

The Methods of Ethics

Henry Sidgwick

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Henry Sidgwick : The Methods of Ethics before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Methods of Ethics:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. AN ARGUMENT FOR UTILITARIAN ETHICS THROUGH METHODOLOGICAL ARGUMENTBy Steven H ProppHenry Sidgwick (18381900) was an English utilitarian philosopher and economist, as well as one of the founders (and first President) of the Society for Psychological Research. He also founded Newnham College in 1875, a women-only constituent college of the University of Cambridge, which was only the second Cambridge college to admit women. He wrote a number of books, such as Outlines of the History of Ethics, The Elements of Politics, The Development of European Polity, The Principles of Political Economy. etc.He wrote in the Preface to this 1874 book, [This book] claims to be an examination, at once expository and critical, of the different methods of obtaining reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done which are to be found in the moral consciousness of mankind generally: and which, from time to time, have been developed, either singly or in combination, by individual thinkers, and worked up into the systems now historical my treatise is not dogmatic: all the different methods developed in it are expounded and criticized from a neutral position, and as impartially as possible my immediate object is not Practice but Knowledge. I have thought that the predominance in the minds of moralists a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science: and that this would be benefited by an application to is of the same disinterested curiosity to which we chiefly owe the great discoveries of physics I have wished to put aside temporarily the urgent need which we all feel of finding and adopting the true method of determining what we ought to do; and to consider simply what conclusions will be rationally reached if we start with certain ethical premises, and with what degree of certainty and precision.In the first chapter, he explains, The boundaries of the study called Ethics

are variously and often vaguely conceived: but they will perhaps be sufficiently defined if a Method of Ethics is explained to mean any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ought to do, or to seek to realize by voluntary action I provisionally distinguish the study of Ethics from that of Politics, which seeks to determine the proper constitution and the right public conduct of governed societies it seems clear that an attempt to ascertain the general laws or uniformities by which the varieties of human conduct, and of mens sentiments and judgments respecting conduct, may be EXPLAINED, is essentially different from the attempt to determine which among these varieties of conduct is RIGHT and which of these divergent judgments VALID. (Bk. I, Ch. I, 1, pg. 1-2) He states, Here I wish only to point out that, if the duty of aiming at the general happiness is thus taken to include all other duties, as subordinate applications of it, we seem to be again led to the notion of Happiness as a ultimate end categorically prescribed---only it is now General Happiness and not the private happiness of any individual. And this is the view that I myself take of the Utilitarian principle. (4, pg. 8) He outlines, I have attempted to define and unfold not one Method of Ethics, but several: at the same time these are not here studied historically, as methods that have actually been used or proposed for the regulation of practice; but rather as alternatives between which the human mind seems to me necessarily forced to choose, when it attempts to frame a complete synthesis of practical maxims and to act in a perfectly consistent manner. Thus, they might be called natural methods rationalized (5, pg. 12) He adds, My object, then, in the present work, is to expound as clearly and as fully as my limits will allow the different methods of Ethics that I find implicit in our common moral reasoning; to point out their mutual relations; and where they seem to conflict, to define the issue as much as possible. (5, pg. 14) He states, To sum up: our conscious active impulses are so far from being always directed towards the attainment of pleasure or avoidance of pain for ourselves, that we can find everywhere in consciousness extra-regarding impulses, directed towards something that is not pleasure, nor relief from pain; and, indeed, a most important part of our pleasure depends upon the existence of such impulses: while on the other hand they are in many cases so far incompatible with the desire of our own pleasure that the two kinds of impulse do not easily coexist in the same moment of consciousness; and more occasionally the two come into irreconcilable conflict, and prompt to opposite courses of action. And this incompatibility is no doubt specially prominent in the case of the impulse towards the end which most markedly competes in ethical controversy with pleasure: the love of virtue for its own sake, or desire to do what is right as such. (Ch. IV, 3, pg. 52) He summarizes, the apparent cognitions that most men have of the rightness or reasonableness of conduct are normally accompanied by emotions of various kinds, known as moral sentiments: but an ethical judgment cannot be explained as affirming merely the existence of such a sentiment: indeed it is an essential characteristic of a moral feeling that it is bound up with an apparent cognition of something more than mere feeling there seems to be no ground for regarding such desires and aversions as the sole, or even the normal, motives of human volitions. Nor, again, is it generally important to determine whether we are always, metaphysically speaking, free to do what we clearly see to be right. What I ought to do, in the strictest use of the word ought, is always in my power, in the sense that there is no obstacle to my doing it except absence of adequate motive; and it is ordinarily impossible for me, in deliberation, to regard such absence of motive as a reason for not doing what I otherwise judge to be reasonable. (Ch. VI, 1 pg. 77-78) He says, It seems to me .more in accordance with common sense to recognize---as [Joseph] Butler does---that the calm desire for my good on the whole is AUTHORITATIVE; and therefore carries with it implicitly a rational dictate to aim at this end, if in any case a conflicting desire urges the will in an opposite direction On this view, ultimate good on the whole, unqualified by a reference to a particular subject, must be taken to mean what as a rational being I should desire and seek to realize, assuming myself to have an equal concern for ALL existence. (Ch. IX, 3, pg. 112) Later, he adds, I shall therefore confidently lay down, that if there be any Good other than Happiness to be sought by man, as an ultimate practical end, it can only be Goodness, Perfection, or Excellence of Human Existence. (4, pg. 115) He asserts, The first and most fundamental assumption , involved not only in the empirical method of Egoistic Hedonism, but in the very conception of Greatest Happiness as an end of action, is the commensurability of Pleasures and Pains. By this I mean that we must assume the pleasures sought and the pains shunned to have determinate quantitative relations to each other; for otherwise they cannot be conceived as possible elements of a total which we are to seek to make as great as possible. (Bk. II, Ch. II, 1, pg. 123) But later he adds, I continue to make comparisons between pleasures and pains with practical reliance on their results. But I conclude that it would be at least highly desirable to control and supplement these results of such comparisons by the assistance of some other method: if we can find any on which we see reason to rely. (Ch. III, 7, pg. 150) He clarifies, it may be thought by religious persons that the performance of duties is owed not to the human or other living beings affected by them, but to God as the author of the moral law. And I would certainly not deny that our common conception of duty involves an implicit relation of an individual will to a universal will conceived as perfectly rational: but I am not prepared to affirm that this implication is necessary, and an adequate discussion of the difficulties involved in it would lead to metaphysical controversies of which I am desirous of avoiding. (Bk. III, Ch. II, 1, pg. 218) He observes, I have endeavored to ascertain impartially, by mere reflection, on our common moral discourse, what are the general principles or maxims, according to which different kinds of conduct are judged to be right and reasonable in different departments of life. I wish it to be particularly observed, that I have in no case introduced my own views, in so far as I am conscious of their being at all peculiar to

