reflection on our morality. If these sources only ever deal with compatibilist freedom, then how could we know that incompatibilist freedom would be so much more valuable?

Most contemporary utilitarians follow Sidgwick's endorsement of compatibilism. They see a vast gap distance between our (morally sufficient) freedom, and what the theist needs. But the utilitarian can also convince incompatibilists, by turning to the *scope* of freedom. Morality needs freedom for three distinct purposes: to hold other people morally responsible, we must believe their actions were freely chosen; to deliberate, I must believe that my actions are under my control; and, finally, the ability to freely choose one's projects is a necessary component of a valuable human life.

Utilitarians argue that compatibilist freedom is definitely sufficient to attribute moral responsibility to others. The appropriateness of such attributions depends on the consequences of praise and blame, and involves no deeper metaphysical commitments. This is highly significant, because only the attribution of moral responsibility to others could possibly concern the freedom *to do evil*. If I am even moderately decent, then I do not seriously consider performing horrendous evils myself. So my ability to deliberate cannot depend upon my freedom to do evil. And we saw earlier that liberal utilitarians do not regard that freedom as valuable. So I have no reason to think of myself as free to do evil *at all*. Even if I must think of my freedom as CDF, I never need to ascribe evil-doing CDF *to anyone*.¹⁹

I conclude that morality never needs evil-doing CDF. Whatever morality does need, it needs less than theism.

6. *Immortality*

The freewill defence is typically combined with immortality. Many innocent people suffer horrendous evil without compensation – consider a young

¹⁹ We could also note that, even if I need to think of my own freedom as *incompatibilist*, it does not necessarily follow that I must think of it as *contra divine*. For the purposes of moral deliberation, and of leading a good life, it would presumably be sufficient to believe that God could intervene in my choices, but never does.

child tortured to death. An afterlife makes compensation possible.²⁰ The theist then argues as follows. CDF has both benefits and costs. It makes new goods available, but it also makes horrendous evils unavoidable *by God*. The afterlife ensures that *everyone* receives the benefits, and that these benefits are sufficient to compensate for any evils suffered in this life. Ex-ante, everyone enjoys CDF plus the risk of horrendous evil. Ex post, some get CDF plus horrendous evil, while others enjoy CDF without horrendous evil. *x* cannot complain that *she* has suffered horrendous evil, as she benefits [perhaps post-mortem] from the features of W2 that make some evils unavoidable.

Unfortunately, an afterlife is not sufficient. Theism also needs a *prior* life. A second anti-theist argument objects, not to the *amount* of evil in the world, but to its *distribution*. Two features of that distribution are undesirable: (1) many innocent people suffer horrendous evils, while many guilty people enjoy very pleasant lives; and (2) suffering and pleasure are distributed very unequally with regard to many morally irrelevant characteristics such as gender and nationality. In short, suffering and pleasure do not track moral desert.

In a just world, suffering would not be unequally distributed in morally irrelevant ways. This does not mean there would be no suffering, but that any suffering would be distributed according to desert. Only those who deserved to suffer would do so.

If we have compatibilist freedom, or indeed any freedom other than CDF, God can ensure that no innocent person ever suffers any horrendous evil. If

²⁰ If the afterlife is infinite in duration, or contains goods of infinite value, then it may seem to completely erase horrendous evil. Suppose each finite earthly human life has a finite value. While suffering can bring this value below zero, rendering the life not worth living, it cannot create infinite disvalue. If we combine each earthly life with an afterlife of infinite positive value, then every human being enjoys an overall existence of infinite value. And, most strikingly, it seems that no amount of earthly suffering has any negative impact on that total value. By standard transfinite arithmetic, each infinite life has *the same* infinite value. Contrary to initial appearances, this world's evils do not make it worse for its inhabitants. The argument from evil collapses.

Unfortunately, this argument fails, for reasons familiar from the recent philosophical literature on infinite utility. (Vallentyne, and Kagan, 'Infinite Value and Finitely Additive Value Theory'; Mulgan, 'Transcending the Infinite Utility Debate'.) Any plausible aggregative principle for lives of infinite duration must meet the following condition: If any two lives are identical at some times, and if one is better at all times when they differ, then that life is better overall. Suppose *x* and *y* are two people who enjoy an infinitely valuable afterlife. If *x*'s earthly life is better than *y*'s, then *x*'s overall existence is more valuable than *y*'s.

we have CDF, then perhaps even God cannot prevent some innocent suffering. But God will still aim to minimise undeserved suffering. This world contains too much innocent suffering, too unequally distributed. We would not accept such unequal innocent suffering within any human society. We expect human rulers to be more impartial. We should expect no less from God. A morally perfect benevolent God would be perfectly impartial, and would not create a world where some fare so much better than others, through no merit of their own.

