

HENRY SIDGWICK

HENRY SIDGWICK was never a Fellow of the British Academy for he died in August, 1900, some months before it received its Charter from the Crown. He had, however, taken a leading part in endeavouring to secure its creation, and every one felt that he would have been not only one of its first members, but one of the members most certain to exert influence within the body, and indeed certain to add lustre to any body to which he might belong. It has, therefore, been held that he ought to be commemorated in these pages as one who did much to call the Academy into being, no less than as the friend for whom many among our members felt both reverence and affection. He was born at Skipton in Yorkshire on May 31, 1838; his father, who was headmaster of the Grammar School there, died when he was three years old, and his mother then left Skipton. He was educated at Rugby, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated as the first of his year in the Classical tripos in 1859, obtaining also a place in the first class of the Mathematical tripos. He was immediately elected a Fellow of his College, and resided there thenceforth; a few months (during vacation) were spent at Göttingen studying Arabic under Ewald. Appointed lecturer at Trinity, he resigned his fellowship in 1869, because he felt he could no longer take the test then required by law. In 1875 he was elected University Prae-lector in Philosophy, and in 1883 Professor of Moral Philosophy. He continued to lecture at Cambridge until a short time before his death.

Thus his whole life was occupied with study, the results of which expressed themselves in teaching and in writing. His first reputation was made as a classical scholar. He then turned to Oriental studies, partly in the hope of exploring the problems bearing on Christian theology, and ultimately gave most of his time to philosophical inquiries, while also pursuing Economic Science and Political Science, on both of which, as well as on Ethics and Metaphysics, he was accustomed to lecture.

The following remarks on his philosophical position are from the pen of his friend and colleague, Professor James Ward:—

‘Philosophy for Sidgwick was essentially reflected Common Sense—“the common sense of educated persons rectified by a general acquaintance with the results and methods of science.” Thus he sided with Reid in opposition alike

to the idealism of Berkeley and to the scepticism of Hume; while he rejected the Kantian "miscalled criticism" with all its later developments as really "dogmatism in the worst sense." On the other hand he was no thorough-going empiricist, but maintained that no cogent inference is possible without assuming some general truth, the validity of which cannot itself be guaranteed by any canon of inference.' Unfortunately, however, he has left no enumeration of the primitive truths which he himself accepted, nor yet formulated the criterion by which they can be ascertained, or the method by which they might be systematized. Still there is no doubt that—natural theology apart—he agreed in the main with the Principles of Common Sense as enunciated by Read.

But he concerned himself primarily with ethics and cognate subjects, and of the growth of his ethical views he has left an interesting account. Here, as in his philosophical studies generally, he began as a disciple of J. S. Mill. But he soon perceived "the profound discrepancy between the natural end of action—private happiness, and the end of duty—general happiness." A "fundamental ethical intuition" seemed necessary before the Utilitarian method could be made to work. This the Kantian "categorical imperative"—Act from a maxim that you can will to be a universal law—appeared to furnish. But this in turn on further reflection proved inadequate, since it did not recognize the undeniable reasonableness of self-love. Finding, however, that Self-love as well as Conscience was admitted as a natural principle by Butler, who had also proved the existence of disinterested impulses, Sidgwick was led to side with the English Intuitionists against the school of Bentham. And in this attitude he began, taking Aristotle as his model, to examine common-sense morality. The result was twofold: *negatively*, though the Intuitional Ethics disclosed no principle to supersede or even supplement the Kantian imperative or the Utilitarian formula, with which this was in complete accord; yet, *positively*, it proved to be a body of practical rules clearly conducing to the general happiness. He saw at length, to use his own words, "that Utilitarianism may be presented in the scientifically complete and systematically reflective form of that regulation of conduct, which through the whole course of human history has always tended substantially in the same direction." "I was thus," he tells us, "a Utilitarian again, but on an Intuitional basis"; or, as his successor, Professor Seeley, puts it, though he adhered fully to Utilitarianism, "it was on an expressly rational ground, not on the basis of naturalism," a difference which is profound. But one difficulty remained to the last unsolved: the religious sanction could not, Sidgwick believed, be demonstrated by ethical arguments alone, and he had therefore reluctantly to abandon the idea of rationalizing morality completely.'