myself: my sole object has been to make explicit the implied premises of our common moral reasoning. (Ch. XI, 1, pg. 338) He says, If, then, the prescriptions of Justice, Good Faith, and Veracity, as laid down by Common Sense, appear so little capable of being converted into first principles of scientific Ethics, it seems scarcely necessary to inquire whether such axioms can be extracted from the minor maxims of social behavior, such as the maxim of Liberality or the rules restraining the Malevolent Affections Indeed Common Sense can only be saved from inconsistency or hopeless vagueness by adopting the interest of society as the ultimate standard: and in the same way we cannot definitely distinguish Courage from Foolhardiness except by a reference to the probable tendency of the daring act to promote the wellbeing of the agent or of others, or to some definite rule of duty prescribed under some other notion. (Ch. XI, 7, pg. 355) He concludes, it remains to consider whether we can frame any other coherent account of Ultimate Good. If we are not to systematize human activities by taking Universal Happiness as their common end, on what other principles are we to systematize them?... I have failed to find any systematic answer to this question and hence I am finally led to the conclusion that the Intuitionist method rigorously applied yields as its final results the doctrine of pure Universalistic Hedonism---which it is convenient to denote by the single word, Utilitarianism. (Ch. XIV, 5, pg. 406-407) He defines it: By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct. (Bk. IV, Ch. I, 1, pg. 411) He admits, It is perhaps not surprising that some thinkers of the Utilitarian school should consider that the task of hedonistic calculation which is thus set before the utilitarian moralist is too extensive; and should propose to simplify it by marking off a large sphere of individual option and self-guidance to which ethical dictation does not apply. I should quite admit that it is clearly expedient to draw a dividing line of this kind; but it appears to me that there is no simple general method of drawing it; that it can only be drawn by careful utilitarian calculation applied with varying results to the various relations and circumstances of human life. (Ch. IV, 1, pg. 477) He summarizes, No doubt there are other ends besides Happiness, such as Knowledge, Beauty, etc., commonly regarded as unquestionably desirable but when the pursuit of any of these ends involves an apparent sacrifice of happiness in other ways, the practical question whether under these circumstances such pursuit ought to be maintained or abandoned seems always to be decided by an application, however, rough, of the method of pure empirical Hedonism. And in saying that this must be the method of the Utilitarian moralist, I only mean that no other can normally be applied in reducing to a common measure the diverse elements of the problems with which it has to deal. (Ch. V, 1, pg. 479) But he also cautions, Thus, on Utilitarian principles, it may be right to do and privately recommend, under certain circumstances, what it would not be right to advocate openly; it may be right to teach openly to one set of persons what it would be wrong to teach to others; it may be conceivably right to do, if it can be done with comparative secrecy, what it would be wrong to do in the face of the world; and even, if perfect secrecy can be reasonably expected, what it would be wrong to recommend by private advice or example Thus the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this; that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret; and similarly it seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept esoteric And thus a Utilitarian may reasonably desire that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, insofar as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands. (Ch. V, 3, pg. 489-490) Sidgwick's book will be of great interest to anyone seriously studying contemporary ethical theories, or Utilitarianism in general. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Excellent analysis of utilitarian positions By Stephen K Jones An excellent analysis of the plethora of positions posited to provide a coherent utilitarian theory of morality. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Kindle Poor Formatting By Robert Williams Looks like a great book, but unfortunately the Kindle edition is very poorly formatted and in places virtually impossible to follow.