The best theist reply is that things are not as they seem. Imagine two otherwise identical worlds: *Rebirth* and *Single Life*. In each, many people suffer in ways that cannot be justified given their behaviour in this lifetime. The difference between the two worlds is this. In *Single Life*, each individual lives only once; while in *Rebirth*, the same individual is reborn many times, and one's fate in each life depends on one's actions in previous lives. In *Rebirth*, all suffering is deserved.

Rebirth is more just than *Single Life*. And there is no other morally significant difference – as both worlds contain the same aggregate welfare, the same average welfare, and exactly the same distribution of welfare at any one time. If desert has any value, then *Rebirth* is better. Any God choosing between these two worlds will prefer *Rebirth*.

These two possible worlds are two interpretations of our actual world. If God created the world, and if rebirth is possible, then we are living in *Rebirth*. There are only three possibilities: either rebirth is actual; or rebirth is logically impossible; or God does not exist. If rebirth is logically possible but not actual, then God does not exist. Theists must either defend the cycle of rebirth, or argue that it is logically impossible.

If rebirth is not possible, then God could provide a different afterlife. However, liberal utilitarians will argue instead that God would prefer not to create any human beings at all. Without rebirth, our world is simply too unjust. God would prefer creatures who never perform evil. God would create w_1 instead of w_2 . Theism must defend the logical possibility of rebirth.

The argument that a just God would favour rebirth is not unprecedented. It can be found in all cultures where belief in rebirth is common. Nor is it unknown in the Western theist tradition – belief in reincarnation was one of the heresies attributed to Origen in the third century AD.²¹ However, hav-

²¹ Origen is also associated with universalism – the view that everyone (even the Devil) will eventually be saved. In fact, it seems likely that, while the accusation of universalism is just, Origen himself did not embrace reincarnation. The claim that he did is more likely to have been an attempt to discredit his views by association with aspects of con-

ing been declared a heresy, the rebirth view fell out of favour in our philosophical tradition. I argue that, in light of modern liberal utilitarian values, the time has come to reconsider that decision.²²

7. *Is Rebirth possible?*

We begin with objections to the metaphysical coherence of rebirth (section 7), and then consider objections to a perfectly just mechanism of rebirth (section 8).

The possibility of rebirth depends on the nature of personal identity – one of the most contentious of philosophical topics. Consider two diametrically opposed positions. On a *bodily criterion*, personal identity across time requires continuity of bodily identity. It is therefore simply impossible for the same person to be reborn in different bodies. Personal survival of death requires the physical resurrection of the body – as in the traditional Christian view.²³ At the other extreme, on a *dualist* criterion, personal identity requires continuity of spiritual identity, where the soul is distinct from the body. There is then no reason why the same person cannot be reborn in different bodies. Dualism does not guarantee rebirth – or even immortality. God could simply destroy our souls at death. But dualism does mean than

temporary paganism considered disreputable by third-century Christians. (Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*.)

²² Commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, Gianfranco Pellegrino raises the following problem for my argument that a cycle of rebirth could render our world just. One crucial claim in my argument is that rebirth makes it possible that seemingly undeserved suffering is actually deserved due to one's action in a previous life. Any cycle of rebirth must be either infinite or finite. Yet an infinite cycle of rebirth requires infinite past time, which is hard to reconcile with the doctrine of divine creation; while a finite cycle of rebirth implies a *first* life, where any suffering will still be undeserved. There are two main replies available to the theist. (1) If we adopt the view that God is outside time, then it may be possible for God to be the creator of a universe with an infinite past. (2) Theists could accept a first life, and argue that, as a matter of fact, there was no suffering in that life. All suffering occurred in later lives, as a result of misbehaviour in the first life. If this is a possible situation, then it must be what God has created. Nothing we observe in our lives can prove that the first life was *not* like this. (Whether they are true or not, myths of a fall from paradise are not logically incoherent.)

Finally, I would note that my dialectical purpose is to raise difficulties for theism. If the supposition that this world is just requires an infinite cycle of rebirth, and if theism is inconsistent with such a cycle, then theism is inconsistent with the supposition that this world is just.

²³ Van Inwagen, 'The Possibility of Resurrection'.

rebirth for human beings is one of God's options. Given our earlier argument, this is sufficient to establish that God would take that option.

Another currently popular view that also seems to rule out rebirth is the no-self view of Derek Parfit.²⁴ On this view, there is no self that continues from moment to moment. It thus seems obvious that there is no self that could survive death. We might be drawn to the no-self view by a dualist error theory. Suppose we believe that personal identity requires a soul with 'inherent existence' (in the Buddhist phrase). Finding no such soul, we conclude that there is no personal identity.