Sidgwick's work in Economic Science is dealt with in the following paragraphs, which are from the pen of his former pupil, Dr. Keynes of Cambridge:—

'Sidgwick's chief contribution to Economics was his *Principles of Political Economy*, the first edition of which appeared in 1883. In 1885 he was President of the Economic Section of the British Association, and his Presidential Address was afterwards published under the title of *The Scope and Method of Economic Science*. Shortly before the end of his life he again dealt with the same topic in an important contribution to Mr. Palgrave's *Dictionary of Political Economy*. He wrote various essays on economic subjects, some of which appeared in the *Contemporary Review*, and he made contributions towards the solution of more concrete economic problems in memoranda which he prepared, by invitation, for

Royal Commissions on the Financial Relations between Great Britain and Ireland, and on Local Taxation.

Leaving on one side the memoranda just referred to, Sidgwick's economic work was mainly of an analytical character, and his most striking contributions to economics consisted of analyses of fundamental conceptions, certain additions to the theory of value on the lines of Ricardo and Mill, and a discussion of the central problems of what he called the Art of Political Economy.

Sidgwick's analyses of such conceptions as wealth, value, capital, were extraordinarily subtle, perhaps too subtle for the ordinary reader, whose main desire is for a simple formula of easy application. He held that economists, generally speaking, were inclined to underrate the importance of *seeking* for the best definition of each cardinal term, while overrating the importance of *finding* it; and the value of his own discussions of definitions is undoubtedly to be found rather in the discussions themselves than in the definitions ultimately proposed. But for the student the discussions are illuminating and suggestive in the highest degree.

In the doctrine of value, Sidgwick cleared up in an effective though simple way some of the ambiguities connected with the notions of supply and demand, and he introduced modifications into the theory of international values that were as important as they were original.

His treatment of the practical side of Economics, which he dealt with as constituting the Art of Political Economy, was abstract and general, but it was marked pre-eminently by impartiality and practical wisdom. In weighing judicially the advantages and disadvantages of given courses of action Sidgwick was unrivalled; and while those who ask for a general solution of practical questions that shall be unqualified and categorical must go away from his book disappointed, those who wish to have both sides presented to them fully and fairly in order that they may form a decision for themselves will never fail to be rewarded by the perusal and re-perusal of his pages.'

Some further observations on Sidgwick's Economic writings have been given to me by his colleague Professor Alfred Marshall of Cambridge. They are as follows:—

'Sidgwick's contributions to Economic Science are distinguished by strength, thoroughness, courage, and caution. His knowledge of men and things was wide. As President of the Cambridge Charity Organization Society he concerned himself actively with the details of individual lives; and the same interest in concrete study made itself felt in his treatment of public affairs. But his main occupation was with fundamental ideas. He analysed them with much subtlety, and showed great skill in bringing them to bear on one difficult problem after another. He sought steadfastly for those underlying causes which are apt to escape attention, but are often in the long run the most important; and the combined breadth and depth of his treatment of large problems will make it live after the particular economic conditions of his own time have passed away.

Perhaps his best economic work, and indeed the best thing of its kind in any language, is his treatment of the "Art of Political Economy"; to use the name that he chose for his discussion of the economic functions of government and of the public conscience. The warmth of his philanthropic zeal made itself felt specially in this part of his work; in spite of the sense of responsibility that caused him to keep his zeal resolutely down. For he recognized that, in the

advocacy of reform, emotion is likely to darken the mind. He was always ready to act bravely, and to counsel others to act, even on imperfect knowledge, where none better was to be had; but he refused to hide from himself any valid arguments that told against his counsel, or any weakness in the case for it. He thus lessened the popularity and the apparent effectiveness of some of his work; but all the more will his name ever be a watchword to the student.'

