

The Cosmos of Reasons: Sidgwickian Ethics and Non-Moral Consequentialism

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I. Introduction

- A. The two “Oxford Sidgwickians”—Derek Parfit and Roger Crisp—criticize Sidgwick’s usage of moral concepts.
1. Parfit claims that Sidgwick should have distinguished more clearly between the concept of what we morally ought to do and the concept of what we have decisive reason to do (2011, I:453; 2015: 262).
 2. Crisp argues that Sidgwick should have jettisoned distinctively moral concepts such as ‘wrong’, ‘duty’, and ‘requirement’ (2015: ix, 17-19, 129, 218). This is partly because the views Sidgwick finds most plausible (egoism and utilitarianism) are best stated in terms of ultimate reasons, without reference to duties, permissions, or requirements.
- B. If these criticisms are right, *The Methods of Ethics* may provide support for a view that Parfit calls ‘Non-Moral Consequentialism’. According to this view, we always have decisive reason to do whatever would be impartially best, and there are no basic normative facts involving moral concepts or properties.
- C. As Parfit claims, the relation between NMC and traditional moral theories “raises some important and little discussed questions” (2015: 21).
- D. My Thesis: The Sidgwickian case for NMC provides strong reasons for believing that NMC is superior to moral and partialist versions of consequentialism.

II. Non-Moral Consequentialism

- A. NMC has much in common with Scalar Consequentialism.
1. Alastair Norcross argues that consequentialism should be seen as “a theory of the goodness of states of affairs and of the comparative value of actions, which rates alternative possible actions in comparison with each other” (2006: 223).
 2. The controversial feature of SC is the denial of facts about moral obligations and moral wrongness.
 3. NMC and SC are motivated by many of the same considerations. Among them is the fact that questions about ultimate reasons are more fundamental than questions about moral requirements.
 - a. The significance of morality would be undermined if we do not have ultimate reasons to care about it. The significance of ultimate reasons could not be similarly undermined (Parfit 2017: 343).
 - b. Moral requirements seem capable of providing only derivative reasons, and our basic ethical questions can be answered without utilizing moral concepts (Crisp 2006: ch. 1, 2015: 19, n. 35; Norcross 2006).

- B. The primary difference between NMC and SC is that only NMC issues verdicts about decisive (all things considered) reasons.
1. SC omits verdicts about decisive reasons in order to avoid the demandingness objection.
 2. Because SC does not issue judgements about decisive reasons, it is vulnerable to the charge of insufficient action guidance (Driver 2012; Lang 2013; Case 2016).
 3. Whereas NMC is not susceptible to the action guidance objection, it initially appears vulnerable to demandingness worries. But this depends on how these worries are formulated.
 - a. Best version of demandingness objection: It is implausible that every failure to maximize impartial good is morally wrong where this implies that the agent is blameworthy. NMC avoids this objection by jettisoning moral wrongness.
 - b. NMC does have the demanding implication that we have decisive reason to sacrifice our own good whenever doing so is impartially best. The fact that this conflicts with our natural inclinations and typical behaviors is not evidence that this implication is faulty (though it does explain why it might initially *seem* faulty to creatures like us).

III. NMC in *The Methods of Ethics*

A. Evidence for a non-moral reading of Sidgwick

“[F]or the purposes of the present treatise...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, or to seek to realize by voluntary action” (ME 1).

1. This declaration is meant to allow egoism to be included among the ethical views up for consideration. Given that a characteristically non-moral view is among the “methods”, we can assume that ‘ought’ and ‘right’ are concepts tied to ultimate reasons rather than duties.
2. Sidgwick’s key axiom is stated in non-moral terms: “[A]s a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally...not merely at a particular part of it” (ME 382).

“[Sidgwick’s] claim does not imply that, if he aims at his own lesser good, his acts would be wrong in some distinctively moral sense, by being, for example, acts that are blameworthy, or unjustifiable to others, or acts that would give him reason for remorse and give others reason for indignation.” (Parfit 2017: 344)

B. Evidence against a non-moral reading

1. Sidgwick’s initial presentation of his principle of *Rational Benevolence* states that each individual is “morally bound” to give as much regard to the good of others as to their own good (ME 382).
2. Sidgwick sometimes refers to this principle as a ‘duty’, and he employs notions of ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ at various other points in which he is not merely examining the views of others.

C. Sidgwick’s central question was non-moral, but that he failed to consistently keep the distinction between moral obligations and decisive reasons before his mind (Parfit 2011, I:453; 2015: 262).

D. Omitting moral concepts from his own views would have benefitted Sidgwick in several ways.

1. He could have established more clearly the direct link between reasons and well-being (Crisp 2015).
2. He could have presented a stronger reply to the worry that the common-sense duty of benevolence is less stringent than his principle of *Rational Benevolence* (ME 382).

IV. The Sidgwickian Case for NMC

A. Sidgwickian grounds for rejecting moral versions of consequentialism

1. Sidgwick's second criterion for trustworthiness states that the self-evidence of a basic ethical proposition must be ascertained by careful reflection (ME 339).
 - a. The common belief in distinctively moral properties (e.g. moral wrongness) is likely effected by the influence of custom, tradition, positive law, etc.
 - b. The general belief in moral obligations is vulnerable to evolutionary debunking (Crisp 2006; de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2017).
2. Sidgwick assigns substantial theoretical weight to non-arbitrariness.
 - a. Any consequentialist threshold for moral permissibility (including maximization) would be objectionably arbitrary (Norcross 2006).
 - b. This concern has been misunderstood by critics such as Lawlor (2009) and Portmore (2011).

B. Sidgwickian grounds for rejecting partialist versions of consequentialism

1. The primary support for basic reasons of partiality (intuitive judgments about cases) is especially vulnerable to the distorting influences of our habits and cultural practices.

“And certainly there are obvious sources of error in our judgments respecting concrete duty which seem to be absent when we consider the abstract notions of different kinds of conduct; since in any concrete case the complexity of circumstances necessarily increases the difficulty of our judging, and *our personal interests or habitual sympathies are liable to disturb the clearness of our moral discernment*” (ME 214, emphasis added).
2. Our assent to abstract impartialist principles is less susceptible to evolutionary debunking than our assent to abstract principles of self-favoring and partialism (de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 2017).
3. Awareness of derivative reasons of partiality can lead to mistaken belief in ultimate reasons of partiality (ME 252, 382).
4. Partial Dualism (Crisp 2006, forthcoming; Parfit 2011, 2017; Phillips 2011; Portmore 2011) gives rise to pervasive arbitrariness and indeterminacy.

“For my own part I am disposed to think that to a philosophical mind it is only a ‘systematic’ manner of thought on such a subject that can approve itself as a ‘right manner’” (Grote on Utilitarianism I: 173).
5. Basic reasons of partiality fit better with subjectivist metaethical views than they do with the object-given view that Sidgwick endorses (Cf. Sobel 2015: 35-36).