David Phillips


David Phillips’s tightly argued *Sidgwickian Ethics* deserves high praise. Its ambition is to interpret and evaluate the main meta-ethical and normative doctrines of Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (*ME*). It deals with Sidgwick’s non-naturalism, his intuitionist moral epistemology, his rejection of the (deontological) rules of common-sense morality, and his “Dualism of Practical Reason”.

There is an established body of scholarly and philosophical literature on the topics in Sidgwick to which *Sidgwickian Ethics* is devoted. Its novelty does not therefore lie in the issues to which it directs its attention. Instead, its novelty lies in the fact that it helps us see clearly the relations between its topics.

Sidgwick defends a kind of non-naturalism: “the fundamental notion represented by the word ‘ought’ or ‘right,’ which such [moral or prudential] judgments contain expressly or by implication...[is] essentially different from all notions representing facts of physical or psychical experience” (*ME* 25). In chapter two, Phillips contends that this view is defensible (pp. 20–21), that it is central to Sidgwick’s ethics (pp. 13, 21–28), and that Sidgwick’s defense of non-naturalism is superior to Moore’s (pp. 35–38).

Some balk at the suggestion that non-naturalism is central to Sidgwick’s ethics. His subscription to this doctrine has certainly done him no favours, especially when understood to have ontological implications, which to Phillips it does (pp. 27–30). The idea, then, that this view is central to Sidgwick’s ethics requires explanation.

One explanation, overlooked by Phillips, is that the commitment is taken as fundamental because it is a premise in an argument for another view that is central to Sidgwick’s ethics, that moral requirements are *à la* Kant categorical and necessary. The analyses of “ought” that Sidgwick does consider seem either to challenge the idea that moral claims are categorical or that they are necessary. This understanding of Sidgwick fits with the fact that he ends his discussion of various attempts to analyze “ought” by claiming that his aim has been to “exhibit” that there are “unconditional or categorical” imperatives (*ME* 35), a claim which he defends until the end of the chapter of *ME* that includes it, and with the fact that he is keen to show in his skirmish with Stephen (much discussed by Phillips) that denying non-naturalism leaves one unable to account for the “necessary nature of an ethical first principle” (pp. 26, 29).
In *ME*, Sidgwick provides an argument for utilitarianism; it relies in part on an appeal to two philosophical intuitions:

[U:] The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view...of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realized in the one case than in the other (*ME* 382).

[R:] It is evident to me that as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally, – so far as it is attainable by my efforts, – not merely at a particular part of it (*ME* 382).

He thinks these get him utilitarianism’s “fundamental” or “first” principle (*ME* 387, 421): roughly, that one ought to promote a surplus of aggregate good even when doing so issues in a net cost to oneself. Sidgwick thinks (U) and (R) are self-evident truths. They satisfy the “conditions” of self-evidence: that intuitions be clear and precise, self-evident on reflection, consistent with other self-evident propositions one accepts, and not denied by someone who one believes is no more likely to be in error than oneself (*ME* 338–342).

He goes on to claim that unlike (U) and (R) the main principles of common sense (e.g., that one ought to keep one’s promises) do not satisfy the conditions of self-evidence; in particular, they are not clear and precise in practice (*ME* 342, 360–361). They represent “mere opinions” about what we ought to do (*ME* 338). Phillips calls this the “criterial argument” for utilitarianism (pp. 64, 67).

Sidgwick also provides a “proof” of utilitarianism, aimed at the proponent of common-sense morality. In it, he argues that utilitarianism’s ability to support the main rules of common-sense morality and to inject greater clarity, completeness, and system into ethical thinking provides the proponent of common-sense morality with reason to accept it. Sidgwick describes this proof as involving a “line of argument which on the one hand allows the validity, to a certain extent, of the maxims already accepted, and on the other hand shows them to be not absolutely valid, but needing to be controlled and completed by some more comprehensive principle” (*ME* 420). Phillips calls this the “bi-partite ad hominem” argument (p. 63).

Many think that these arguments reveal Sidgwick’s moral epistemology. Phillips agrees. In chapter three, he argues that in the criterial argument Sidgwick relies on a moderate foundationalism, according to which intuitions possess intrinsic epistemic credibility that is amplified with the satisfaction of the third and fourth conditions of self-evidence (pp. 59, 60–62, 76–85). (He