

# Introduction

ROSS HARRISON

THIS COLLECTION OF PAPERS celebrates the centenary of the death of Henry Sidgwick, leading late Victorian intellectual. Sidgwick was, in both senses of the term, a practical reasoner. Firstly and centrally he was a student of practical reason. He thought deeply and wrote profoundly about what we should do, in a way which still influences people thinking about this more than one hundred years later. Secondly he was himself a significant agent. He was an active reformer, particularly of institutions, and we are still living among the effects of his institutional changes. One of these is the British Academy. For Sidgwick was central in the process which led to its foundation and, partly in recognition of this, the Academy sponsored a one-day conference marking his centenary at which earlier versions of these papers were discussed.

Sidgwick's home institution was the University of Cambridge, where he was the established Professor of Philosophy. In Cambridge he was a great innovator. He reformed what was then called the Moral Sciences Tripos (that is, the system of studies centred on philosophy but also including at that time economics and politics). He reformed the administrative structure, being for many years secretary of the main university committee. He nurtured natural science (and paid out of his own pocket for the construction of laboratories). Above all, he was one of the leading figures in establishing the higher education of women at Cambridge. He was the central person responsible for the foundation of Newnham College, one of the two first women's colleges. Later his wife was an early principal of Newnham. Sidgwick lived with his wife

in the college, so if we ask where the philosophy professor was when McTaggart, Russell, and Moore were philosophy students in the man's world of Cambridge, the answer is that he was living in a women's college.

Sidgwick's creations still matter in Cambridge, and in the recently written multi-volume history of the university, the volume on this period takes one sentence to reach his name. It uses Sidgwick as one of two representative figures with which to sum up the tendencies of the time. However, if Sidgwick's actions were mainly for Cambridge, his thought was for the world. He wrote what has been described as the first work of modern, professional, moral philosophy. This was *The Methods of Ethics*, which Sidgwick published first in 1874 and then continued to bring out in revised editions until his death (the last is the seventh edition). It is still admired and taken seriously by leading moral philosophers, and the supreme tribute we pay to Sidgwick is that we engage with him as a thinker and an equal, even a century after his death. He still speaks to us, and how he still speaks to us is the central focus of the following papers.

Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* makes a new start in the subject. However, it was not the sort of new start that recognises no previous civilisation and believes itself to be building intellectual palaces afresh in a previously barren land. Instead it is itself a historically sensitive work. The methods which Sidgwick discusses are the methods used by the predecessors he admired, Aristotle, Butler, Kant, and Mill, and its partially historical character is more obvious in the first than in later editions. He works out his position in intellectual conversation with his great predecessors in the subject. History is for Sidgwick a resource to be used in the present, so that historical thinkers are taken to be thinkers who speak to the living, rather than their pastness rendering them mistaken, inapplicable, or incomprehensible. Today Sidgwick himself has the same role for us. He is a natural part of the history of ethics (he himself also wrote a good *Short History of Ethics*). However, he is not merely a historical figure. We need to see him as a part of history but we also need to see what he, as a part of that history, saw. We need to engage anew with a project that places moral reasoning as merely part of the understanding of the justification of action; we need the whole

range of practical reason. This has been happening in the last twenty-five years in ethics, which is one reason why current leading practitioners admire Sidgwick. By intellectual conversation with him we resolve the problems of both periods: not only his problems but also our own.

The present collection aims to further this process, and to do it by keeping the balance between history and analysis. There are no papers directly on the history of ethics here, but we get comparisons and placing, particularly with respect to the work of Kant and Mill. More fine-grained, contextual history of this kind would have been possible, and the distinguished historian of moral philosophy, Jerome Schneewind, showed just how much can be achieved by looking at Sidgwick in the context of Victorian moral philosophy as a whole in his *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (OUP, 1977). However, here the philosophical tribute to Sidgwick is paid more by analysis than by history: that is, by direct engagement with the thought itself.

Sidgwick wrote high professional ethics but he also lectured to the general public about practical ethics. As Stefan Collini brings out in his paper here, this was part of what he thought of as his task (his proper activity) as a professor. The description of the actuality as well as the possibilities of such practice (Sidgwick's role as a public moralist) is the topic of the first two papers here; and this is where the collection is most fully historical. Yet one of the presumptions sustaining this collection of papers is that thinking about action and acting on thought should have something to do with each other. The presumption is that study of a philosopher of practice should study both the thought and the practice, so that the history and the philosophy illuminate each other.

If the papers here are classified into a formal academic subject area, they are from both Intellectual History and Moral Philosophy, but they are not presented as if these were wholly disconnected elements (Sidgwick and *X*; Sidgwick and *Y* ...). The aim is to understand the man, the thought, the time; and for full understanding we need both *X* and *Y*. At the conference which led to these papers, earlier (and shorter) forms of them were presented and discussed. Although the sessions could be classified as one part Intellectual History to two parts Philosophy, in the discussions themselves the two parts intermingled in a way

which I think the discussants found to be natural, constructive, and illuminating. I hope some of the stimulus we gained from discussing each other's papers and from the varied audience (which ranged from research students to a direct descendant of Sidgwick's brother) can here be made available to a wider audience.

