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THE METHODS OF ETHICS*

abstract

The paper begins with an account of the intellectual background to Henry Sidgwick's writing of his Methods of Ethics and an analysis of what Sidgwick meant by a 'method'. His broad distinction between three main ethical theories – egoism, consequentialism, and deontology – is elucidated and accepted. Sidgwick's different forms of intuitionism are explained, as are his criteria for testing the 'certainty' of a potentially self-evident belief. Section 3 discusses dogmatic intuitionism (common-sense morality systematized) and Sidgwick's own view, in the light of his requirement for precision in ethics. The final section concerns the implications of Sidgwick's position on disagreement for ethical theory. It is suggested that we have some knowledge in ethics, on which most converge, but not much. The paper concludes with a recommendation for a more irenic and less dogmatic approach to philosophical ethics.

keywords

Henry Sidgwick, ethical methodology, ethical intuitionism, moral disagreement, dogmatism

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It seems only appropriate, in an issue of a journal dedicated to the the methods of philosophy, and in a paper on the methods of philosophical ethics, to begin with Henry Sidgwick's book *The Methods of Ethics*, first published in 1874 and passing (sometimes rather painfully) through six further editions, until the seventh of 1907, which is now canonical.¹ Of course, my title is not the real reason for beginning with Sidgwick. Rather it is the content of his book, and its quality. C. D. Broad famously said in 1930 that, in his view, Sidgwick's *Methods* is 'the best treatise on moral theory that has even been written', an opinion recently echoed by Derek Parfit in 2011, who suggested that the *Methods* contains 'the largest number of true and important claims' of all books in the history of ethics.² How one individuates claims, and judges importance, are of course not straightforward matters, but I think Parfit's suggestion is at least highly plausible. I do not, however, want merely to inflict exegesis of Sidgwick on my readers, though there will be some of that in what follows.³ I will begin with a little on what Sidgwick himself meant by a 'method', an issue which, despite Sidgwick's reputation for clarity, is in fact rather murky. I will then go on to describe his own philosophical method (in the standard sense) – that is, the way he did ethics, focusing in particular on his intuitionism. I shall then look critically at his intuitionist appraisals of common-sense morality, and at his own proposed alternative, suggesting an alternative to that alternative. I will end with a problem for any normative proposal, and then suggest some implications of that problem for the way we do philosophy now.

1. Sidgwick's 'methods'

By the time the *Methods* was published, Sidgwick had for a decade been planning a book that might reconcile 'moral sense', or intuition, with utilitarianism. In the preface to the sixth edition, the editor, E.E. Constance Jones, included some illuminating notes for a lecture by Sidgwick on the development of his ethical views. Although Sidgwick is often, with some justification, described as the third of the great 'classical utilitarians', we can see from his own account of his intellectual journey that, though it began with utilitarianism strictly understood, it soon departed from there and was never to return. Sidgwick tells us that he was initially committed to Millian utilitarianism, which he found

¹ Sidgwick, 1907. All otherwise unattributed page references in the text are to this volume.

² Broad, 1930, p. 143; Parfit, 2011, p. xxiii.

³ Many of the arguments below are presented in Crisp, 2006 and Crisp, 2015. Readers may wish to consult those books for further background, elucidation, and development.

liberating in contrast to the ‘arbitrary pressure’ of the dubious, confused, or dogmatic moral rules he had been taught. That commitment sat alongside antipathy to the views of the influential Cambridge philosopher William Whewell, whose *Elements of Morality* (1845) led Sidgwick to the view that ‘intuitional’ ethics was, in comparison with mathematics, ‘hopelessly loose’. (Note, by the way, Sidgwick’s rather confusing usage of ‘intuitionism’ to refer both to the normative, first-order, deontological view he rejected, and to a range of epistemological positions, one of which he accepted. More on that below.)