Despite appearances, Parfit's view does not automatically rule out rebirth. We must separate *eliminativism* (there are no persons) from *reductionism* (personal identity is reducible to, and no more valuable than, its constituent relations). Eliminativism rules out rebirth. But it also rejects personal identity within this life. This is very radically metaphysically revisionist. To avoid radical *moral* revisionism, eliminativists must adopt *fictionalism* about persons – for moral purposes, we talk as if there were persons, despite knowing that there are no persons. But we can then apply the same solution to rebirth. To take one striking example, even the most eliminativist Buddhist continues to speak of rebirth at the level of *conventional* truth – even while recognising the *ultimate* truth that there are no persons to be reborn.

By contrast, reductionism allows rebirth as an ultimate truth, and not merely a conventional one. Rebirth, like personal continuity within a life, can occur through memory or psychological continuity – without a separate entity that continues from one life to another. However, reductionism does create problems for our overall argument. Parfit's main point is that, because reductionism is true, personal identity is less morally significant than we are inclined to believe. If the identity of persons is nothing over-and-above certain physical or psychological relations, then it cannot be more important than those underlying relations. Reductionism leads to moral revisions, often in the direction of utilitarianism. Reductionism limits the moral significance of personal compensation and individual responsibility. It thus reduces the force of the argument from evil, and lessens the relevance of rebirth. (We return to this aspect of reductionism in the final section, where I argue that it supports our utilitarian alternative to rebirth.)

We cannot use an account of personal identity to settle the controversy over rebirth, for three reasons. The first is that personal identity is highly

²⁴ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, part three. This view is also associated with David Hume, and is found in many varieties of Buddhism.

controversial – so our account of rebirth will simply inherit that controversy. The second is that the correct account of personal identity depends upon facts about human beings. Proponents of rebirth often treat human rebirth as a datum, and thus seek an account of personal identity consistent with that ‘fact’; while opponents, citing the ‘datum’ that humans are not reborn, may prefer a different account. Finally, our preferred account of personal identity may depend upon whether or not we believe in God. (For instance, some theists argue that the will of God can provide the mysterious ‘further fact’ that Parfit finds lacking in all non-reductionist accounts of personal identity.²⁵) But, obviously enough, any attempt to use the resulting account of personal identity as a premise in an argument for or against the existence of God will result in circularity.

It seems that we have reached an impasse. However, we must recall our dialectical context. We are not asking whether rebirth is possible *for us*. We are asking whether there are any possible free creatures for whom rebirth is possible. If any account of personal identity consistent with rebirth is conceptually coherent, then we can *imagine* creatures for whom personal continuity is consistent with rebirth. And it seems that, whatever the truth regarding humans, dualist and reductionist accounts are coherent. Therefore, God could have created free reborn creatures. If we also believe that we are *not* such creatures, then this strengthens our objection to theism.

Consider a more modest objection to rebirth: that, whatever its conceptual coherence, rebirth is not a plausible interpretation *of this world*. This argument appeals to the popular idea that memory is necessary for personal identity. If so, then, even if we are reborn, our rebirth typically does not preserve identity, as most people do not remember their past lives. Rebirth would then provide no personal survival beyond death. Alternatively, if we defend personal identity without memory – perhaps by appeal to an immaterial soul – we must then ask why personal identity without memory is *valuable*.²⁶ Can survival without memory offer compensation and punishment?

In our dialectical context, this argument against rebirth counts *against* theism. It suggests that, while logically possible, rebirth is not an epistemic

²⁵ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, p. 119.

²⁶ The defender of rebirth might also replace memory with *psychological* continuity – and then argue that this continuity could be *subconscious*. Perhaps my character develops through time even though I have no memory. Consider the relevance of my early years, of which I now have no memory, to my moral character. But this still leaves the evaluative questions. Is psychological continuity without memory valuable? Is it a suitable basis for desert?

possibility when applied to human beings. God could have made reborn creatures, but did not. Both theists and proponents of rebirth must reject this argument. One option is as follows. Perhaps memories of *past* lives are recovered in some *future* life. Consider the following model.²⁷ An individual goes through a long series of lives (L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln). In the final life (Ln), all previous lives are remembered. Earlier lives are analogous to a series of dreams: each unrelated to the others, but all remembered by the single waking self. (This metaphor is especially apt within an Idealist, Buddhist, or Neoplatonic metaphysical scheme, where our final state is akin to waking from the dream of our earthly life.) The fact that some individuals do claim reliable memory of past lives is then evidence in favour of rebirth; while the fact that most people do not remember any past lives does not count against rebirth. This model seems to provide enough personal continuity to ground moral responsibility across lives. And, for all anyone knows, it is the model God has chosen.

