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## The Dualism of Practical Reason and the Autonomy: Sidgwick's Pessimism and Kant's Optimism

**Abstract** The question this paper is concerned with is: what if Immanuel Kant found a solution to the problem of the dualism of practical reason before Henry Sidgwick even came to formulate it? A comparison of Sidgwick's and Kant's approach to the problem of the dualism of practical reason is presented only in general terms, but the author concludes that this is sufficient for grasping the advantage of Kant's solution to the problem.

**Keywords:** Henry Sidgwick, Immanuel Kant, the dualism of practical reason, autonomy, pessimism, optimism

An amusing and persistent anecdote that had followed Henry Sidgwick for decades – namely, that he is the most famous philosopher that no one has ever heard of – cannot really be associated with his name any more.<sup>1</sup> To become aware of this one needs only to take a look at the monographs written in the past several years about or inspired by his ethics.<sup>2</sup> Surely, in professional academic circles Sidgwick's book *The Methods of Ethics* (1981 [1907]) has been acknowledged since its first edition (1874) as one of the most important achievements in the history of ethics, as a classic work – and it's still recognized as such.<sup>3</sup> However, even those who proclaim the book to be an unsurpassable study in philosophical ethics admit that it is sometimes dull (Parfit 2011: xxxiii), written in the style of a complicated, technical treatise (Singer 2000: xiv). Hence it shouldn't come as a surprise that it was mostly experts in philosophical ethics who took on the task of studying this undoubtedly important and difficult book and that it couldn't engage the interest of philosophers with different philosophical orientations,<sup>4</sup> let alone a broader audience.

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2 See: Schultz (2004), Nakano-Okuno (2011), Philips (2011), Parfit (2011), Lazari-Radek and Singer (2014), Hurka (2014), Crisp (2015).

3 Cf. Broad (1930:143), Parfit (2011: xxxiii).

4 After reading the book Alfred North Whitehead was even deterred from engaging in ethics at all (Harrod 1951: 76). On the other hand, some moral philosophers gladly acknowledge Sidgwick as the "philosopher's philosopher" (Singer 2000: xiv).

Regardless, all experts and interpreters of Sidgwick's ethics agree on one thing: namely, that he formulated a fundamental problem of practical philosophy<sup>5</sup> that, by his own admission, he didn't succeed in solving, and which has apparently remained unsolved within his own, in the broader sense, consequentialist theory. This problem – known as the “dualism of practical reason” – represents Sidgwick's genuine legacy: just about all of his successors have tried to come up with a rational solution (that is, with a justification of the rational insolubility) to the problem, or, if they are his critics, to declare it a badly formulated problem that as such should be dismissed. However, our intention here isn't to assess the cogency of all of the offered suggestions, since that requires their comparison and, quite certainly, a lot more space. Likewise, given the limited number of pages we won't go into detail about Sidgwick's complex theory of dualism. Still, there is one comparison we don't wish to avoid: the one between Sidgwick's and the so-called Kantian approach to the problem of the dualism of practical reason.<sup>6</sup> The comparison shall, of course, be quite simplified, at the risk of leaving out some important details, whose elaboration requires a larger study.

But before we make a closer comparison of these two approaches it seems appropriate to ask the question: to what extent did Sidgwick engage with Kant's ethics? Marcus Singer (Singer 2000: xlii) noted that Sidgwick – although an author of several essays on Kant's metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mathematics – had barely and, so to speak, incidentally written about Kant's ethics.<sup>7</sup> We tend to agree with Singer's remark that Sidgwick's lack of a more adequate engagement with Kant's ethics may reveal the most serious deficiencies of his own approach (Singer 2000: xlii). In other words, what if Kant, in his own distinct manner, had solved the problem of the dualism of practical reason before Sidgwick, in his own distinct manner, even came to formulate it?

5 Although Sidgwick would, following Joseph Butler, rather say that he *reformulated* it: “Butler's express statement of the duality of the regulative principles in human nature constitutes an important step in ethical speculation; since it brings into clear view the most fundamental difference between the ethical thought of modern England and that of the old Greco-Roman world... [i]n Platonism and Stoicism, and in Greek moral philosophy generally, but one regulative and governing faculty is recognised under the name of Reason – however the regulation of Reason may be understood; in the modern ethical view, when it has worked itself clear, there are found to be two, – Universal Reason and Egoistic Reason, or Conscience and Self-Love” (Sidgwick 1931 [1886]: 197-198).

