Reviews

"Old Sidg"

by Carl Spadoni

Jerome B. Schneewind. *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. Pp. xvi, 465. C$56.95. £17.50. US$39.00.

THIS IS C.D. Broad's assessment of Henry Sidgwick's status as a moral philosopher and writer:

> 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.... Yet he has grave defects as a writer which have certainly detracted from his fame. His style is heavy and involved, and he seldom allowed that strong sense of humour, which is said to have made him a delightful conversationalist, to relieve the uniform dull dignity of his writing. He incessently refines, qualifies, raises objections, answers them, and then finds further objections to the answers. Each of these objections, rebuttals, rejoinders, and surrejoinders is in itself admirable, and does infinite credit to the acuteness and candour of the author. But the reader is apt to become impatient; to lose the thread of the argument; and to rise from his desk finding that he has read a great deal with constant admiration and now remembers little or nothing.[1]

There is much to support the second part of Broad's opinion. In Sidgwick's lifetime, *The Methods of Ethics* underwent five editions of meticulous revision; two more editions followed after his death. Unfortunately, in the present style of short, to the point articles, the Sidgwick trait of cautious, patient prose has more often given way to

[1] C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930), pp. 143-4.

captious pruning from the editor's pen. Oddly enough, in some of his exchanges with philosophical opponents such as F.H. Bradley, Sidgwick's detached copiousness was chafed to the point of blunt polemic. Unlike Broad, the author of this recent book, J.B. Schneewind, views Sidgwick's thoroughness as a turn towards modern moral philosophy. According to Schneewind, Sidgwick's inelegant expression is more than made up by his lucidity, frankness and persistence to follow an argument. After reading Schneewind's book and re-perusing the *Methods*, I must confess that Schneewind has performed an admirable service in reviving the reputation of a neglected philosopher long since dubbed by Bertrand Russell and his Cambridge contemporaries as "Old Sidg". Schneewind's treatment is all the more valuable since he considers Broad's long chapter to be flawed by the omission of a unified presentation of Sidgwick's ethical views. The previous lack of a scholarly, detailed analysis of the *Methods* is now rectified.

Schneewind's project consists of three main parts. Part I, the first five chapters, presents the historical background to the *Methods*. It includes a brief biography of Sidgwick; an account of his intellectual roots and development; and a history of moral philosophy prior to the *Methods*, in particular, the conflict of two opposing traditions, intuitionism (Reid to Grote) and utilitarianism (Bentham to J.S. Mill). Some readers may have cause for complaint with the paucity of Schneewind's biographical remarks. After stating, for example, that in his later years, Sidgwick came into contact with a new generation of philosophers, Schneewind quotes from a letter written by Sidgwick in September 1895 to James Ward concerning Russell's dissertation: "both Whitehead and I have looked through it.... We think it decidedly able" (p. 16). These two short sentences are merely tantalizing, and we are left wondering whether the full text of the letter contained anything further. Admittedly, there is some justification for the brevity of Schneewind's sojourn into biography. For one thing, there have already been a number of excellent articles and books concerned with the details of Sidgwick's life—for example, the classic *Henry Sidgwick, A Memoir*, and of late, Brand Blanshard's entertaining study, "Sidgwick the Man", in the July 1974 issue of *The Monist*. Moreover, Schneewind's primary focus is on ethical views and arguments, and here the reader is taken on an intellectual tour of philosophers and theologians who in varying degrees dogmatized, compromised and wrangled about the foundation and principles of morality. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intuitionists appealed to common sense, the

authority of God and conscience, and the self-evidence of moral maxims. They were fundamentally opposed to any utilitarian attempt to base morality on happiness, pleasure or utility. In contrast, Paley put forward a theological version of the utilitarian doctrine. Bentham and Godwin, on the other hand, so infuriated their reading public with their crude formulations that utilitarians were regarded as mere philistines. With the use of rule utilitarianism and the distinction between quantity and quality of pleasures, J.S. Mill tried to make the whole position more palatable. Through all these twists and turns, Schneewind's treatment is first-rate—historically accurate, succinct, and critical of both the utilitarian and intuitionist schools of thought, their strengths and weaknesses.

