

Roger Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 234 pp. ISBN: 9780198716358 (hbk). £ 35.00.

While several excellent books on Sidgwick have been published in recent years, *The Cosmos of Duty* is the first comprehensive study of Sidgwick's masterpiece, *The Methods of Ethics* (ME). This book will obviously be of interest to Sidgwick scholars and those who do research on the history of ethics. But given the continuing relevance of Sidgwick's arguments, as well as Crisp's fruitful engagement with current literature on topics such as non-naturalism, hedonism, and virtue ethics, anyone with a general interest in moral philosophy would benefit from reading this book.

To alleviate problems presented by the complicated structure of the *Methods*, Crisp adopts a thematic approach; each chapter is devoted to a topic (or topics) explored in various places throughout Sidgwick's treatise. The book begins with a helpful elucidation of the general framework of Sidgwick's project, including his views on metaethics, moral concepts, and the aims of philosophical ethics (Chapter 1). Crisp argues that while Sidgwick might have done better to frame the book as about ultimate principles rather than methods, he was right to focus on the triad of utilitarianism, deontology, and egoism (pp. 21-28). One of the chief merits of the book is its detailed coverage of parts of the *Methods* that do not always receive adequate attention, such as Sidgwick's discussion of free will (Chapter 2) and his accounts of virtue and the individual virtues respectively (Chapters 5 and 6). Of course, more popular Sidgwickian topics are also covered including hedonism (Chapter 3), intuitionism (Chapter 4), and the 'dualism of practical reason' (Chapter 7). The chapter on intuitionism does an especially good job of clarifying the relevant notion of self-evidence while providing instructive interpretations of Sidgwick's ethical axioms.

Although Crisp is largely in agreement with Sidgwick on many central issues, *The Cosmos of Duty* contains incisive critiques to go along with careful and well-informed exegesis. One of Crisp's central criticisms is that Sidgwick was "insufficiently parsimonious" in his use of ethical concepts. He persuasively argues that Sidgwick could have more effectively pursued his aims by avoiding distinctively moral concepts such as 'wrong', 'duty', and 'requirement' (pp. ix, 17-19, 129, 218). Employing these concepts forced Sidgwick to include lengthy passages in order to clarify them and map their mutual relations (p. 17). These intricate discussions are ultimately a distraction because fundamental practical questions can be answered without the moral concepts. Crisp expresses the point thus: "For me to know what to do, all that is required is that I know what I have strongest ultimate reason to do. To ask whether I am permitted or required to act in that way is to ask an unnecessary and potentially confusing question" (pp. 230 n. 53). One way in which talk of permissions and requirements can generate confusion is by obfuscating the link between reasons and well-being. Crisp provides a helpful illustration: "The reason I have not to hurt you...is that I have a reason not to cause suffering (a reason that can be stated without using any special moral concept), not that I have a reason not to break some alleged moral directive or other" (p. 19 n. 35).

Perhaps the most important reason why Sidgwick would have done better to jettison moral concepts is that the views he finds most plausible (egoism and utilitarianism) are best stated in terms of ultimate reasonableness or what there is most reason to do, without reference to duties, permissions, or requirements (p. 18). This is no small point, as understanding this feature of consequentialism is crucial for proper assessment of its plausibility. Consider, for instance, the common objection that consequentialism is overly demanding insofar as it issues a

moral requirement to maximize the general good at all times. Given the conceptual link between moral requirements and blameworthiness, the implausible implication is that whenever anyone fails to maximize the good they are thereby deserving of blame. By framing consequentialism in terms of reasons rather than requirements, this problematic implication is avoided (see A. Norcross, “The Scalar Approach to Utilitarianism”, in H. West (ed.), *Blackwell Guide to Mill’s Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 217-232). A further benefit to thinking of consequentialism in this way is that it can help us to better understand the nature of disagreements between consequentialists and their opponents. Derek Parfit has recently argued that shifting our attention to overtly “non-moral” formulations of consequentialist principles might help us to resolve some of these disagreements (D. Parfit, *On What Matters* vol. 3, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