6 We assume that Kant, like Sidgwick, could have been familiar with Butler's conception of the “duality of the regulative principles” (see footnote 4).

7 A few pages in the *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (Sidgwick 1931 [1886]: 271-278) and an essay about Kant's understanding of the freedom of the will, which was later reprinted as an appendix in *The Methods of Ethics*.

The phrase “dualism of practical reason” appears three times in *The Methods of Ethics* (1981 [1907]: xii (preface to the second edition), xxi (preface to the sixth edition) and 404, n. 1). However, the whole closing chapter of the book is dedicated to the nature of the problem, which Sidgwick understands as “the most profound problem of ethics” (1981 [1907]): 386, n. 4). In an important article “Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies” (Sidgwick 2000 [1889]: 43) this problem is alternatively named “the dualism of rational or governing principles”. To put it briefly, Sidgwick is worried, to a level of gloominess and pessimism (cf. Mackie 1992), about the possibility of an irreconcilable conflict of moral normativity and the normativity of prudence. Regarding the two equally rational and ultimate ends of our practical reason, according to Sidgwick – our own good and universal good<sup>8</sup> – this conflict is presented in three forms: between interest and duty, between personal and general happiness, and between the two methods of ethics (utilitarianism and egoism, i.e. impartial reasoning and rational egoism). Sidgwick’s pessimism consists in his belief that one can’t always expect *success* when it comes to solving a possible conflict between the concern for our own good and the concern for universal good.<sup>9</sup> Since practical reason has at its disposal two equally justifiable rational and ultimate ends, which may at times lead to a suspension of decision-making, it cannot as such rely on its own capacities “to frame a perfect ideal of rational conduct” (Sidgwick 1874: 473). Because of its inherent inability or lack of capacity, it’s as if practical reason evokes some kind of an external impartial instance (God), the only thing which could provide a congruence of that what we ought to do on the grounds of prudence and that what we ought to do on moral grounds. Even if the separate demands of morality and prudence often coincide in our experience, the unprovability of the existence of a just warrantor of their congruence is proof of its contingency and incompleteness (cf. Sidgwick 1981 [1907]): 506-509; McLeod 2000: 276; Orsi 2008: 19), which means that practical reason can sometimes prescribe mutually exclusive courses of action.

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8 “The rationality of self-regard seemed to me as undeniable as the rationality of self-sacrifice” (Sidgwick 1981 [1907]: xx); “It is... reasonable for an individual to make an ultimate sacrifice of his happiness for the sake of the greater happiness of others, as well as reasonable for him to take his own happiness as ultimate end... [T]he fulfilment of Duty [is] ultimately reasonable for the individual no less than the pursuit of self-interest” (Sidgwick 2000 [1889]: 45-46); cf. Parfit 2016: 169-170.

9 Exactly the opposite – the only thing we can expect, given the equal strength of the demands of morality and the demands of prudence, is *inevitable failure* – those are the words in which Sidgwick ends the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics* (Sidgwick 1874: 473).

There are three dominant ways of understanding the relationship between the realm of morality and the realm of prudence in the history of ethics:<sup>10</sup>

1. between these two equally valid normative realms there exists a harmonic or collaborative relationship – didn't Plato and Aristotle repeatedly say that to live morally is to live according to our own interests, i.e. in accordance with rationality?; this understanding is certainly in line with Joseph Butler and Thomas Hobbes, as well as contemporary Hobbesians such as David Gauthier and Gregory Kavka; what the defenders of this understanding have in common is the opinion that a reconciliation is achievable in case of a possible conflict between the two normative realms;
2. considering the initially equal rational power of our own demands, in case of a conflict between the two normative realms there is rather a disharmonic relationship; this "dualism of practical reason" demonstrates how impotent the practical reason is when it comes to solving the conflict, which ultimately leads to the "triumph of skepticism" (Sidgwick 1874: 472) regarding the "rational authority of morality" (cf. Brink 1992: 203-204); since prudential and moral reasons can be compared in terms of their rational power, Sidgwick allows for the possibility of calling into the question the authority of morality if at some point prudential reasons become stronger;
3. between the two normative realms there is no relationship of equality (in terms of strength) but rather of hierarchy; morality, namely, with regard to prudence, always has an overriding strength. Kantians are not the only ones who hold this view, but also some utilitarians whose writing are inspired by both Kant and Sidgwick such as, for example, Richard Hare (cf. 1981: 24); within the framework of this understanding the question of the dualism of practical reason shouldn't even be asked, since any possible conflict or lack of coincidence between the prudential and moral demands would be automatically solved for the benefit of the latter.