Sidgwick understood Mill to hold that each person seeks her own happiness (psychological hedonism) and that each person ought to promote the happiness of all (ethical hedonism). He found both views attractive, not yet seeing the potential inconsistency between them. As he came to recognize the possibility of conflict between ‘interest’ and ‘duty’, Sidgwick began to think seriously about egoism as a normative view, and concluded that it is the opposition between ‘interest’ (that is, self-interest) and duty or the general good that is central to ethics, rather than that between ‘intuitions’ and hedonism. This, he says, explains the structure of the *Methods*, in which, after an introductory book, egoism (interest) is discussed in book 2, intuitionism (duty) in book 3, and utilitarianism (the general good) in book 4. Further, Sidgwick decided that, despite his aversion to first-order intuitionist ethics, the only way to ground a utilitarian justification for sacrificing one’s own happiness for the sake of others was through a fundamental ethical intuition: ‘I must somehow see that it was right for me to sacrifice my happiness for the good of the whole of which I am a part’.

Where was he to find such an intuition? Sidgwick returned to Kant, and, though impressed by Kant’s view that what is right for any person must be right for all persons in similar circumstances, felt that this notion of universalizability was insufficiently substantive to ground a principle of duty in opposition to egoism. This led Sidgwick to Joseph Butler, who he believed also accepted a ‘dualism of the practical reason’. It was under the influence of Butler that Sidgwick rejected psychological hedonism and accepted the existence of disinterested, other-regarding motivation. Further, since Butler’s powerful critique of utilitarianism also worried Sidgwick, and Sidgwick realized that he himself was already an ‘intuitionist’ by accepting both the Kantian thesis about rightness and the need for an intuitionist foundation for utilitarianism, he decided to reconsider intuitionist ethics itself. Unsurprisingly, Sidgwick decided to study not Whewell, but Aristotle, seeing his *Nicomachean Ethics* as an impartial attempt to make consistent the common-sense morality of his day. Sidgwick set out to do the same for nineteenth-century British morality, and 3.1-9 was the first component of the *Methods* to be completed. Again, more below on how he got on.

The subject of philosophical ethics, Sidgwick says, is the ‘methods’ of ethics, where a method is ‘any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings “ought” – or what it is “right” for them – to do, or to seek to realize by voluntary action’. Such a ‘procedure’ need not be a process. Sidgwick allows that a version of intuitionism according to which we have immediate insight into the rightness of certain actions is proposing a method (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 4). Nor is Sidgwick to be understood as suggesting that only actions matter in ethics, and not, say, the feelings or the characters of agents. Indeed he elsewhere allows that the common-sense conception of virtue includes the emotions (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 222-3) and that ethics should construct ideals of character (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 393). But discussion of such topics is significant only in so far as it is related to the primary question of ethics – how we should act, that is, what we have overall reason to do. Like Aristotle, Sidgwick sees philosophical ethics as essentially practical (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 1; 4).⁴

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b26-9.

The definition of method here leaves it open whether Sidgwick is including ethical theories, which advocate certain basic normative principles, as among the ‘rational procedures’ he has in mind. It appears not. Consider the view that God has implanted in us knowledge of certain apparently non-utilitarian common-sense rules, such as the rule that we should keep promises, because these rules are the best way to promote the utilitarian end of general happiness. According to Sidgwick, this view constitutes a rejection of the *method* of utilitarianism, though not of the utilitarian *principle* (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 85). Ethics, however, as Sidgwick points out, is ‘sometimes considered as an investigation of the true ... rational precepts of Conduct’ (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 2-3), and he himself implies that we are interested in the principles that determine which conduct is ultimately reasonable (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 5-6; see 14). In other words, philosophical ethics is an inquiry into what grounds or justifies our actions and any decision-procedure we adopt, and so we might wonder why Sidgwick emphasizes methods rather than ultimate principles (Jerry Schneewind plausibly suggests that Sidgwick was influenced by analogies between scientific and ethical methods.) Sidgwick’s book should perhaps have been titled *The Ultimate Principles of Ethics*, those principles each being a different statement of our ultimate reasons for action; and if it had been so titled some of the unclarities introduced by his focusing on methods might have been avoided.

