

## Sidgwick on Motives

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Many objections to Sidgwick's utilitarianism spring from the fact that he uses a standard of rightness which is significantly at odds with its common uses. Consequently, his claims about rightness are often confusing and seen as grounds for objections. A better concept of rightness would eliminate many of these confusions and leave most of Sidgwick's utilitarian theory intact.

Specifically, Sidgwick states:

*the end that gives the criterion of rightness needn't always be the end that we consciously aim at (p. 201)<sup>1</sup>*

In contrast, the common-sense concept of rightness attaches a great deal of importance to the ends that we consciously aim at – or, actually, to the ends that we should aim at (and should avoid). As a result, utilitarians such as Sidgwick find themselves battling a constant string of objections, many of which ultimately boil down to, “But utility maximization serves poorly as an object for people to aim at.”

Sidgwick claims to defeat the idea that common-sense morality is concerned with motives by providing a series of cases in which the moral judgment of an action deviates from the moral judgment of the motive that gives rise to it. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Sidgwick, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics*, in the version presented at [www.earlymoderntexts.com](http://www.earlymoderntexts.com), last accessed Sept. 16, 2017. All references to Sidgwick will be to this version of the text.

These arguments targeted the form of motive intuitionism common in his day, such as that of his contemporary James Martinau, against which Sidgwick devoted a full chapter (Book III, Chapter 12) of *Methods of Ethics*. This view said that actions borrow their moral value from the motives behind them. Showing differences between the moral value of actions and of the motives behind them defeats this view.

However, Rosalind Hursthouse provides us with a different way to relate right action to motives that can handle Sidgwick's counter-examples. In doing so, it provides a foundation for the case that the common-sense criterion of rightness looks at the ends we do (or should) aim at.

### The Gap between Right Action and Good Motives

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

#### *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, denying her the opportunity of recusing herself.

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 also done from malice.

#### *Good Motives, Wrong Action*

For his example of a person with good motives doing something wrong, Sidgwick mentioned a 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, Sidgwick only needs 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.<sup>2</sup>

### *Acts with Bad Consequences.*

In the third type of case, Sidgwick pointed out:

*[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 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 his drinking brought about the fatal accident, he will be judged to have done something wrong even though he 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:

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<sup>2</sup> Sidgwick, in *Methods of Ethics* (7<sup>th</sup> Edition), 1907, specifically uses the term “perjury” rather than “lying” to save a benefactor’s life, which provides the better argument as described here.

*An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.*<sup>3</sup>

Since Sidgwick wrote of motives, I wish to modify Hursthouse's proposal slightly to make it relevant to the discussion:

*An action is right iff it is what a person with the right and best motives would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.*

The reason for my choice of the term "right and best motives" will become apparent shortly.

To determine right action, we begin with a judgment of what counts as the right and best motives. We infer what the person with the right and best motives would characteristically do in the circumstances. We judge the agent's actions according to whether it corresponds or deviates from that prediction.

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 performs the action, only that it be the action that a person with the right and best motives would have performed.

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

### *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 motivates her to perform actions inconsistent with those duties and harmful to the accused such as cause the accused "needless pain

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 355-356).

with well-aimed insults,” p. 94) she acts wrongly. The difference between right and wrong actions tracks what a person with good motives would have characteristically done 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 motive 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, or a combination of these good motives combining their weight against the motive utilitarianism of parental affection. 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.

### *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 (which would have moved a properly motivated agent to act differently), or should have known about (that a properly motivated agent would have discovered).

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.

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

The objections raised against Sidgwick here are not objections to utilitarianism. They do suggest that a form of motive utilitarianism – where actions are right in virtue of their relationship to good motives (and the absence of bad motives), and motives are good or bad in virtue of their utility – may work out better than act-utilitarianism.<sup>4</sup> Such a utilitarian can say that maximizing utility is still the ultimate end of morality, but it is not the criterion of right action. It is the criterion of good motives, on which the moral value of actions ultimately depends.

Getting to that point would require a lot more work than I have done here. In this paper, I have taken a stab to removing one of the roadblocks to that larger project. One would have to consider other potential roadblocks, such as additional counter-examples that drive a wedge between right actions and what a person with good motives (and lacking bad motives) would characteristically do.

At the same time, there are other arguments that can be brought to bear to support the idea that the common-sense concept of right action is concerned primarily with the motives people should have. For example, “right action” and “wrong action” are terms of praise and condemnation. They are not only used as statements of praise and condemnation, but they are used to signal other people in the community to direct their praise and condemnation to actions of that type. Sidgwick himself writes that praise and condemnation are directed to the ends that people should aim at for the purpose of promoting good ends and demoting bad ends.

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<sup>4</sup> Adams, Robert Merrihew (1976). “Motive Utilitarianism”. *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (14):467-481.

Then there would be the task of showing that many of the objections thrown at utilitarianism can be reduced to different ways of expressing the claim that the utilitarian concept of right action as something distinct from the ends that people consciously aim at serves as a poor end for people to consciously aim at. For example, the claim that utilitarians cannot be committed to an institution of promising if they are exclusively committed to the end of promoting utility understand the rightness of actions as focused on the ends at which people should aim.