I conclude both that rebirth is an option for a just God, and that, for all anyone knows, this is the option God has chosen. Not only might there be creatures who are reborn; but we also cannot be sure that we are not such creatures.

8. *Does rebirth guarantee justice?*

Suppose the theist concedes that rebirth is possible. They might still reject rebirth, by denying that it provides a just world. Our question was why bad things happen to good people. Rebirth offers the best reply: they do not. However, only perfectly ethicised rebirth can play this role – and this is inconsistent with CDF.

I borrow the distinction between *ethicised* and *non-ethicised* rebirth from Obeyesekere.²⁸ Historically, non-ethicised rebirth usually comes first. The cycle of rebirth is seen as a natural phenomenon. While it may be influenced by human action, it is not itself a moral process. In ethicised rebirth, by contrast, rebirth tracks desert. Ethicised rebirth can guarantee that people get what they deserve in the next life. Non-ethicised rebirth makes

²⁷ This model is drawn from McTaggart and other idealists, and is also the traditional Buddhist model of the life history of a Buddha or Arahant. (McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion*; Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*.)

²⁸ Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*.

this staggeringly unlikely. A perfectly just world requires ethicised rebirth.²⁹

Suppose human beings have CDF. Suppose, also, for the sake of an argument by *reductio ad absurdum*, that the mechanism of rebirth is perfectly ethicised. If the rebirth mechanism is perfectly ethicised, then it must ensure that I get what I deserve in this life. My fate in this life depends, in part, on the actions of other human beings. So the rebirth mechanism must be based on perfect predictions of the actions of others. But, if such predictions are possible, then God, who is omniscient and omnipotent, could also make them. But this contradicts our assumption that humans have CDF. So the mechanism of rebirth cannot be perfectly ethicised.

Compatibilists, such as Sidgwick, will reject this argument simply by rejecting CDF. Even if we accept CDF, however, the argument still fails. CDF may rule out a perfectly ethicised system of rebirth. But *partially* ethicised rebirth mechanisms are still available. Even we, with our very limited knowledge, can make *some* predictions about an individual's fate in this world. We know, for instance, that someone born into a lower-caste family in a poor region of India has fewer life chances than someone born into affluence in the West. Presumably God can make many more predictions. The *most* just world consistent with CDF will be governed by a rebirth mechanism that is as ethicised *as possible*. Even if it is not perfectly just, this would be much more just than any world without rebirth.

Indeed, even non-ethicised rebirth might well be more just than a world where each person has only one life. If we believe in non-ethicised rebirth, then it is no longer tragic for a child to die young, as her short life is only one part of the individual's much longer journey. If every soul goes through a similar series of lives, some of them brief, then this individual's entire existence is no longer tragic *in comparison* to the total existence of others. Rebirth also allows loved ones to meet again in another life.³⁰ Death

²⁹ If the rebirth mechanism is perfectly ethicised, then we have a perfect theodicy without God. Indeed, God's only role is to act as an infallible mechanism for perfectly ethicised rebirth. If God makes *choices* independent of the individual's ethical merits, then this introduces an element of arbitrariness and unfairness.

³⁰ This particular role for rebirth can only be played by rebirth within the kin group, or some other system where friends in one life find each other anew in each rebirth (or at least in some future rebirth). Most systems of non-ethicised rebirth that have been adopted in human history have involved rebirth within the kin group – suggesting that, even when it is non-ethicised, one key role of belief in rebirth has always been to make the world seem more just.

thus loses much of its sting. As a result, the fact that innocent people are murdered becomes less unjust.

9. *Immortality and Morality*

We now compare the requirements of theism with those of morality. As with freedom, we distinguish both a *scope* and a *mechanism*. Theism requires a perfectly ethicised cycle of rebirth; or, if CDF makes perfection impossible, a *maximally* ethicised cycle. With regard to scope, that cycle must include all human lives – past, present, and future. A morally perfect God will create a world that not only *is* just, but *has always been* just.

It may seem obvious that morality requires much less. After all, rebirth is hardly a common view in Western culture. Many people continue to believe in morality, and to act relatively morally, without any belief in an afterlife whatsoever. The fact that belief in non-ethicised rebirth, itself insufficient for a just world, is found in many cultures reinforces the conclusion that human beings can live indefinitely within an unjust cosmos.

I agree that morality requires much less than theism in terms of both scope and mechanism. However, I shall also argue that morality does require some belief akin to immortality.