Sidgwick says that, by adopting some plausible assumption or other, one can connect almost any method with almost any ultimate principle. But he limits his own discussion to those methods ‘logically connected with the different ultimate reasons widely accepted’ (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 78). In other words, he is looking for certain commonly alleged ultimate reasons for action (such as the promotion of happiness), and the decision-making procedure that most naturally rests on each such reason. For example, egoistic hedonism consists in the acceptance of the agent’s own happiness as ultimate reason or end, and its method will be the attempt by the agent to maximize her own happiness. But since method and end can come apart – as in the case of Sidgwick’s own utilitarianism – one might wonder why Sidgwick appears to require that, before any ultimate reason can be given a place in his discussion, its related method must be present in common-sense morality. Imagine that common-sense morality made no room for utilitarian decision-making. The utilitarian principle could still capture what justifies the common-sense method or decision-procedure. Further, his emphasis on method over principle can lead to philosophical distortion. The focus on method may explain, for example, why Sidgwick is so ready to find utilitarianism within common-sense morality, because people sometimes decide what to do by trying to work out what would do the most good from the impartial point of view. This is evidence merely of a principle of beneficence, alongside others, and that is a far cry from utilitarianism as usually understood, according to which this is the only ethical principle.

The distinction between what has become known as the ‘criterion’ of morality – what it is that makes actions right or wrong – and decision-procedures has become clearer since Sidgwick’s time, though there is no doubt that it is at work in some of his arguments. But I do think that his decision to focus on just three ‘methods’ – that is, three broadly ethical theories – egoism, intuitionism (what we might call ‘deontology’), and utilitarianism – is reasonable. These are the three positions which have come to the forefront in the history of western ethics since Socrates, though of course egoism went largely into retreat in the twentieth century, two reasons for that being perhaps G.E. Moore’s somewhat unconvincing but widely accepted objections along with Victorian distaste for the position (distaste also felt by Sidgwick, who describes the view as ‘despicable’ in earlier editions of the *Methods*, and merely ‘ignoble’ in the sixth and seventh). The debate in normative ethics, then, is between rational or normative egoism, deontology, and utilitarianism (or perhaps more broadly ‘consequentialism’). As I have said, Sidgwick began by elucidating egoism, focusing in particular on its conception

of well-being and arguing for hedonism over ‘perfectionism’. What he says about hedonism is brilliantly insightful, but in fact he could have largely left open the question of what well-being consists in, except in so far as it is claimed to involve virtue – another issue dissected beautifully by him in 2.5. When it comes to ‘dogmatic’ intuitionism – his somewhat questionable name for first-order deontology – his focus is very much more on the meat of the theory. Indeed his two-hundred page discussion of that view in book 3 is almost certainly the best elucidation of that position in the history of philosophy, and very sadly neglected, especially by most of its current adherents, who believe Sidgwick is too boring and too utilitarian to read (in fact, as anyone who reads him seriously will soon realize, he is neither!). Before we get to that, however, let us briefly look at intuitionism in general.

According to Sidgwick, intuition is a doxastic faculty (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 4-5; 28; 275), nothing more, or less, than a capacity for forming beliefs of a certain kind, with the possibility thereby of acquiring knowledge. These beliefs, because of their apparent source in intuition, may be called ‘intuitions’, and Sidgwick feels himself entitled to assume their *existence*, though not their *truth* (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 210-12):

2. Intuitionism

I wish therefore to say expressly, that by calling any affirmation as to the rightness or wrongness of actions ‘intuitive’, I do not mean to prejudge the question as to its ultimate validity, when philosophically considered: I only mean that its truth is apparently known immediately, and not as the result of reasoning. I admit the possibility that any such ‘intuition’ may turn out to have an element of error, which subsequent reflection and comparison may enable us to correct; just as many apparent perceptions through the organ of vision are found to be partially illusory and misleading: indeed the sequel will show that I hold this to be to an important extent the case with moral intuitions commonly so called. (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 211; see 34n2)

