

Sidgwick on Motives

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In his discussion of intuitionist or common-sense morality, Henry Sidgwick rejects the idea that morality is concerned primarily with motives.

To support his point, Sidgwick identifies cases where our moral judgment of an action differs from our judgment of the motive behind that action. Specifically, he identified cases where:

1. An agent with a bad motive does what she ought to do.
2. An agent with a good motive does what he ought not to do.
3. An agent is blamed for consequences that were entirely independent of her motives.

Combined, these provide a strong case against the thesis that an action inherits its moral value from the motive behind it.

However, there is another way to relate actions to motives that avoids these problems.

The Gap between Right Action and Good Motived

First, let us look at these three types of cases.

Bad Motives, Right Action

Sidgwick borrowed his example of a person performing a right action from a bad motive from Jeremy Bentham. It concerns an attorney who prosecutes a case out of malice towards the accused. (p.95) We can make this case clearer by assuming that she is the only prosecutor available.

Sidgwick agreed that the prosecutor could be blamed if malice motivated her to perform harmful actions inconsistent with her duty as a prosecutor. However, the possibility malicious acts done out of malice does not disprove the possibility of duty done from malice.

Good Motives, Wrong Action

For his example of a person with good motives doing something wrong, Sidgwick mentions man who "tells a lie to save a parent's or a benefactor's life." (p.94)

We can easily imagine a case when telling a lie to save a life is not wrong, such as the paradigm case of lying to the Nazi soldiers about the Jews hiding in the attic. However, these types of cases do not discredit Sidgwick's point. We only need to find an example where a person acting from a good motive does what he ought not to do. The case of a witness who commits perjury rather than testify honestly against a parent who is guilty of a crime fits this model. Parental affection is a good motive – but not good enough to justify perjury.¹

Acts with Bad Consequences.

In the third type of case, Sidgwick pointed out:

¹ Sidgwick, in *Methods of Ethics* (7th Edition), 1907, specifically uses the term "perjury" rather than "lying" to save a benefactor's life.

[Y]ou'll agree that we can't evade responsibility for any foreseen bad consequences of our acts by the plea that we didn't want them for themselves or as means to some further end (p. 94)

The paradigm case that fits this description is that of negligence. The drunk or texting driver is only motivated by a desire to get to where he is going. Hitting and killing a pedestrian was not on his list of things to do. However, if her drinking or texting brought about the fatal accident, she will be judged to have done something wrong even though she acted on plain and ordinary motives.

Another Way of Relating Actions to Motives

The examples above make it clear that actions do not inherit their moral value from the motives from which they spring. However, there is another way of relating actions to motives.

Rosalind Hursthouse presented an account of right action where moral evaluations primarily concerned character traits or virtues. On her account:

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.²

To determine right action, we begin with a judgment of good character. We then infer what a person with this character would do. We then judge the act of the individual according to whether the individual performed this action or some other.

On the account, the moral value of the right action is not inherited from the motives behind that action. It does not matter why the agent performed the action, only that it be the action that a person with good motives would have performed.

Let us apply this to the three cases that Sidgwick described above.

Bad Motive, Right Action

In the case of the prosecutor motivated by malice, Sidgwick shared the intuition that, so long as the prosecutor confined herself to those actions that a properly motivated prosecutor would have performed, she does nothing wrong. If, on the other hand, her malice might motivate her to perform actions inconsistent with those duties and harmful to the accused such as cause the accused “needless pain with well-aimed insults,” she acts wrongly. These are not actions that the virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Good Motives, Wrong Action

In the case of the witness committing perjury to save a guilty parent from a criminal conviction, though parental affection is a good motive, a properly motivated person would have a stronger motive to tell the truth under oath. This may be as simple as an aversion to lying under oath, or a love of justice, or an interest in protecting and preserving the institution of trial in a court of law. Having such a motive does not automatically erase the motive of parental affection, and the witness may well regret the need to tell the truth. In fact, we may say that the properly motivated person would feel torn – but still do his duty and tell the truth.