10. *Separating Morality from Theism*

I begin by dispensing with some familiar arguments that attempt to tie morality to theism. If morality requires us to believe in God, and if we cannot believe in God without an afterlife, then morality requires that afterlife. Morality might require God for three reasons. (1) If some relationship with the divine is a necessary condition for a meaningful human life, then the moral need to think of our own lives as meaningful requires belief in God. (2) Alternatively, if we can only behave morally in a world we believe to be just, and if God is necessary to guarantee justice, then we must posit God. (3) Finally, God might be necessary to ground moral truths.

All three arguments are vulnerable. Even if we agree that human lives would be *more valuable* if God existed, it does not follow that the values available in an atheist world are insufficient. Utilitarians will simply reply that the avoidance of suffering and the cultivation of the most valuable human experiences, achievements, and relationships are sufficient for a meaningful human moral life.

As we saw earlier, a perfectly just Godless world is possible, if some impersonal mechanism generates an ethicised cycle of rebirth. So justice does not require God. I would also argue that morality does not require the world to be perfectly just. We return to that question below.

Finally, God is not needed to ground moral truths. This argument for theism does have some force in relation to non-naturalists such as Sidgwick, who cannot base morality on either natural facts or human inclinations. Without God, the non-naturalist seems to leave moral facts hanging in thin air. Contemporary non-naturalists will offer two replies: one negative, the other positive. The negative reply notes that God faces the same problems as any naturalist foundation for morality – a point familiar from both Plato's Euthyphro dilemma and G. E. Moore's 'naturalistic fallacy'. Just as we can always ask, of any natural property, whether actions with that property are right; so we can ask whether God's commands are right, or the things that God loves are good. The appeal of non-naturalism rests on the implausibility of *any* foundation for moral claims, whether natural or supernatural.

The positive defence of non-naturalism would appeal to analogies with other areas of knowledge. The autonomy of different realms of discourse is a striking theme of recent philosophy. We accept knowledge of mathematics, logic, and other minds that cannot be reduced to, or derived from, knowledge of any other domain. Why not grant non-natural moral facts the same autonomy?

11. *Separating morality from justice: Scope*

Suppose we accept, as many contemporary philosophers do, that morality can survive without God. Our present question is whether it can survive without some kind of afterlife. A believer in perfectly ethicised rebirth might argue that, even if morality does not require God, it does require a perfectly just world. We saw earlier that a perfectly just world requires perfectly ethicised rebirth. So morality requires the same.

Utilitarians, like many others, will simply deny that morality presupposes a completely just world. Morality is essentially forward-looking. It relates to our impact on the world. We can affect the future, but not the past. What matters is what the future holds, not the past. So morality cannot require a belief that the world *has been* just. Indeed, utilitarians will be very suspicious of that belief. If it turns out to be false, it will have a very negative impact. (The following argument draws on a long utilitarian tradition –

especially associated with Jeremy Bentham – of rejecting conservative defences of the status quo.)

If we believe in ethicised rebirth, then we will also believe that the less fortunate deserve their misfortunes, and thus deserve no assistance. If ethicised rebirth is not true, then our false beliefs will lead us to fail to assist innocent victims of injustice. *False* belief in *ethicised* rebirth illegitimately reduces concern for the least fortunate.

If the metaphysical case for rebirth is compelling, then of course we should believe it. But the rebirth story is under-supported by evidence and argument.³¹ (Even if rebirth per se is well-supported, belief in *ethicised* rebirth is certainly a leap of faith.) If we believe in rebirth, we definitely do so for moral reasons. Utilitarians will then argue that, for well-off people to believe, without sufficient evidence, that they ‘deserve’ their good fortune on account of virtuous past lives – while others deserve to suffer – is an extreme case of objectionable partiality.

Theism and morality have very different scopes. Theism must apply its cycle of rebirth to the past as well as the future, because a just cosmos concerns both past and future. On the other hand, for the utilitarian, morality is essentially forward-looking.

12. *Separating morality from justice: Mechanism*

Morality does not require the same scope of immortality as theism. But perhaps it requires the same mechanism, with a more limited scope. Here are three familiar moral arguments for immortality:

1. *The justice argument.* Morality tells us to play our part in making the world just. We cannot adopt a goal unless we know that goal will be achieved. Therefore, we must believe that the world will become just.
2. *The Sidgwick argument.* Morality only makes sense if there is a perfect correlation between self-interest and aggregate well-being. Such a coincidence is only possible with an afterlife. Therefore, morality requires an afterlife.
3. *The meaningfulness argument.* My life can only be meaningful if I have some chance of achieving some goal that can only be achieved if I survive death.