To this extent, then, Sidgwick’s intuitionism is cognitivist. Intuitions for him are not to be understood as, say, certain sentiments or attitudes, but as non-inferential (or ‘immediate’: Sidgwick, 1907, p. 98) rational beliefs which present themselves to the subject as true (and hence as potentially false) -- that is, as apparently self-evident (see e.g. Sidgwick, 1907, p. 338). Each person has to make up her own mind about whether she has any such beliefs, and at this point Sidgwick is characteristically cautious, noting that, in his experience, people seem likely to identify as moral intuitions non-cognitive states such as mere impulses to, or unspecific preferences for, action, or non-intuitive cognitive states, such as conclusions from rapid or semi-conscious processes of reasoning or familiar and unreflectively held opinions. The fact that Sidgwick denies the status of intuition to the latter shows that mere non-inferentiality is insufficient for a belief to be an intuition: it must also present itself as self-evident to the subject. If, as soon as the subject holds her customary belief up to the light it seems not true to her, then that belief was and is not a moral intuition. Some find talk of a faculty of intuition mysterious,⁵ and may seek to undermine the idea through some developmental or evolutionary account (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 212-14). Sidgwick refuses to allow that mere knowledge of the causal history of certain apparent cognitions provides any ground for distrusting them. All of our cognitive faculties have such a history, and hence so do all of our beliefs (including the beliefs of those who criticize intuitions). And the subject-matter of ethical judgements is such that they cannot be inconsistent with

⁵ See e.g. Mackie, 1977, pp. 38-9.

any merely descriptive psychological or physical claims. Nor, even if our capacity for moral cognition had been present from the start, would that give it any special claim to correctness. None of this is to deny, of course, that some more specific causal account of the origin of certain beliefs might not increase the probability of their being mistaken.

In the nineteenth century, intuitionists were often seen in opposition to so-called *inductivists*. Having presented a broad conception of intuition as ‘immediate [i.e. non-inferential] judgement as to what ought to be done or aimed at’, Sidgwick is careful to situate his intuitionism in the context of contemporary debate (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 97-8), noting quite correctly that the parties in the debate were commonly talking at cross purposes, since each was claiming to know different things. The inductivists claimed inductive knowledge of the pleasantness of certain actions, whereas intuitionists focused on the rightness (or wrongness) of those actions. Rational or normative hedonism itself cannot be known inductively. It must be either grasped intuitively, or inferred from other premises at least one of which must include a normative intuition.

What we see here is a standard argument for foundationalism in epistemology. Someone inclined towards a non-foundationalist approach, such as some form of coherentism, may well accept Sidgwick’s negative argument against inductivism (that induction alone cannot ground an ethical theory), but deny that foundationalism is the most plausible alternative. Rather, it might be claimed, for example, that hedonism provides the most consistent and coherent fit with other beliefs we have about goodness, rightness, or the world in general. Sidgwick’s own relationship with coherentism is a complex one, as we shall shortly see.

Sidgwick outlines three forms of intuitionism (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 102). The first is ‘perceptual’ intuitionism, according to which each person should do what they think right in each case as it arises. Sidgwick plausibly rejects this view, on the basis that most people find their own particular intuitions open to doubt, non-comprehensive, inconsistent over time, and indeed often in conflict with those of others, and will want to appeal to some general rules or moral theory to support their particular judgements. The second form, as I have mentioned, is ‘dogmatic’ intuitionism. According to the dogmatic intuitionist, general moral rules are implicit in common-sense moral thought, and the task of the philosopher is to elucidate and systematize them as far as possible. Dogmatic intuitionism is not, then, entirely unreflective; indeed it is the result of reflection on the *dogmata* – the beliefs – of common sense. But Sidgwick no doubt felt the name appropriate partly because he believed the view to be *insufficiently* reflective, and hence unable to provide a coherent underpinning for common-sense morality itself, an underpinning which would enable the agent to know exactly which obligations she was under in each situation in which she found herself. What is particularly objectionable to Sidgwick about dogmatic intuitionism, then, is not its starting from common-sense morality, but its readiness to end there also without having removed the indefiniteness which is, he thought, as inappropriate in ethics as in a legal system.

