

Attila Tanyi

Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*

Hauptseminar, Konstanz, Winter semester 2010/11

Montag, 10-12am, Raum D435

Introduction. Henry Sidgwick was one of the most influential ethical philosophers of the Victorian era, and his work continues to exert a powerful influence on Anglo-American ethical and political theory. His masterpiece, *The Methods of Ethics* (Hackett, 7th edition, 1907), was first published in 1874 and in many ways marked the culmination of the classical utilitarian tradition. Sidgwick's treatment of that position was more comprehensive and scholarly than any previous one, and he set the agenda for most of the twentieth-century debates between utilitarians and their critics. But in addition to authoritatively formulating utilitarianism and inspiring utilitarians, the *Methods* has also served as a general model for how to do ethical theory, since it provides a series of systematic, historically informed comparisons between utilitarianism and its leading alternatives. C. D. Broad, a later successor to Sidgwick's Cambridge chair, famously went so far as to say "Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* seems to me to be on the whole the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written, and to be one of the English philosophical classics". For these reasons engaging with Sidgwick's work remains an excellent way to cultivate a serious philosophical interest in ethics, meta-ethics, and practical ethics, not to mention the history of these subjects. This course will systematically investigate Sidgwick's position, his arguments and method. The language of instruction will be English.

Hausarbeit möglich. The course will be completed by a 10-15 page long paper (Times New Roman, 12, 1.5) written by the student on topics that are related to the course. Topics must be discussed with the course instructor and must have his permission. During the course student presentations will also be possible (they will be compulsory if the number of students will not be higher than the number of occasions). The idea for these presentations, however, is not that the student gives a lecture to the other participants of the course, but that he/she guides us through the text, by summarizing Sidgwick's position and making critical remarks and commentaries.

Course material. Since we will read one book, it is important that we have the same edition. The one we will use - this is the standard one, available in bookshops and the internet - is Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 7th edition, 1907 (reprinted in 1981).

Background and overview reading. Those who are interested and want to have a good overview of Sidgwick's philosophy before the course are advised to read the entry on Sidgwick in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (accessible for free on the internet). Other places where one can find good treatment of Sidgwick's philosophy that are in the semester apparatus of the course are the following:

Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe. An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Ross Harrison (ed.), *Henry Sidgwick*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Bart Schultz (ed.), *Essays on Henry Sidgwick*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Jerome B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, London: Routledge, 1967.

The last two works are particularly useful since they involve extensive discussion of *The Methods of Ethics*.

Course schedule. What follows is the schedule of the course with topic and literature for each occasion. I do not here provide secondary literature; if a student is interested in the given topic – wants to write his/her paper on it, for instance – I am happy to provide further bibliographic information.

Seminar 1 (October 18). Introduction and general matters of interest (practical issues: examination, grading, student presentations etc.). Lecture by the course instructor. Overview of the work, ethics and politics, ethical judgments.

Book I, Chapters I-III

Seminar 2 (October 25). Pleasure and desire, free will.

Book I, Chapters IV-V

November 1: national holiday, All Saints day.

Seminar 3 (November 8). Overview of intuitionism and egoism. Goodness.

Book I, Chapters VII-IX

Seminar 4 (November 15). Egoism and empirical hedonism. The congruence of happiness and duty.

Book II, Chapters I, II, V

Seminar 5 (November 22). Intuitionism, virtue and duty.

Book III, Chapters I, II

Seminar 6 (November 29). Benevolence.

Book III, Chapter IV

Seminar 7 (December 6). Justice.

Book III, Chapter V

Seminar 8 (December 13). Laws and promises (political obligation, fairness).

Book III, Chapter VI

Seminar 9 (December 20). Review of common-sense morality.

Book III, Chapter XI

Seminar 10 (January 10). Moral motivation, moral judgment, philosophical intuitionism.

Book III, Chapters XII, XIII

Seminar 11 (January 17). Ultimate good, the meaning and proof of utilitarianism.

Book III, Chapter XIV

Book IV, Chapters I, II

Seminar 12 (January 24). Utilitarianism and common-sense morality.

Book IV, Chapter III

Seminar 13 (January 31). The method of utilitarianism.

Book IV, Chapters IV, V

Seminar 14 (February 7). The relations of the three methods, the dualism of practical reason.

Concluding Chapter