³¹ For a philosophical critique of arguments and evidence for rebirth, see Edwards, *Reincarnation*.

All three arguments are forward-looking. But they demand different mechanisms. The justice argument is the most demanding. It requires a perfectly ethicised cycle of rebirth (or something equivalent) in the future. It is also the least persuasive argument, with two obvious weaknesses. In the first place, my goal as an individual is not a just world – something I cannot bring about – but merely to play my part in bringing about such a world. I can play that part even if I know that, because others will not play theirs, the world is unlikely to become just. Rule utilitarians have long acknowledged the distinction between an ideal code (based on an ideal world of full compliance) and moral guidance for the real world of partial compliance. The non-compliance of others is a serious moral issue, but we do not solve it by wishing it away.³²

Furthermore, to adopt something as my goal, I clearly do not need to believe that it *will* come about. Indeed, if I already believe *that*, then it makes no sense to adopt the goal. If success is inevitable, then morality is irrelevant. The most that I must believe is that the goal is possible. If a just world is my goal, it is enough to believe that such a world is possible – however unlikely. If I have the more limited of playing my part in a just world, then I only need to believe that it is possible that my actions will make the world more just.

I conclude that the justice argument fails. We turn next to the Sidgwick argument. This requires only a correlation between self-interest and morality in the future. It does not require a just world. Indeed, the Sidgwick correlation is possible even in a world that always remains unjust. The Sidgwick correlation does not require that the good always prosper; only that some mechanism ensures that the rewards for each individual of behaving morally – whatever those rewards may be – are equal to her rewards from self-interested behaviour. It might turn out that I will suffer whatever I do, while you will prosper. What matters is that I do best by doing my duty, not that I do well.

The Sidgwick correlation clearly does not apply to this life. In this life, self-interest and morality clearly point in different directions. An afterlife can align them. So Sidgwick requires an afterlife. But he does not need an immortal afterlife, or an eternal cycle of rebirth. A perfect correlation could be achieved in a single next life – where any rewards from immorality in this life (and losses from moral behaviour) are counter-balanced.

³² On contemporary rule utilitarianism, see Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*; Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism*, chapter three; and Mulgan, *Future People*, chapter five.

So the Sidgwick correlation requires some afterlife, even if it needs much less than theism. But does morality require the Sidgwick correlation? Most contemporary utilitarians would say that it does not. Utilitarians regard the clash between self-interest and aggregate well-being as a site of real moral conflict. Our moral lives are structured by the clash between these two conflicting sources of moral demand. While it is difficult to resolve that conflict, it is not impossible. A central question for utilitarians is the extent to which morality requires me to sacrifice my own well-being for the common good. Such sacrifice is morally problematic because, in our world, it so often seems to be uncompensated. In a world with a Sidgwick correlation, while the concept of self-sacrifice may make sense, uncompensated sacrifice is ruled out.³³

A Sidgwick correlation is not necessary for morality, and would indeed render our moral lives rather empty. Modern utilitarianism offers many more realistic ways to balance self-interest and aggregate well-being. However, although Sidgwick's correlation is unnecessary, his argument does uncover a real issue for utilitarian ethics. If the gap between self-interest and aggregate well-being grows too large, then any recognisably utilitarian moral code may become too demanding for ordinary human beings. Accordingly, utilitarians have an urgent need to seek ways to bring self-interest and aggregate well-being closer together. I shall argue that concern for future people can play this role.

We turn now to our third moral argument for immortality. The meaningfulness argument is most famously associated with Kant. Morality gives me

³³ This is also why utilitarians have strong reason to reject recent philosophical attempts, such as that of David Gauthier, to reduce morality to self-interested rationality. (Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*.)

We should also note that the existence of a Sidgwick correlation would not necessarily resolve any of our *practical* difficulties. Faced with an apparent conflict between self-interest and aggregate well-being, I must decide what to do. Sidgwick tells me that the conflict is only apparent, as some unknown mechanism ensures that self-interest and aggregate well-being coincide. This does not, in itself, help me decide what to do. Should I do what self-interest seems to recommend, or what aggregate well-being seems to recommend? Commentators typically assume that the mechanism works by adjusting post-mortem individual rewards so that the action recommended by utilitarianism *in this life* also maximises self-interest. But, of course, an opposite mechanism is equally possible. Perhaps we should all pursue our own self-interest – and trust that a utilitarian afterlife will ensure that our egoism maximises aggregate well-being. (In much the same way that many of our contemporaries trust in the mechanisms of the free-market to conjure maximum aggregate well-being out of self-interest.) If our aim is to decide what to do, then positing a Sidgwick correlation does not help.

the goal of perfect virtue. As perfect virtue is only possible if I am immortal, I must adopt the postulate of immortality. As it stands, this argument is over-stated. I can surely adopt perfect virtue as the goal around which I structure my life, while still acknowledging that I cannot ever reach that goal. This move is especially congenial to utilitarians, who urge me to adopt utility maximisation as my ethical standard, without claiming that I could ever actually maximise utility.