² Rosalind Hursthouse. On Virtue Ethics (Kindle Locations 355-356). Kindle Edition.

Negligence

In the case of a person being blamed for consequences he was not motivated to bring about, we looked at the example of a drunk driver who causes a fatal accident.

Agents are not always held accountable for the consequences of their actions. For example, if, while playing baseball in Hawaii, one's fly ball lands and detonates an old bomb dropped during the attack on Pearl Harbor 80 years earlier, one would not be blamed for the damage. It matters that the danger is one that the agent knew about (and which would have thus moved a properly motivated agent to act differently), or should have known about (that a properly motivated agent would have taken pains to determine).

In these types of cases, we can attribute the agent's blame not to the presence of a bad motive (a desire to do harm) but with the absence of a good motive (the absence of a desire to prevent harm). Such an aversion would have motivated the agent first to investigate whether the action created a risk of harm to others and, if so, motivated the agent to avoid realizing that harm. The fact that she failed to discover a risk that a concerned person would have been expected to discover, or ignored a risk, showed that she did not care enough about the well-being of others.

Many cases of wrong action may be understood as lacking a virtue rather than having a vice – of lacking a good motive rather than having a bad motive. Sidgwick himself notes, “a conspicuous obstacle to virtuous action is absence of adequate motive.” (p. 207)

A Concern with Motives

There might be other arguments against deriving the moral value of actions from the moral value of motives. However, there is a broader reason for thinking that Sidgwick undervalued the role of motives.

Unless we allow contra-causal free will, when we say that a person ought to have done something else, this would require that the agent ought to have believed or wanted something else, or that some mental state should have been different. Otherwise, we would be saying that the same person with the same mental states in the same situation should have acted differently – without a cause to do so.

Furthermore, Sidgwick repeatedly endorses the idea that to say that an act is right is to say that all people in those circumstances should perform that action. It would be consistent with this to also say that if an action is prohibited then it would also be prohibited to others in those circumstances, and if it is obligatory then it would also be obligatory for others in those circumstances. In other words, the person who is calling an act wrong is not only saying that the agent should have been motivated to do something else, but that similar agents in similar circumstances should all be motivated to do something else.

Should all agents be motivated by a desire to maximize utility?

Sidgwick says no (or, at least, “not necessarily”).

The doctrine that universal happiness is the ultimate standard doesn't imply that universal benevolence is always the right or best motive. As I have already pointed out, the end that gives the criterion of rightness needn't always be the end that we

consciously aim at; and if experience shows that general happiness will be better achieved if men frequently act from motives other than pure universal philanthropy, those other motives are preferable on utilitarian principles. (p.201)

When a person asks, “Why should I (not) do this thing,” what he is asking for is the fact that should motivate him not to (not) do this thing. In those cases where the agent should not be motivated by universal happiness, then “because it will bring universal happiness” is the wrong answer. This is not the thing that is supposed to move the agent to action – not in a situation where general benevolence is not the right or best motive.

What is the right or best motive?

We find this in the answer people actually give. “Because it is a lie,” or “Because he is innocent,” or “Because you promised.” When these are offered as the reason to do or not do some action, they identify the fact that should have a motivating influence on the person asking the question. If it doesn’t have a motivating influence, then there is something wrong with that person.

But it should not only have this motivating influence on the person asking the question. The answer reports that this fact should have the same influence on all people in a similar situation – whether one can coherently will that motive to be a universal motive, common across all moral agents.

Conclusion

Sidgwick did not properly appreciate the importance of morals in moral evaluations. He was right, actions do not get their value from the motives from which they spring. A good motive can bring about wrong actions, and a person with bad motives can still do the right thing. More importantly, the lack of a good motive is also a fault. However, any time we identify something as a moral obligation or a moral prohibition, we are making a claim about what should motivate all agents. This invites us to ask the question, “What are the implications of everybody having this particular set of motives?”

Intuitive morality, I would argue, already understands this to some degree.