

Sidgwickian Moral Theorizing

On the Teleological Relation Between Principles and Methods

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A systematic perspective on Sidgwick's
project in *The Methods of Ethics*

Three (levels of) ought questions in moral philosophy

(Q1) What ought we to do?

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(Q1) What ought we to do?

(Q2) How ought we to deliberate on [what we ought to do] ?

Three (levels of) ought questions in moral philosophy

- (Q1) What ought we to do?
- (Q2) How ought we to deliberate on [what we ought to do] ?
- (Q3) How ought we to theorize about [how we ought to deliberate on [what we ought to do]]?

Claim and aim: Sidgwick's project in *The Methods of Ethics*

- (Q1) What ought we to do?
- (Q2) How ought we to deliberate on [what we ought to do]?
- (Q3) How ought we to theorize about [how we ought to deliberate on [what we ought to do]]?

Claim

In *ME*, Sidgwick explicitly deals with (Q1) and (Q2) and offers an implicit answer to (Q3) that is based on his conception of how principles (which are supposed to answer (Q1)) and methods (which are supposed provide elements to answers to (Q2)) are related: namely teleologically.

Aim

To reconstruct Sidgwick's implicit account of moral theorizing, "Sidgwickianism".

1. A systematic perspective on Sidgwick's project in *The Methods of Ethics*
2. The teleological relation between principles and methods
3. Ramifications: Kantianism, *ME's* dialectics, and the dualism

The teleological relation between principles and methods

(Q2) How ought we to deliberate o [what we ought to do]?

“[This book] claims to be an examination [...] of the different methods of obtaining reasoned convictions as to what ought to be done which are to be found – either explicit or implicit – in the moral consciousness of mankind generally.” (ME, v)

“My object, then, in the present work, is to expound [...] the different methods of ethics that I find implicit in our common moral reasoning.” (ME, 14)

“a ‘Method of Ethics’ is explained to mean any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’ – or what it is ‘right’ for them – to do” (ME, 1)

“the present treatise [...] is [...] primarily concerned [...] with the critical exposition of the different ‘methods’ – or rational procedures for determining right conduct in any particular case.” (ME, 78)

(Q2) How ought we to deliberate o [what we ought to do]?

1. A method is a rational procedure for determining right conduct in any particular case (*ME*, 78).
2. Right conduct *is* what we ought to do (*ME*, 1).
3. What we ought to do *is* the answer to (Q1).
4. Hence, a method is a rational procedure for determining the answer to (Q1).
5. Any procedure for determining the answer to a question is a way of deliberating o that question.
6. Hence, a method is a rational way of deliberating o (Q1).
7. A *rational* way of deliberating o X is an answer to the question about how we *ought* to deliberate on X.
8. Hence, a method is an answer to the question about how we ought to deliberate on (Q1).
9. (Q2) *is* the question about how we ought to deliberate on (Q1).
10. Hence, a method is an answer to (Q2).

Methods are answers to (Q2) – further evidence

1. Sidgwick consistently employs “method” in contexts which focus on the deliberative role of methods in practical reasoning elsewhere (PSR, ix, 25, 26).

“It is the business of *Ethics* to treat of details of duty or right conduct, but *Ethical Philosophy* is primarily concerned with the general principles and methods of moral reasoning.” (PSR, ix; cp. 25)

“we have to recognise it as part of the business of Philosophy, to ‘unify’ the principles and methods of reasoning directed to practical conclusions, which we call ‘political’ when they refer to the constitution and action of government, and ‘ethical’ when they refer to private conduct.” (PSR, 26)

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2. The deliberative focus matches Sidgwick’s own account of the plan of his treatise (*ME*, 232–233).

“I think, however, that in the case of this notion it is impossible to carry out that analysis of ordinary practical reasoning into several distinct methods, each admitting and needing separate development, upon which the plan of this treatise is founded.” (*ME*, 232–233)

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2. The deliberative focus matches Sidgwick’s own account of the plan of his treatise (*ME*, 232–233).
3. In many passages, Sidgwick explicitly talks about the methods of egoism or intuitionism and consistently characterizes them as answers to (Q2) (*ME*, xxv, 95, 96, 101).