However, like Sidgwick's dualism, Kant's argument also points to a deeper moral issue. If we are to live morally meaningful lives, then we do need something to play the role that immortality plays for Kant or Sidgwick. But a secular concern for future people is sufficient here as well.

13. *Separating future concern from self-concern*

Among both philosophers and non-philosophers, opinion divides sharply over the meaningfulness question. This division often tracks the divide between atheists and theists. Of course, atheists and theists disagree over whether they *will* survive death. But they also disagree over two evaluative questions. Would it be good to survive death? And especially: Is life meaningless or empty if we do not? Many people find it liberating to think that this life is all we have. This gives our present life a new meaning and urgency. Others find such a prospect intolerable. The former tend to be atheists; the latter theists. Of course, we could see both reactions as rationalisations. If you are convinced that this world is all there is, then you might want to look on the bright side; while someone who has devoted their life to the search for posthumous salvation will hardly cherish the prospect that this was unnecessary. But I propose to take these conflicting attitudes at face value.

My own attitude is mixed. I believe that the absence of an afterlife would not – and, indeed, *does* not – deprive life of its meaning. But, on the other hand, insofar as life is good I would like it to continue, and I certainly do not feel the force of the currently fashionable idea that an eternal life must be eventually meaningless.³⁴ And, most significantly for our present discussion, I believe that we must look beyond our own immediate interests and concerns – and perhaps beyond the boundaries of our own individual earthly life – to find true meaning.

³⁴ Williams, “The Makropolous Case”.

Not everyone shares this last belief. But my present aim is to show that even those who do share it, need not posit rebirth or any other afterlife. In the meaningfulness argument, immortality plays two roles. It provides continuity of both *moral agent* and *moral object*. In Kant's original example, the two are merged, as my principal moral object *is* my own moral agency. Suppose I know that, whatever I do, I will be annihilated immediately after my next action. This fact might render my final choice meaningless, in two distinct ways. If the *objects* of my moral concern do not extend beyond my own life, then I will be indifferent to the results of my final action. Alternatively, I may feel unable to embark on any course of *action* at all – on the grounds that actions require agency extended over time, and my agency is about to end.

Drawing together our discussions of both Sidgwick and meaningfulness, I suggest that immortality can play three useful roles in moral philosophy. Immortality can provide each of the following: (1) continuity of moral agent; (2) continuity of moral object; and (3) reconciliation of self-interest and aggregate well-being.

Any form of afterlife provides for continuity of both agent and object. If I will live again, then, at any point in this life, my agency stretches into the future. Even if my moral concern is only for myself, its object is also ongoing.³⁵ However, no form of immortality offers a satisfactory reconciliation. Ethicised rebirth (or ethicised personal immortality) reconciles self-interest and utilitarian morality. However, because that reconciliation is perfect, it achieves too much – depriving our ethical lives of their richness and moral content.

Non-ethicised rebirth also provides continuity of both agent and object. Continuity is ensured by rebirth itself, not by its mechanism. So long as I will be reborn, both my agency and my self-concern continue. However, non-ethicised rebirth, or any other form of non-ethicised personal immortality, does nothing to reconcile self-interest and aggregate well-being. Indeed, it inhibits such reconciliation. By ensuring continuity of the *individ-*

³⁵ A *finite* cycle of rebirth may seem insufficient. If each life is similar, then I will face the threat of meaninglessness in my *last* life. However, if change or progress is possible from one life to another, then, while *this life* might require a next life to render it fully meaningful, we cannot assume that this requirement holds true of all future lives. Things might be different in the next life in ways that we cannot now predict, even if the next life is also finite in duration. The fact that today needs tomorrow to render today's projects meaningful, does not imply that I must live for ever if each day's projects are to make sense.

ual agent, non-ethicised rebirth allows for purely self-concerned continuity of object.

By contrast, if we reject a personal afterlife, we must also reject the possibility of continuity for the individual agent. We must then seek alternative objects of moral concern. And, as we shall now see, this very search itself inevitably leads to a partial reconciliation between self-interest and aggregate well-being.