That brings us to Sidgwick’s preferred view: ‘philosophical’ intuitionism. Here Sidgwick is seeking ‘one or more principles more absolutely and undeniably true and evident, from which the current rules might be deduced, either just as they are commonly received or with slight modifications and rectifications’. He goes on:

[W]e conceive it as the aim of a philosopher, as such, to do somewhat more than define and formulate the common moral opinions of mankind. His function is to tell men what they ought to think, rather than what they do think: he is expected to transcend Common Sense in his premises, and is allowed a certain divergence from Common Sense in his conclusions. It is true that the limits of this deviation are firmly, though indefinitely, fixed: the truth of a philosopher’s premises will always be tested by the

acceptability of his conclusions: if in any important point he be found in flagrant conflict with common opinion, his method is likely to be declared invalid. Still, though he is expected to establish and concatenate at least the main part of the commonly accepted moral rules, he is not necessarily bound to take them as the basis on which his own system is constructed. Rather, we should expect that the history of Moral Philosophy – so far at least as those whom we may call orthodox thinkers are concerned – would be a history of attempts to enunciate, in full breadth and clearness, those primary intuitions of Reason, by the scientific application of which the common moral thought of mankind may be at once systematised and corrected. (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 373-4)

Sidgwick's readiness to assess his own views by the lights of the common-sense morality he is so doubtful about represents, I suggest, an unwillingness entirely to surrender the methodology of Aristotelian dialectic, in which one's own philosophical conclusions must be tested against what is commonly thought. If he had done so, his theory would certainly have been more radical; but it would also have been epistemically purer and hence, I suggest, more systematic. Since Sidgwick nowhere explains exactly how much epistemic weight to give to common-sense morality – that is, how far a philosopher's conclusions may diverge from that morality – he is leaving it open for a dogmatic intuitionist to use the many cases in which utilitarian conclusions are violently at odds with common-sense morality as an internal argument against Sidgwick's own arguments for utilitarianism, as well as unclear how we are to decide between two theories, one of which may have more self-evidence on its side but is less consistent than the other with common-sense morality.

But Sidgwick has good advice for the philosophical intuitionist, pure or impure, on how to proceed. He offers four tests which any allegedly self-evident intuition must pass if it is to be judged of the 'highest certainty' (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 338-42). The first three are relatively straightforward:

- (I) *Clarity*. 'The terms of the proposition must be clear and precise.'
- (II) *Reflection*. 'The self-evidence of the proposition must be ascertained by careful reflection.'
- (III) *Consistency*. 'The propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent.'

The fourth is more tricky, and stated indirectly:

- (IV) *Non-dissensus*.

Since it is implied in the very notion of Truth that it is essentially the same for all minds, the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity.... And it will be easily seen that the absence of such disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs. For if I find any of my judgments, intuitive or inferential, in direct conflict with a judgment of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality. And though the total result in my mind is not exactly suspense of judgment, but an alternation and conflict between positive affirmation by one act of thought and the neutrality that is the result of another, it is obviously something very different from scientific certitude.

We will come back to the fourth condition later. But let me now consider Sidgwick's discussion of dogmatic intuitionism in the light of his three conditions.

3. Dogmatic Intuitionism and Sidgwick's Dualism

Towards the end of book 3, after his long survey of common-sense morality, Sidgwick undertakes to bring together the various threads of his argument. He begins by reminding us of his general aim (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 337-8): to decide whether common sense can provide the basis for 'clear and precise principles commanding universal acceptance', on the understanding that such principles may be arrived at only through philosophical refinement of common-sense morality itself. These principles, in so far as they are self-evident, must of course be non-derivative and ultimate (Sidgwick, 1907, pp. 350-51).