“I apply the term “Intuitional“ [...] to distinguish a method in which the rightness of some kinds of action is assumed to be known without consideration of ulterior consequences.” (*ME*, xxv)

“There remains then Pure or Quantitative Egoistic Hedonism [...] as a method [...]. According to this the rational agent regards quantity of consequent pleasure and pain to himself as alone important in choosing between alternatives of action” (*ME*, 95)

“Writers [on the intuitional method] usually mean that this rightness is ascertained by simply “looking at” the actions themselves, without considering their ulterior consequences.” (*ME*, 96)

Principles as providing elements for answers to (Q1)

(Q1) What ought we to do?

(Q2) How ought we to deliberate on [what we ought to do]?

For Sidgwick, *ought*-questions are to be answered by reference to *reasons*. Hence, answering the normative question (Q2) requires some *prior* assumption about which properties provide reasons for actions.

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“What then do we commonly regard as valid ultimate reasons for acting or abstaining? [...] In the first chapter we found that such reasons were supplied by the notions of Happiness and Excellence or Perfection [...], regarded as ultimate ends, and Duty as prescribed by unconditional rules.”
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“The Principle of Egoistic Hedonism is the widely accepted proposition that the rational end of conduct for each individual is the Maximum of his own Happiness or Pleasure.” (ME, xxvi)

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“we seem to be again led to the notion of Happiness as an 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.” (ME, 8)

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"[i]f all the ends which men are found practically to adopt as ultimate [...] were taken as principles for which the student of Ethics is called upon to construct rational methods, his task would be very complex and extensive." (ME, 8–9)

The relation between methods and principles

1. Methods *proceed on* principles (ME, xxv).

“The Methods indicated in chap. i. have a *prima facie* claim to proceed on reasonable principles.” (ME, xxv)

The relation between methods and principles

1. Methods *proceed on* principles (ME, xxv).
2. Methods *are based on* principles (ME, 411).

“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. It would tend to clearness if we might call this principle, and the method based upon it, by some such name as “Universalistic Hedonism.” (ME, 411)

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2. Methods *are based on* principles (ME, 411).

How methods are based on and proceed on principles:

“At the same time, it is not necessary, in the methodical investigation of right conduct, [...] to assume that the end itself is determined or prescribed by reason: we only require to assume, in reasoning to cogent practical conclusions, that it is adopted as ultimate and paramount. For if a man accepts any end as ultimate and paramount, he accepts implicitly as his “method of ethics” whatever process of reasoning enables him to determine the actions most conducive to this end.” (ME, 8)

“it can hardly be denied that the recognition of an end as ultimately reasonable involves the recognition of an obligation to do such acts as most conduce to the end.” (ME, 35)

The relation between methods and principles is teleological

Given a certain principle that specifies which ultimate reasons we have, we also have an implicit answer to the normative question (Q2) – how we ought to deliberate on (Q1): **in a way that best lives up to those reasons.**

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“I am aware that these two latter methods [i.e. Egoistic Hedonism and Utilitarianism] are commonly treated as closely connected: and it is not difficult to find reasons for this. In the first place, they agree in prescribing actions as means to an end distinct from, and lying outside the actions; so that they both lay down rules which are not absolute but relative, and only valid if they conduce to the end.” (ME, 84)

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Given a certain principle that specifies which ultimate reasons we have, we also have an implicit answer to the normative question (Q2) – how we ought to deliberate on (Q1): **in a way that best lives up to those reasons.**

So given a certain principle, we are implicitly committed to a method of ethics: the procedure of practical reasoning which best serves this principle – i. e. which gives us guiding rules the compliance with which best enables us to find out what we have most reason to do.

It is in *this* sense that a method is “based on” and “proceeds on” a principle:

The teleological claim

The principle gives the method its aim.

Further evidence for the teleological claim in action

1. What rejecting the method of Utilitarianism amounts to.

“[M]any moralists who have maintained as practically valid the judgments of right and wrong which the Common Sense of mankind seems intuitively to enunciate, have yet regarded General Happiness as an end to which the rules of morality are the best means, and have held that a knowledge of these rules was implanted by Nature or revealed by God for the attainment of this end. Such a belief implies that, though I am bound to take, as *my* ultimate standard in acting, conformity to a rule which is for me absolute, still the natural or Divine reason for the rule laid down is Utilitarian. On this view, the *method* of Utilitarianism is certainly rejected: the connexion between right action and happiness is not ascertained by a process of reasoning. But we can hardly say that the Utilitarian principle is altogether rejected: rather the limitations of the human reason are supposed to prevent it from apprehending adequately the real connexion between the true principle and the right rules of conduct. This connexion, however, has always been to a large extent recognised by all reflective persons.” (ME, 85)

Further evidence for the teleological claim in action

1. What rejecting the method of Utilitarianism amounts to.
2. Which method better serves the principle depends on several empirical assumptions.