Suppose I am convinced that I will not survive death. This threatens to make my life meaningless, especially as I approach the moment of my death. How can I ensure continuity of both moral agent and moral concern? To explore this question, let us begin with a more extreme case. Suppose I become convinced of the no-self view, advocated by Parfit and Buddhism. I see my present self, not as a continuing agent who exists through time, but as a momentarily existing atom of experience. ‘I’ consist only of this present choice. How can I make that choice meaningful?

If I remain self-concerned, and self-focused, my search for meaning will be fruitless. As I cease to exist the moment this choice is made, it can neither affect *me* in the future, nor form part of any meaningful ongoing pattern of action that *I* perform.

The contemporary Kantian moral philosopher Christine Korsgaard presents the need for agent continuity as a conclusive practical reason to reject the reductionist no-self account of personal identity. The fact that we can do *metaphysics* without supposing deep further facts about the identity of persons does not mean that *ethics* can afford to be equally parsimonious. To deliberate, one must see oneself as a unified conscious agent whose projects and identity endure through time.³⁶

Korsgaard’s Kantian argument for a continuing self is strikingly analogous to the Kantian argument for personal immortality. I shall argue that the best reductionist reply to the former provides the best utilitarian reply to the latter.

Suppose that, despite Korsgaard’s argument, I remain in the metaphysical grip of the no-self view. I cannot believe in a continuing self. But I accept the need to think of my present decision as a part of some larger pattern of actions, performed by some agent larger than my (present, momentary) self. How might I proceed?

The obvious solution is to think, not in terms of individual agents, but of groups. My present self and my future selves, though not strictly one per-

³⁶ Korsgaard, “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency”. For related discussion, see Mulgan, “Two Parfit Puzzles” and Mulgan, *Future People*, chapter 3.

son, are still a group of agents acting in concert. Instead of focusing on *what I can do*, and then being paralysed by my own limitations, I should instead begin by asking *what we can do together*. I then choose my action, not in isolation, but because of the role it plays in some larger collective pattern of action.

The advantage of group action is that it is much more metaphysically parsimonious in this context than individual agency. I can believe that my present and future selves act as a group even if I am sceptical about the precise metaphysical status of that group. Consider the more familiar case of a group made up of different persons, such as a department or nation. I can easily believe that my department acts as a group without believing that there exists some metaphysically distinct agent that is *the department*.

This metaphysical parsimony is especially useful in the parallel case of immortality. Suppose I very strongly do not believe in personal immortality or rebirth. I simply cannot believe that I will survive death. Indeed, perhaps I cannot even entertain that belief as a ‘postulate of practical reason’ – whatever that means. But I am convinced that meaningfulness requires continuity of agency beyond my death. I cannot really believe that there are future selves who are continuations of my present self. But I do believe there are future people, distinct from myself, with whom I can join in group action. Instead of thinking of my present action in isolation, and despairing over the limitations imposed by my mortality, I should think of that group, and then ask what we can do together. I then play my part in our best group action.

These remarks apply to continuity of agency. This is the more difficult, and more controversial, case. Continuity of moral object is easier to achieve. Under the no-self view, as an isolated instantaneous self, I can only achieve meaning by caring about future selves who are not me. As a mortal person who rejects personal immortality, I can only achieve meaning by caring about future people who are not me. Continuity of agency obviously supports continuity of object. Once I start to evaluate my actions by considering their part in a larger group action, I am likely to begin to identify with that group, and with its other members – adopting their concerns as my own.

This brings us to a second advantage of the group action path to meaning. Unlike the solution offered by non-ethicised rebirth, it provides a partial Sidgwick correlation. To make my life meaningful, I must think more about larger wholes, and less about my individual self. This brings my self-concern closer to aggregate well-being. The reconciliation is never total. The groups in question are smaller than the whole of humanity, and my

identification with them is never absolute. The conflict between self-interest and aggregate well-being remains. But this is as it should be, if our reconciliation is not to obliterate the essence of human moral life.

Group action is hardly uncontroversial, and raises more questions than it answers.³⁷ But it does provide a metaphysically parsimonious alternative to both Kant's moral argument for immortality, and Sidgwick's own solution to his dualism of practical reason. It also highlights the comparative modesty of morality, as against the metaphysical extravagance of theism.

As obligations to future people become more pressing in our ethical lives, and as ethical issues become more globalised and interconnected, group actions will become ever more significant.³⁸ This makes our ethical lives more complicated, and can make individuals feel insignificant. I have argued that, on the contrary, group action is the key to a meaningful ethical life.

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³⁷ For an excellent recent discussion, see Woodard, *Reasons, Patterns and Cooperation*.

³⁸ For further discussion of these future changes in our ethical lives, see Mulgan, 'Moral Philosophy and the Future'.

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