Sidgwick draws a general connection between the clarity and non-dissensus conditions, arguing that attempting to make a common-sense principle precise will lead one into disagreement about it. In other words, even if one becomes clear in one's own mind about some complex principle – such as the principle, say, that one should keep a promise made to a living person, in full knowledge of its risks, to do something morally acceptable, and so on – one will find epistemic peers who disagree with one about that principle once refined. Common-sense moral principles are either too vague to meet the clarity condition, or, if they meet that condition, fail to meet the non-dissensus condition.

But there are problems with Sidgwick's critique. His clarity principle is too demanding: he requires an acceptable ethical principle to be so precise that it can cover any plausible eventuality without the need for any judgement on the part of the person acting on it. Sidgwick holds a view of ethics as aiming at the level of precision appropriate to a natural science, and this explains a good deal of his antipathy towards common-sense morality. Sidgwick ignores or plays down the notion of practical wisdom as a capacity to judge correctly in particular cases, perhaps in the light of general 'prima facie' or pro tanto principles. This conception of principled judgement plays an essential role in many central versions of dogmatic intuitionism, from Aristotle to Whewell (and of course on to Ross and others who wrote after Sidgwick).

Is Sidgwick's own utilitarian principle in a better position than pluralistic intuitionism? Judgement is involved in accepting utilitarianism to start with, but it will also be involved in assessing the implications of the principle in particular cases. Consider some apparently simple case in which I have to decide between two delicious desserts. Sidgwick himself, in his discussion of empirical hedonism in 2.2-3, brings out how difficult such a decision might be. I shall have to recall earlier experiences with each kind of dessert, analyse the quality of each of those on offer, and then make a judgement based on the evidence before me. It is not clear why such judgements are any easier than trying to decide, for example, what form my expression of gratitude to some benefactor should take. Judgement is inescapable. What matters is how best to ensure that one's judgements are correct.

Of course, pluralistic intuitionists should not be against system, and most are not. Consider, for example, Aristotle's discussion of how to rank the different claims on us of those differently related to us, as relatives, citizens, and so on, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.2, or Ross's list of prima facie duties. But we have to remember that, however much systematizing we do, the context of human decision-making is sufficiently complex and unpredictable that any plausible ethical theory has to allow some room for individual judgement about particular cases.

What is Sidgwick's own preferred alternative to common-sense morality? Sidgwick accepts:

Benevolence: One ought to aim at the universal good.

He does not, however, go for straight utilitarianism, accepting:

Prudence: One ought to aim at one's good on the whole.

This combination, of course, is his version of the 'dualism of practical reason', which leads him to despair, as he cannot find a principled solution to problem cases in which my own good and the universal good come apart. But if Sidgwick had recognized the importance of practical judgement, he could have allowed for a more plausible form of the dualism, in which each agent has reason to aim at her own good *and* reason to aim at the universal good, the circumstances she finds herself in determining which reason, in those circumstances, has greater weight.

Now return to W.D. Ross, who says:

If, so far as I can see, I could bring equal amounts of good into being by fulfilling my promise and by helping some one to whom I had made no promise, I should not hesitate to regard the former as my duty... [and] normally promise-keeping ... should come before benevolence.⁶

Ross, then, appears committed to the following principle:

Promise: Any agent has ultimate reason to keep promises.

I suspect that many people, perhaps the majority, would accept Promise, and this leaves us with a philosophical stand-off between deontologists on the hand and utilitarians or consequentialists on the other (and, if I am allowed a third hand, rational egoists as well). Remember Sidgwick's fourth condition – non-dissensus – which requires us to suspend judgement on any fundamental ethical proposition if we find that some epistemic peer disagrees (or, even worse, *might* disagree) with it. This condition strikes me as highly credible, and its implications might seem deeply worrying, since I see no plausible way to show that many of those who disagree with me in ethics are not (at least!) my epistemic peers. Is normative philosophical ethics, then, left in complete chaos? Not entirely. First, there is enough consensus on some principles for us even perhaps to say that we know them. Consider, for example:

Own Pain: Any agent has a reason to minimize (undeserved) suffering in their own life.