Sidgwick was keenly interested in political inquiries, as indeed he was in the actual politics of his time. He had planned a threefold treatment of the subject. One book was to deal with politics in general, analysing fundamental conceptions and examining the problems which recur in most States. Another was to trace historically the development of political institutions. The third would have consisted of a comparative study of the constitutions of Europe and European colonies, in connexion with the history of the nineteenth century, which has seen most of these constitutions framed.

Of these three treatises the first was executed in his lifetime, and appeared in a book entitled *The Elements of Politics*. The second was left in the form of notes for lectures and has been published since his death by his widow under the title of *The Development of European Polity*.

The third did not I think, get beyond the stage of a plan drawn out in his own mind.

The two books I have just named are both of great excellence, the former in respect of its acute discussion, not only of the main problems of politics, but of numerous minor points arising out of those problems; the latter in respect of the skill shown in bringing within reasonable compass a very large subject. Few among Sidgwick's friends knew till this second book appeared how wide was the range of his historical knowledge, and how complete his mastery of historical method. All his writings are marked by ingenuity, subtlety, precision, as well as by perfect lucidity both in thought and in expression; but this book is perhaps that in which his breadth of view and power of subordinating details to principles are most conspicuously shown.

During the last twenty-five years of his life he devoted much time and labour to an investigation of obscure problems connected with the action of one mind upon another in ways not yet scientifically determined, including the phenomena popularly called, for want of a better name, 'Spiritualistic.' He was for a time president of the Society for Psychical Research which has been investigating these phenomena. It was characteristic of his delicately balanced mind that he never, during all that period, committed himself to any declaration either that facts and laws of psychic action, hitherto

unknown, had been discovered, or that it had been shown that there was little chance of discovering them. His attitude was invariably that of an inquirer who thought that phenomena existed which, because hitherto unexplored, deserved investigation, but who was not prepared to draw any positive conclusions from the investigation so far as it had gone. The detection of many impostures did not shake his opinion that inquiry ought to be prosecuted: but even when facts seemed to have been established to which no suspicion of imposture attached, he refused to give his sanction to any of the hypotheses which sought to explain the facts by assuming forms of personal existence not cognizable by the usual sense perceptions. In this, as in so much else, he was a sceptic in the old Greek sense of the word, considering every view, but scarcely committed to any.

With great penetration, and an insistent earnestness in getting to the bottom of every question, he had a scrupulously careful habit of weighing as well as analysing all the arguments that could be advanced upon either side. His natural bent was to distrust all that was obvious and to discover flaws in every accepted doctrine. This tended to make his books difficult, because the reader found it hard to carry in his mind all the qualifications and limitations subject to which Sidgwick admitted some view of a previous writer or propounded some view of his own. They are not books for the hasty perusal of those who wish to carry away a body of broad conclusions, fit to be easily remembered and applied. But they are so fertile in suggestion and so acute in criticism, they state every aspect of the matter in hand with such precision and such fairness, as not only to form an admirable discipline for the student's mind, but to leave him with the sense that difficulties have been thoroughly explored, and that no material point needed for the forming of a conclusion has been omitted. It would be hard to find any writer of our time whose devotion to truth and unwearied patience in pursuing it are more conspicuous and more fitted to become a model to others.

Though primarily a thinker and a teacher, Sidgwick was by no means a man of the cloister. He was warmly interested in the political and religious movements of his time. He took a leading part in the discussion of educational problems and exerted great influence in his University. His special interest in the education of women, which forty years ago had but few friends among men, made him one of the founders of Newnham College at Cambridge, and he thereafter watched over its fortunes with unceasing care. Nor was it only by his writings and his lectures that he influenced the

thought of his generation. The extraordinary acuteness and quickness of his mind, joined to a lively sense of humour, made him an admirable talker, and as he was himself full of geniality and kindness, his company was much sought, and his opinions greatly affected the views and action of an unusually large circle of friends. Few men were so often consulted upon all sorts of questions: few were so unselfishly willing to give the best of their counsel to those who sought it. Even if he had written nothing, Sidgwick would have deserved, by his personal influence as well as by his teaching, to be ranked among the most stimulative intellectual forces of our time.

JAMES BRYCE.