

Sidgwick on Motives

Alonzo Fyfe (20171008)

I am here to argue that motives plays a larger role in morality than Henry Sidgwick in *Methods of Ethics* gave them credit for. Of course, I do not have time in this forum to give a complete defense of that thesis, but I wish to take two steps in that direction.

The first step will be to show that the reasons Sidgwick gave for evaluating actions independent of motives forks fine against the type of motive-based intuition he was familiar with, but that is not the only way to relate actions to motives. There is another option, and Sidgwick's objections do not work against that option.

The second step will draw from some of Sidgwick's own claims to provide a reason to seriously consider a stronger link between right action and good motives.

Right Actions and Good Motives

Sidgwick argues for a gap between right action and good motives. Specifically, Sidgwick wrote:

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

This identifies the gap that Sidgwick sees between right action and good motive. I am not going to dispute this claim, but I will argue that it is ambiguous. One interpretation is true but not significant, while a second interpretation is significant but not true.

The common-sense concept of rightness attaches a great deal of importance to the ends that we consciously aim at. Or, actually, it attaches importance to the ends that we should (and should not) aim at. As a result, when a utilitarian such as Sidgwick points to utility as a criterion of rightness, they confront a number of objections, many of which ultimately boil down to, *But utility maximization serves as a poor 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.

These arguments targeted the form of motive intuitionism common in his day, such as that of his contemporary James Martineau, against whom 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.

¹ Sidgwick, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics*, in the version presented at www.earlymoderntexts.com, last accessed Sept. 16, 2017. All references to Sidgwick will be to this version of the text.

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, she provides a foundation for the case that the common-sense criterion of rightness looks at the ends we do (or should) aim at.

Sidgwick provides strong objections to this account,

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). She wants to see the accused harmed, and she can't keep this from being one of the motives behind her actions in prosecuting him. We can make this case clearer by assuming that she came out of retirement specifically to prosecute this case, and she is careful to deny him a legal loophole he can use on appeal.

Sidgwick agreed that the prosecutor could be blamed if malice motivates her to perform harmful actions inconsistent with her duty as a prosecutor. However, the possibility of wrong acts done out of malice does not disprove the possibility of right actions 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.²

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).

Paradigm cases that fits this description are those of negligence and recklessness. The drunk driver is only motivated by a desire to get to where he is going – to get home and go to sleep. Hitting and killing a pedestrian was not on his list of things to do, either for its own sake or as a means to some other end. However, if his drunk driving 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:

² Sidgwick, in *Methods of Ethics* (7th 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.*³

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 or best motives would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.

To determine right action on this model, we begin with a judgment of what counts as the right or best motives. We infer what the person with the right and best motives would characteristically do in the circumstances.⁴ We look at what the agent actually did. Then we measure the gap (if any) between what the agent did and the agent with the right and best motives would have done.

On this 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 good motives (and lacking bad motives) would have done. Our moral evaluation of action still depends on a prior evaluation of motives. We must determine that to determine what a person with good motives would have done.

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 causing the accused “needless pain 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 or not 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 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.⁵

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.

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

⁴ Of course, beliefs are also relevant, and we must ask whether an agent has those beliefs a well motivated agent would have. However, we will need to save this complication for another time.

⁵ In fact, these residual sentiments provide additional reason to believe that we are dealing with motives rather than rules, which can be easily set aside when an exception applies.

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, not coincidentally, would be the type of danger that can be expected to move a person with good motives.

We can also make a case for dangers that a properly motivated would have sought to discover, and place the agent who did not try.

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 sufficiently strong 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 are consistent with 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.⁶ 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, instead, the criterion of good motives.

Showing that common-sense morality is comfortable with relating right action to the right and best motives does not show that this is a good idea. I want to present at least one reason, with key points taken from Sidgwick, to suggest that it may be a good idea.