I find it hard to see how any sane person could disagree with this principle. Certainly all the sane people I have met seem to act in accordance with it. But note that it really doesn't take us very far, practically. It is just one pro tanto reason, and cannot be said to be our only reason (unless we should also accept that all of us should commit suicide as soon and as painlessly as possible). Not even the following principle will pass the non-dissensus test:

Another's Pain. Any agent has a reason to minimize the suffering of another.

Egoists will disagree with this, and though I think the many egoists in the history of philosophy to be mistaken, I cannot find any way to make them all my epistemic inferiors. Where, then, does this leave philosophical methodology in ethics? In my book *Reasons and*

4. Disagreement and its Implications

⁶ Ross, 1930, pp. 18-19.

the Good, I suggested that there are at least three strategies worth considering: resignation, impartiality, and debate. The first would involve one's refraining from any kind of philosophical debate about normative theory. This strategy, however, seems excessively pessimistic about the prospects for convergence on the truth in ethics and resulting ethical progress. The example of *Own Pain* suggests that truth is available, and there are at least some signs of *apparent* ethical progress, such as the recognition of racism, sexism, and speciesism. So, on the assumption that progress in ethics is possible, one might seek to engage in *impartial* consideration of and debate concerning the various current normative theories. There is more to be said for this strategy than for resignation, and it is certainly likely to be part of the best overall philosophical package. But the fact remains that one will usually persist in one's attachment to the normative principles that strike one as plausible, and one is thus in an especially good position to spell out those principles and display their advantages to others. So this leaves us with the final strategy, in which debate between the advocates of the different normative theories continues. But carried out between those who have suspended judgement as to the correctness or otherwise of the view which they themselves find attractive, such debate would be less adversarial and more constructive than much in philosophy at present. This would have several significant advantages. First, each participant would be more likely to notice the faults in her own position and the advantages in those of others. Second, philosophers would see that there is often greater epistemic benefit in discussing issues with those of radically different views than with some clique of one's own. Third, the aim of debate would be not the victory of one's own position but convergence on some truth, which might well be a conglomeration of various elements from several existing ethical theories. Ethical enquiry must be informed by a spirit of impartiality, in which those who propose normative principles are prepared both to hold up those principles to the light of rational reflection and the arguments of others, actual or imagined, and to look enthusiastically at the views of others, in search of enlightenment rather than dialectical victory. Critical argument, of course, would continue to be the mainstay of moral philosophical discussion, but if it were freed of its unjustified dogmatism there would be a greater likelihood of convergence on the truth.⁷ Contemporary philosophy seems to me analogous in some ways to the following. Imagine a group of equally experienced cavers, lost underground in the darkness, and wanting to get out as soon as possible. They share ideas, and it turns out that they all disagree on the best strategy. Only one of them, at best, can be right about the way to go. Now imagine that each decides to spend the time she has available trying hard to persuade her colleagues to agree with her, focusing only on what she sees as the weaknesses of their views and the strengths of her own. If I were lost, I would much prefer to be in a group whose members, though prepared to state their own views as well as possible, were also ready seriously to look for flaws in their own view and advantages in the views of others. Do we, or do we not, seriously want to find our way out of the cave? If so, then we should change the way we currently do moral philosophy.

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⁷ In discussion, Timothy Williamson pointed out the advantages of the adversarial approach in certain legal systems. The overall decision in such systems, however, lies not with the adversaries but with an impartial judge. My suggestion is that philosophical adversaries seek to incorporate more of the impartial judicial perspective into their own mode of debate.

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