A second of Crisp’s overarching criticisms is that Sidgwick should have allowed a greater role for individual judgment within ethics. The *Methods* is colored by Sidgwick’s belief that philosophical ethics aims to be ‘systematic and precise’ (ME 1). The thrust of his critique of common-sense morality is that its principles are often too vague to provide clear guidance, and they frequently come into conflict with each other without a principled means of adjudication. Further, attempts to precisify the relevant principles lead to disagreements and uncertainties that destroy the appearance of self-evidence. Crisp, however, objects that Sidgwick mistakenly discounts the possibility of practical wisdom as the ability to make accurate ethical judgements in particular cases without relying on perfectly determinate principles (pp. ix, 3-4, 114, 192-194). He notes that the complexity and unpredictability of human decision-making is such that the need for individual judgment is inescapable (even for utilitarians), and that this fact significantly weakens Sidgwick’s overall case against pluralistic forms of deontology such as those of Aristotle and Ross (pp. ix, 194).

Sidgwick might reply by noting that the indeterminacy that typically crops up within his brand of utilitarianism is *practical*-it arises from our lacking the empirical knowledge necessary for correctly applying the principle. This seems importantly different from indeterminacy within pluralistic versions of deontology in which we are unable to determine which of several competing principles is to be applied. This *ethical* indeterminacy is especially problematic because it casts doubt on our general ability to grasp objective ethical truths via intuition. It is not unreasonable to hold that if we can have knowledge of ethical principles we should also be able to know the circumstances in which they apply as well as their status relative to each other. Crisp could respond by claiming that agents with practical wisdom are indeed able to discern which principle is to be applied in a given context even though this cannot always be articulated in advance. However, more would then need to be said to address Sidgwick’s most pressing worry about “perceptual intuitionism” which is that, compared to reflection on abstract general principles, individual judgments of conscience are especially vulnerable to the undue influence of feelings and inclinations (ME 214, 339-340).

A final critique arising at various points within *The Cosmos of Duty* is that Sidgwick fails to appreciate the implications that his epistemic criteria have for his own ethical views. Crisp argues that Sidgwick’s position on peer disagreement—that it requires suspension of judgment—should have reduced him to a position of neutrality concerning hedonism, impartialism, and consequentialism (pp. ix, 84, 95, 110, 125). While it is clear that many reflective and intelligent individuals reject key Sidgwickian doctrines, that Sidgwick’s views on disagreement commit him to suspension of judgment is less obvious than Crisp suggests. In the relevant passage from the *Methods* Sidgwick adds two important qualifications to his conciliatory position. First, he

notes that disagreement from an epistemic peer reduces him to a state of neutrality *temporarily*, and that the result is not complete suspension of judgment but rather “an alternation and conflict between positive affirmation by one act of thought and the neutrality that is the result of another...” (ME 342). As Crisp points out, it is doubtful that Sidgwick is recommending the somewhat strange state of alternation that he describes (p. 110). But reading these remarks as calling for reduction in confidence rather than complete neutrality seems no less plausible than Crisp’s preferred reading.

Sidgwick’s second key qualification is that disagreement requires a conciliatory response only “if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own” (ME 342). Sidgwick might argue that, while many people disagree with the views he arrives at in the *Methods*, the fact that they have not yet considered his arguments for these views gives him reason to suspect that his dissenters are more likely to be in error (See R. Shaver, “Peerless”, unpublished manuscript). Further, in defense of positions that seem counter to common-sense, such as hedonism and impartialism, Sidgwick provides considerations that explain why others are apt to mistakenly reject them (ME 382, 401-406). These points constitute reasonable grounds for thinking that Sidgwick’s position on peer disagreement is less problematic for other parts of the *Methods* than Crisp maintains.

*The Cosmos of Duty* provides comprehensive and deep analysis of a notoriously complicated text in a reasonably concise volume presented in crystal clear prose. Unlike the *Methods* itself, Crisp’s book is thoughtfully organized for the purpose of helping the reader follow the various lines of argument and understand the implications of each conclusion. But just like Sidgwick’s masterpiece, *The Cosmos of Duty* is so brimming with keen insights and forceful arguments that anyone with a serious interest in philosophical ethics and its history would be remiss to ignore it. In the preface, Crisp expresses hope that his book will encourage others to read the *Methods* and discover that, contrary to received opinion, reading Sidgwick is often “as exciting as coming across an unknown work on ethics by Plato or Hume” (p. x). I am optimistic that this hope will be fulfilled.

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