This sets the stage for Part II, the heart of Schneewind's book, his examination of the *Methods*. Schneewind's approach is mainly expository, and one would have hoped for a more critical commentary. Nevertheless, Sidgwick's reasoning is faithfully and coherently explained. He is shown to have been a candid thinker who attempted to bridge the gap between intuitionism and utilitarianism. He avoided the common pitfalls of his utilitarian predecessors by not committing the naturalistic fallacy or trying to deduce morality from a questionable hedonistic psychology. In accepting utilitarianism, Sidgwick rejected a subjectivist outlook, but then, in the final analysis, confronted egoism as a problematic alternative. Part III considers the criticisms of the *Methods* made within Sidgwick's lifetime, namely, those from evolutionism and idealism; there is also a concluding chapter entitled "Sidgwick and the History of Ethics". My complaint with Part III is that Schneewind mistakenly lumps Bradley's position with that of T.H. Green. He does not seem to realize that although Green and Bradley can be labelled idealists, their idealism was fundamentally different. Certainly, Bradley's *Ethical Studies* is a Hegelian work; in fact, its very structure is dialectical in nature. Yet, Bradley's mature metaphysics was non-Hegelian in a number of important ways. Even though several historical works are cited by Schneewind, Part III could have been improved by a brief synopsis of philosophical developments from 1860 to 1900. Schneewind's failure to provide a historical context for this period omits the basic fact that, to a great extent, Sidgwick was cut off from the philosophical milieu of the times. At Cambridge and Oxford, especially in later years, Sidgwick was considered out of date.

In terms of range and depth of coverage, it is Schneewind's opinion that the *Methods* is comparable to Aristotle's *Ethics* or the work of

Kant. Some readers may wish to quarrel with this comparison, but at least it underscores the point that Sidgwick's ethics deserves more attention than currently given. It is quite unfortunate, therefore, that beginning students of philosophy should read only Mill or Bentham for their understanding of classic utilitarianism. Mill, of course, stands as an intellectual giant of his age. His writings often evoke that rare eloquence of the strength of the human spirit: the hope of harmony and progress for mankind through the use of reason and science. Sidgwick's ethical views are certainly more rigorous than those of previous utilitarians. The *Methods*, however, is a long, difficult, and sometimes cumbersome book.

Despite his rejection of empiricism as a foundation for mathematics, Russell was imbued with Mill's utilitarianism when he first went up to Cambridge in 1890. His initial contact with Sidgwick was probably made at the Society at the beginning of 1892, when Russell was elected a member of that body. In fact, one of Russell's early papers, "Can we be Statesmen?", delivered to the Society on 18 November 1893, has the following introductory sentence: "If our brother Sidgwick were moderator tonight he would probably content himself with first defining the word Statesman and then making an enquiry into the psychological causes of existing political opinion."[2] In the Long Vacation and October terms of that year (1893), and in the Lent term of 1894, Russell took Sidgwick's course on ethics. (Russell's notes for that course are extant in the Archives and have been typed and proofread for researchers.) The lectures given by Sidgwick were part and parcel of his views as formulated in the *Methods*, but the bulk of lecture material later went into his posthumous publication, *Lectures on the Ethics of T. H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau* (1902). This supposition is not only confirmed by the similarity of Russell's notes and Sidgwick's posthumous book, but also by G. E. Moore who took the same course a few years later.[3] According to his diary of books read (*What Shall I Read?*), Russell read the *Methods* in July 1893. The signed flyleaf of his copy of the fourth edition is dated June 1893 (unfortunately, his copy bears no annotations). Besides the course on ethics, Russell took Sidgwick's "Elements of Philosophy" in the October term, 1893. The notes on this latter course have also survived in the Archives. Sidgwick's impression of Russell's performance at Cambridge in the ethics course, dissertation and Fellowship exam has

[2] Manuscript, Russell Archives. Quoted with permission.

