

**THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF
SIDGWICK. NINE ESSAYS,
CRITICAL AND EXPOSITORY.
[LONDON-1901]**

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THE
ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SIDGWICK

NINE ESSAYS, CRITICAL AND EXPOSITORY

BY

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FELLOW OF THE COLLEGE OF PRECEPTORS



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SOME HINTS TO THE STUDENT COMMENCING THE *METHODS OF ETHICS*.

THE following dissertation was written by the author when an "Advanced Student" in the University of Cambridge, and was accepted by the University in June, 1901, as an "original contribution to learning". It was, therefore, in no sense written for the elementary student of ethics. There is, however, some ground for believing that it may prove of assistance to such a student, and with this object, among others, in view, it has been published in book form.

The neophyte in ethics generally avoids the *Methods*, for the work has a not undeserved reputation for difficulty. Even those students who have the temerity to commence its serious perusal often become rapidly discouraged and fly to text-books of a more popular type. The reasons for this are not hard to find, and some of them will be referred to at greater length in the course of the dissertation. Briefly it may be pointed out that among the chief difficulties of the *Methods* are its length; its avoidance of clap-

trap rhetoric and of vivid and popular illustrations (poetic and other); the absence of any strenuous advocacy of some plausible constructive theory, such as the elementary student impatiently demands—in short, its unpartisan character (mistaken by the superficial reader for colourlessness); lastly the fact that some of the earliest chapters are by no means the easiest, so that the student finds himself overwhelmed with difficult problems from the very first. The result is that many readers never get beyond the first half-hundred pages.

Such a comparative neglect of a truly great work like the *Methods of Ethics* is little short of a philosophical disaster. The writer has had before now to look over the papers of elementary students of ethics. They contain much cheap and hackneyed criticism of Mill, and much half-digested idealistic dogma, but they show surprisingly little consciousness of the real difficulties of the subject. The present writer has no little sympathy with idealism, and with the many excellent manuals which have issued during the last decade from that school of thought—so far as he has any ethical views at all they are of an idealistic complexion. Nevertheless he avows his belief that there is no idealistic work in existence which will bear comparison with the non-idealistic *Methods* as a propædeutic to the subject of ethics. In ethics, as perhaps in theology,

a baptism of scepticism is an excellent and essential initiation into its mysteries and problems, and the individual who has escaped this initiation can never expect to do more than play with the subject. Hence in the interests of sound thinking all ethical students should be urged to grapple with the *Methods*, well assured that they will spend their time more profitably than by digesting a dozen inferior works.

How should the student set about his task? He should perhaps begin with the first chapter of the *Methods*, for this contains some very important introductory matter. Thus in the very first paragraph we find Sidgwick defending the independence of ethics against those who would reduce the "ought" to an "is," a naturalistic school of writers whose influence is great and perhaps increasing. In the same chapter we have a clear statement of the three important ethical methods which he proposes to examine, and a characteristic avowal that all three are *prima facie* rational.

The next two chapters may be omitted on a first reading; chapter iii. is, as a matter of fact, important, but somewhat difficult for the beginner. Its burden is that we cannot get rid of the "ought".

Chapter iv. is extremely valuable. In it Sidgwick refutes psychological hedonism; this refu-

tation was really necessary for the establishment of his own doctrine of ethical hedonism. If we "ought" to seek happiness for self or others (ethical hedonism) it is implied that we do not always do so. Chapter iv. should thus on no account be overlooked.

The remaining chapters in the first book may perhaps be omitted on a first reading.

The discussion of the common virtues in book iii. may now be read by the student. The vulgar theory of moral obligation is a crude kind of intuitionism; there are, it is supposed, a number of distinct virtues, justice, benevolence, veracity, etc., which men ought to practise. Sidgwick's discussion of this "common sense" doctrine is admitted by all critics to be extremely able, to be, in fact, the most irrefutable part of his book. The student may well spend much time over this discussion (book iii., ch. iii.-x.). He will thus come to see the weakness of popular intuitionism, and the necessity for a sounder ethical theory. Chapter xi., book iii., is an admirable summary of this attack by Sidgwick upon "common sense".

It should, of course, be remembered (see preface to second edition, p. x.) that his criticism is not directed against the practice of benevolence, courage, etc., but only against the view that vulgar intuitionism is adequate and satisfactory as a scientific

ethical theory. "Common sense" is a valuable guide, but it is not always infallible, nor yet is it always even clear and consistent.

The student may now turn to the chapters on egoism (book ii.). On the break-down of "common sense" men sometimes fly to egoism, for this commends itself as simple and consistent. Sidgwick examines this system on its merits; finds that it involves many practical difficulties, but refuses to deny it a place in ethics. The last chapter of this second book is valuable but difficult; in it Sidgwick shows that evolutionary science has not been able to remove the practical difficulties which surround egoism, and, indeed, hedonism generally. In other words he shows that the boasted attempts of "scientific" writers to come to the rescue of hedonism are not really successful.

Perhaps the student had better now turn to the last book (an exposition of utilitarianism) or he may, if he choose, grapple with the two central chapters of the *Methods*, chapters xiii. and xiv. of the third book. These two chapters represent Sidgwick's own views, and, together with the concluding chapter of the fourth book, should be studied with great care. The chapters on utilitarianism (book iv., ch. i.-v.) are full of good, but not specially striking, matter.