“Indeed we find that almost any method may be connected with almost any ultimate reason [i. e. principle] by means of some – often plausible – assumption.” (*ME*, 83–84)

Further evidence for the teleological claim in action

1. What rejecting the method of Utilitarianism amounts to.
2. Which method better serves the principle depends on several empirical assumptions.
3. What explains two further remarks on how methods and principles are related:
 - (a) Given a set of teleologically relevant assumptions, different principles will generate different methods.

“to every difference in the end accepted at least some difference in method will generally correspond” (ME, 8)

(b) With some suitable teleologically relevant assumptions, two different principles might also generate practically indifferent methods, i. e. methods that recommend the very same actions.

“The discussion in the preceding section will have shown that not all the different views that are taken of the ultimate reason for doing what is concluded to be right lead to practically different methods of arriving at this conclusion.” (ME, 83)

Ramifications: Kantianism, *ME's*
dialectics, and the dualism

Sidgwickian moral theorizing

1. A moral theory (“ethical system”) contains two elements, a principle and a method.

“I understand Utilitarianism to supply a principle and method for determining the objective or material rightness of conduct.” (Sidgwick [1873] 2000, 5)

“Hence arises difficulty in the classification and comparison of ethical systems; since they often appear to have different affinities according as we consider Method or Ultimate Reason.” (ME, 83–84)

“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. It would tend to clearness if we might call this principle, and the method based upon it, by some such name as “Universalistic Hedonism”; and I have therefore sometimes ventured to use this term, in spite of its cumbrousness.” (ME, 411)

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1. A moral theory (“ethical system”) contains two elements, a principle and a method.
2. Principles identify ultimate reasons or right-making properties G.
3. Methods are codified procedure of using some rightness-indicating properties F in practical deliberation from which to derive practical conclusions about the rightness of acts.
4. (**The Teleological Claim**) Principles and methods are related *teleologically*: Methods ought to specify rightness-indicating properties F that best enable us to identify those actions that have the right-making properties G.

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But: The teleological claim is not self-evident or uncontested among peers.

An alternative account of moral theorizing

Right-making properties *necessarily* coincide with rightness-indicating properties: what makes an action right *just is* the way we find out that it is right.

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A method is logically (connected to a principle iff the reason-giving or right-making feature *G* specified by the principle just *is* the rightness-indicating feature *F* which the method uses to guide practical deliberation.

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The teleological interpretation of the dialectics of *ME*

1. Sidgwick begins with considering a theory consisting of a principle *P* and the method logically connected to it, $M_{\log(P)}$.
2. Fixing *P*, he discusses how to modify $M_{\log(P)}$ such that it best serves *P* in light of the most plausible assumptions to satisfy the teleological claim.
3. These modified methods $M_{\text{teleolog}(P)}$ are then checked for further non-teleological criteria of adequacy.

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Disagreement between two theories might be located at the level of principles or of methods: Theories T_1 and T_2 might specify different ultimate reasons or right-making features, $G_1 \neq G_2$, or different rightness-indicating features, $F_1 \neq F_2$.

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It seems less futile when we take the dualism to be located at the level of methods: We are then looking for a way to show that two methods that specify different rightness-indicating features F_1 and F_2 ultimately “coincide” in identifying the very same actions as those that we ought to do.

The question of reconciliation then becomes a partly empirical (and for Sidgwick: partly supernatural) quest for collecting and considering the best evidence available that warrants assumption for such a practical convergence in methods.

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- » involves a substantial assumption that distinguishes the Sidgwickian from a more Kantian, constitutivist account of moral theorizing;
- » sheds light on the dialectics of *ME*;
- » speaks in favour of reading the dualism as being located at the level of methods rather than principles.

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