[3] G. E. Moore, "An Autobiography", in P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Evanston and Chicago: The Library of Living Philosophers, 1942), pp. 16-17.

been preserved in a letter written to Dr. James Carey Thomas on 11 July 1896:

> ... he [Russell] attended my course of instruction in Moral Philosophy; and I was much impressed with the grasp, penetration, and power of expression shown in his essays. I was subsequently one of the examiners who elected him to a Fellowship in Trinity College: the subject of the dissertation he sent in was "The Foundations of Geometry" (or some similar title (and I thought it a masterly piece of work and was much impressed with his performance in the philosophical part of the examination. I think him a man of remarkable promise ....[4]

I have remarked elsewhere in this journal (*Russell*, nos. 29-32, pp. 18-19) that had it not been for McTaggart's dynamic personality and the rise of neo-Hegelianism in British universities, Russell's utilitarian outlook might have been refined by Sidgwick's critical perspective. Although Russell judged Sidgwick to be not quite in the first rank in terms of philosophical ability, he later felt that he and his contemporaries had not given "Old Sidg" the respect he deserved. Because of the fact that Sidgwick's philosophy was not in vogue, they misjudged its relevance. In Russell's case, a mistaken loyalty cost him several years of floundering in an idealistic morass. What a pity that Sidgwick was not able to exert a greater impact on Russell's philosophical generation! Yet, the question of what Sidgwick's role *might* have been without the domination of the neo-Hegelian school, is all too speculative. Like Moore, Russell found Sidgwick's lectures dull and tiresome. Inevitably each lecture would always contain *one* joke, and soon thereafter student attention would flag.[5] Moreover, Sidgwick's chief preoccupation was the study of ethics, which did not exactly coincide with Russell's interests. On the other hand, Sidgwick's background was not completely unrelated to Russell's as one would first imagine. Both men inherited Mill's legacy. Early in his career, Sidgwick had undergone a religious crisis, the gravity of which compelled him to resign his Fellowship in 1869. At the time, Cambridge University required its Fellows to sign the Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith; in fact, the practice was soon abolished after Sidgwick's resignation. It was this kind of moral and intellectual

[4] William M. Armstrong, "Bertrand Russell Comes to America, 1896", *Studies in History and Society*, 2 (Fall 1969 and Spring 1970), p. 32. This letter, in conjunction with the excerpt quoted on p. 16 of Schneewind's book, confutes Russell's recollection that his dissertation was examined only by Ward and Whitehead.

[5] "Some Cambridge Dons of the Nineties", in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 63.

integrity that Russell not only respected but came to possess: "Twenty-four years later [after Sidgwick's resignation], I had the good fortune to be his pupil when I began the study of philosophy at Cambridge."[6] Although Sidgwick's main interest was moral philosophy, he was by no means a stranger to mathematics. He had not only sat the Tripos examinations in both mathematics and classics, but had done so well in each field that he had won the Chancellor's Medal. Concerning the science of form and number, he had argued that ultimately our conclusions depend on intuition—an outright rejection of empiricism. In the preface to the first edition of the *Methods*, he further claimed that the psychological inquiry into ethical beliefs no more belongs to the study of ethics than does "the cognition of Space belong to Geometry". Surely, it is no mere coincidence that these two positions are explicitly enunciated in Russell's *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry*.

There is much more that can be said on Sidgwick's influence on Russell and why this influence did not last, especially in regard to Russell's graduate essays on ethics in the 1890s. In his later philosophical works, he rarely referred to Sidgwick's views; an exception is Chapter IX of Part I of *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* where the *Methods* is discussed in general terms. This review, however, is not the place for an expansive essay on this theme.

Schneewind's book, I should point out, is not for the casual reader. Nor is it intended for the Russell aficionado who hopes to uncover esoteric details of Russell's student years at Cambridge. Besides the reference already mentioned on p. 16, there is only one other Russell reference—a disappointing footnote to *The Principles of Mathematics* concerning the role of intuition in philosophy. Schneewind's use in other contexts, however, of the Dakyns family correspondence gives one hope that Russell's letters to Henry Graham Dakyns and his son Arthur in the 1890s and later, have survived. The importance of Schneewind's book is that it is an invaluable guide to moral philosophy prior to the turn of the century. Even though Schneewind's analysis of the *Methods* is not chiefly a critical one, his purpose is to present Sidgwick's arguments sympathetically in a systematic and coherent form. He more than succeeds in carrying out this purpose. Several excellent bibliographies are appended to the text: Sidgwick's works—his manuscripts and correspondence with their archival locations, his books in various editions, and a chronological listing of his articles, reviews and pamphlets; a checklist of moralists from 1785 to 1900 and secondary literature on J. S. Mill's *Utilitarianism* from 1861 to 1876; and a general bibliography consisting of important secondary sources. The author has also provided a subject and name index.

[6] "Toleration", *The Listener*, 39 (29 April 1948), p. 696.

The Bertrand Russell Archives;
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