In a moving short fragment of autobiography Sidgwick wrote shortly before he died, he wrote that the spirit of the pursuit of truth with absolute candour between a group of friends was the best thing Cambridge had taught him as an undergraduate. Sitting in the Academy that day one hundred years later I felt at times that we were replaying Sidgwickian practice as well as Sidgwickian thoughts. We were in an élite institution. Although not a group of friends, we proceeded in the same spirit of candid enquiry, attempting to fit together thoughts from different positions and backgrounds. This impartiality, this openness to various positions, this concern for the 'methods' (in the plural) of ethics is something that marked Sidgwick. It is what led to his early admiration of Mill (although, later, Mill too was found to have only an impartial apprehension of truth).

We also heard Sidgwick's comment (discussed here by Collini and Rée) that 'I would not if I could, and I could not if I would, be popular.' Sidgwick's thought is more naturally for the few rather than for the many. It is tough, difficult, full of integrity, but without compromises. He is a philosopher's philosopher. As such he has gained the admiration of the tough practitioners of our present day. The philosophical papers in the present collection chiefly concern the hinge of this thought in what Sidgwick called the 'dualism of practical reason'. I have noted Sidgwick's openness to different kinds of thought and his concern to engage in dialogue with his great predecessors. His intention is synthetic: the multifaceted truth will be composed of the best elements of these different views fused together. For example, Sidgwick resolved and transcended the leading dispute in moral philosophy in Britain when he started work. This was between empirical, utilitarian, secular thinkers on the one hand (mainly based in London and best represented by Mill) and, on the other, intuitionist, Christian thinkers (mainly based in Cambridge and represented by the Master of Sidgwick's college when he was a student, Whewell). In the *Methods*

of *Ethics* Sidgwick succeeded in fusing these two apparently irreconcilable complete positions. Like Mill, he remained a utilitarian, but he did so on intuitionistic principles.

Indeed, utilitarianism was reconciled in Sidgwick's eyes with many different levels of intuitionistic thought. For as well as the lower-level intuitionism of Whewell, systematising common moral principles, there was also what Sidgwick called 'philosophical intuitionism', the higher-level pure practical rationality of Kant. This also was reconciled, so (or so Sidgwick thought) utilitarianism could be shown to follow from pure Kantian principles. For good measure the methods of Aristotle were also pressed into service and also found to deliver utilitarianism (since Sidgwick thought that an Aristotelian style of investigation of the common-sense morality of the day revealed it to be utilitarian). So all this fitted together; all these different methods could be reconciled. However, Sidgwick thought that there was also a non-moral, purely prudential, form of reasoning and that this could not be fitted into the mix. Again he could cite a great predecessor, in this case Butler. Yet this did not solve the problem. To be consistent, reason must connect and be unified; yet Sidgwick thought and feared that it was fundamentally dual.

In the four philosophical papers printed here, different strands of this central problem are analysed. John Skorupski (who has earlier written extensively on the philosophy of the century, particularly on Sidgwick's utilitarian predecessor, Mill) gives an account of Sidgwick's methods, in a way which means that, as he sees it, there is no way of resolving Sidgwick's fundamental problems in his own terms. In reply, Onora O'Neill, a major Kantian scholar (and, as it happens, successor to Sidgwick's wife as Principal of Newnham) analyses and criticises Sidgwick's use of a Kantian basis for utilitarianism. In my paper I see how we may be able to understand the problem of dualism by comparing it to the way in which Bentham and Mill (again, the utilitarian predecessors) treated sanctions. In reply, Roger Crisp (another well-known Mill scholar, who has also previously written on Sidgwick) qualifies and amends my use of Mill, and so of how the argument should be presented. These papers are, as I said, primarily analytical, although they help their analysis by comparison of Sidgwick's

thought with that of other major historical figures in Sidgwick's own manner.

Yet as well as theory we also have practice—perhaps the British Academy rather than Oxford House or Toynbee Hall in the East End of London, created by the disciples of T. H. Green. And so to the élitism identified by Collini (and to some extent reproduced in our own discussions). Collini's is a fascinating account; and he has no problems writing about boringness in an interesting manner. His respondent, Jonathan Rée, nevertheless wonders whether Sidgwick is indeed that boring and if, as editor of this collection, I may permit myself a preemptive strike, I'm inclined also to shade this theme with a difference. Collini brings out how Sidgwick preferred to work with insiders, and it is certainly true that someone who had one brother-in-law who became Prime Minister and another who became Archbishop of Canterbury could never be claimed to be an outsider. Yet we should remember how he became such friends with Arthur Balfour (later Prime Minister), whose sister he married. This was by the enormous impact he had on him as a teacher (Balfour was one of his students). Partly this is the effect of period. Collini is writing mainly about the 1890s, when indeed Russell and Moore thought that he was rather a bore. However, if we go back to an earlier period, he was obviously a great and stimulating teacher. This is the evidence not just of Balfour but also of two other of the great figures of late nineteenth-century intellectual life, Maitland the historian and Marshall the economist. Maitland said that 'he was a supremely great teacher' and Marshall described him as his 'father and mother'.

As you can see, I do not agree completely with my fellow contributors; nor do they agree with me. There were many methods in our discussions. Nor did we in them solve Collini's problem of the possible role of a public moralist. However, we did find it a mutually stimulating and educational experience; we would particularly like to thank the British Academy for the opportunity and the occasion, and we hope that others will also enjoy these papers.