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From what has been said so far it is clear that we are advocating the third interpretation of the relationship between the realm of morality and the realm of prudence, although we won't be referring only to the concept of overridingness but will try and demonstrate that the difference between these two realms lies in different sources of their normativity, which ultimately undermines Sidgwick's utilitarian presumption that practical reason is entirely maximizing.

The problematic nature of Sidgwick's theory of dualism originates from his emphasis on egoism as a method of ethics,<sup>11</sup> which gave the final shape to

<sup>10</sup> The most precious synoptic outlook on this typology of understandings is given by Owen McLeod (2001: 269-271).

<sup>11</sup> It was already Sidgwick's student G. E. Moore who headed towards rejecting egoism as a theory of *ethics* (cf. Moore, 1993: 150ff).

his moral axioms. Since utilitarianism and egoism have in common two presumptions – that only happiness is a value in itself and that it should be maximized – both theories support the argument that practical reason must be a maximizing one. And since both egoism and utilitarianism assert the same source of reason (happiness) and the same type of reason (maximizing, promoting) it cannot be demonstrated that utilitarianism is easier to justify than egoism (cf. Hills 2003: 316, 326). Thereof Sidgwick’s moral axioms have the following form: there exists a self-evident axiom that one ought to maximize one’s own happiness, just as there is a self-evident axiom that one ought to maximize the general happiness (cf. Sidgwick 1981 [1907]: 386-387; 418; Sidgwick 2000 [1889]: 44). However, he notices that from this there seems to follow “an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct” (Sidgwick 1981 [1907]: 508).

Three problems emerge from this fundamental contradiction: one practical and two epistemological (cf. Orsi 2008: 20-21). The practical problem consists in that neither of the two axioms can’t have a preponderance over the other. If this were the case than practical reason would be divided against itself, which could entail a deadlock in decision-making and governing – we simply wouldn’t be able to prescribe to ourselves how we ought to act. The first epistemological problem consists in the following: even if the two axiomatic maxims can be mutually exclusive, they can’t both be intuitive, i.e. self-evident, because “[t]he propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent” (Sidgwick 1981 [1907]: 341).<sup>12</sup> The second and more far-reaching epistemological problem Sidgwick formulates as follows: “I do not mean that if we gave up the hope of attaining a practical solution of this fundamental contradiction, through any legitimately obtained conclusion or postulate as to the moral order of the world, it would become reasonable for us to abandon morality altogether: but it would seem necessary to abandon the idea of rationalizing it completely” (Sidgwick 1981 [1907]: 508).

This more far-reaching, epistemological, inclusive and practical problem (that blocks decision-making and thus undermines the concept of autonomy) presents a real challenge to the Kantian ethics. Although there are many structural and historical impediments to an adequate comparison

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12 However, if John Mackie’s interpretation of Sidgwick is right, this epistemological problem can be discarded: “[W]e are left with the competing apparent intuitions that it is rational for a man to seek his own happiness and that it is rational for a man to seek the general happiness. These are not in themselves contradictory: A contradiction arises only when we add to these two intuitions the factual statement that what best promotes a man’s own happiness does not always coincide with what best promotes the general happiness. It is the facts that decide whether the two intuitions come into practical conflict or not” (Mackie 1992: 170).

of Kant's and Sidgwick's ethics that shouldn't prevent us from highlighting some relevant differences. Firstly, contrary to Sidgwick, whose ethics ends on a gloomy note with the unsolvable dualism of practical reason, Kant's ethics starts from this dualism and the thesis that solving it is possible strictly under the condition of a complete rationalization of morality. Kant's optimism consists precisely in this possibility.

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If we consistently follow Kant's dualistic or dichotomic descriptions (duty/inclination, autonomy/heteronomy, will/desire, anthroponomy/anthropology, etc.) we'll see that he presupposes two different types of values – namely, moral value (the intrinsic value of the good will) and prudential value (the instrumental value of happiness).<sup>13</sup> These types of values have various, heterogeneous origins. Certainly, this axiological dualism is associated with the general duality of reason (a priori, intelligible) and sensibility (a posteriori, empirical) which underlies the whole of Kant's philosophy. In the realm of practical philosophy the dualism is expressed through two types of normativity (morality as a motivational superposition of acting out of duty, and prudence as a motivational subposition of acting out of interest or self-love), and two types of imperatives (categorical/hypothetical, reason-based/materially determined reasons for action). One could say that morality understood as a type of normativity is supernormative, while prudence is subnormative. Moral value is an anthroponomically-based unconditioned good (of a volitive origin in reason), while prudential value is anthropologically-based, conditioned good (of empirical, pathological origin) (cf. Kant 1996: 534; Bader 2015: 175). Although Kant admits that happiness is a necessary demand of every rational but needy being (cf. Kant 1996: 159), the material conditionality of the value of happiness<sup>14</sup> demonstrates how prudence, understood as a subnormative source of demands for happiness, can be overcome when conflicted with duty understood as supernormativity, as moral action based on a priori reasons.

It's precisely Sidgwick's ahierarchical understanding of these two types of values which prevents their satisfactory ordering and assessment. We already know the outcome: morality and prudence can produce conflicting demands, if left without the instance that would resolve the conflict and privilege one over the other. Practical reason is left in an irresolvable conflict whenever morality and prudence demand different action, threatening thus to undermine the coherence of practical reason (Bader 2015: 177), wherefore, according to Sidgwick's famous metaphor, "Cosmos of Duty is thus really reduced to a Chaos" (Sidgwick 1874: 473).

13 In the description that follows we mostly pursue and repeat the brilliant interpretation of Ralf M. Bader (2015).

14 Which is "based on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, which can never be assumed to be universally directed to the same objects" (Kant 1996: 159).

Kant's treatment of the dualism of practical reason enables us to overcome this threat. According to him, it is precisely the conditionality of happiness (interest) which allows us to avoid the conflict between morality and prudence, hence the situations in which practical reason is faced with incompatible demands. The instrumental demands of prudence, in order to be allowed, must be compatible with the good will as an intrinsic value. Ralf Bader illustrates this quite convincingly in his important essay:

“When the action that makes one happy is impermissible, the condition of the value of happiness would be undermined by performing this action. Though happiness results from the action, no value is thereby realized. Since the action does not produce anything of prudential value, there is no prudential reason to perform it. That is, given that the normative force attaching to hypothetical imperatives derives from the value of the end that is to be realized, it follows that if the condition of the value of the end fails to be satisfied, then no value will result from the realization of the end, which implies that one does not have any reason to take the means. Because the value of happiness is conditional, the claims of prudence that are based on this value will also be conditional. In this way, the claims of prudence can be silenced by the requirements of duty” (Bader 2015: 185).

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Sidgwick's doubt about the possibility of a consistent rationalization of morality (the epistemological problem), and his preference for heteronomy over autonomy (the practical problem) – under the guise of rational coercion – means for Kant just another unjustified pretension of a content-based ethics. Hence, to choose between Sidgwick's pessimism and Kant's optimism in respect to the solution of the problem of dualism of practical reason may just be another false dilemma.

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Dualizam praktičkog uma i autonomija:  
Sidžvikov pesimizam i Kantov optimizam

### Apstrakt

U ovom tekstu postavlja se pitanje šta ako je Imanuel Kant rešio problem dualizma praktičkog uma pre nego što je Henri Sidžvik uopšte stigao da ga formuliše? Komparacija između sidžvikovskog i kantovskog pristupa problemu dualizma praktičkog uma ovde se pruža tek u opštim crtama, ali autor zaključuje da je i to dovoljno kako bi se uvidela prednost Kantovog rešenja tog problema.

**Ključne reči:** Henri Sidžvik, Imanuel Kant, dualizam praktičkog uma, autonomija, pesimizam, optimizam