Praise, Condemnation, and the Criteria of Rightness

Sidgwick's suggestion that utility provides the criterion of right conduct is inconsistent with the fact that the terms “right action” and “wrong action” are meant to do work. They contain an element of praise and condemnation. In saying this, I am not asserting full-blown emotivism where a claim of right action or wrong action is nothing but an emotive expression. Rather, I am saying that when a person calls an action right or wrong one is, at least in part, praising or condemning that action as well as pointing to it as something for others to praise or condemn.

The reasons to praise and condemn, in turn, include the effects that praise and condemnation have on motives.

Sidgwick himself pointed out that acts of praise and condemnation were to be evaluated on the degree to which they are useful.

From a Utilitarian point of view, as has been before said, we must mean by calling a quality 'deserving of praise,' that it is expedient to praise it, with a view to its future production: accordingly, in distributing our praise of human qualities, on utilitarian principles, we have to consider primarily not the usefulness of the quality, but the usefulness of the praise.

⁶ Adams, Robert Merrihew (1976). “Motive Utilitarianism”. *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (14):467-481.

Furthermore, the usefulness of praise is determined, at least to a large degree, by its effects on motives. For example, we see passages like the following:

It is obviously not expedient to encourage by praise qualities which are likely to be found in excess rather than in defect. Hence (e.g.) however necessary self-love or resentment may be to society, it is quite in harmony with Utilitarianism that they should not be recognised as virtues by Common Sense, in so far as it is reasonably thought that they will always be found operating with at least sufficient intensity.

Among utilitarians, we get a stronger sense of this from John Stuart Mill. Mill argued that there is no natural love of virtue. Instead, we learn it. At first, we learn to act like a virtuous person would act and avoid doing what a virtuous person would avoid in order to obtain rewards (praise) and avoid punishment (condemnation). Over time, what begins as a means to an end of obtaining happiness becomes an end in itself. In Mill's terms, acting virtuously becomes a part of happiness.

Virtue, according to the utilitarian doctrine, is not naturally and originally part of the end, but it is capable of becoming so; and in those who love it disinterestedly it has become so, and is desired and cherished, not as a means to happiness, but as a part of their happiness.⁷

I want to combine these point with another not found in Sidgwick that claims of right and wrong action are statements of praise and condemnation and that that they are used to flag actions as those that others have reason to praise or condemn.

This is easier to see with respect to “wrong action.” When we tell somebody that what they did was wrong, this means that it is something they ought not to have done. As a moral claim, it means more than that the agent made a simple error (e.g., failed to carry the ‘1’ while performing addition), but that the act deserves moral censure. A police officer who shoots somebody wielding an gun in a menacing manner – where the gun was later shown to be unloaded – was wrong to think that he was a threat. However, this is not a culpable error like of the officer shooting an unarmed person reaching for his wallet after being told to do so and “feeling threatened”.

The concept of “right action” is harder to pin down in this sense because “right action” refers both to permissible and obligatory actions. In making a choice between which shirt to wear, both of my options are “right actions” in the sense that I have a moral permission to choose either shirt. “Right action” in the sense of permissible action carries no praise with it – just the absence of condemnation.

However, there are other uses that do carry this meaning. A person comes home from work and tells her friend very coffee about some trouble at work. A co-worker had been drinking on the job. When that co-worker was told to drive over to the field office and pick up some papers, this agent said, “I told the supervisor, and they fired her on the spot.” When she asks, “Did I do the right thing?” she is not asking – nor is she understood as asking, “Did I increase general utility?” She is asking whether she deserves condemnation.

Claims of right and wrong action, understood as statements of praise and condemnation, and as flags for telling others what to praise and condemn, should be evaluated according to the standards of praise and condemnation. For Sidgwick, this means evaluating them according to how successful they may be

⁷ Mill, John Stuart, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 4, <https://www.utilitarianism.com/mill4.htm>, last accessed October 2, 2017.

in encouraging the development of good motives and at discouraging bad motives. As Sidgwick says, the right and best motive may not be the motive of maximizing utility.

As a final note, if acts of praise and condemnation are actions, and actions are evaluated according to their conformity with what a person with good motives would do, we would also have reason to evaluate praise and condemnation (and reward and punishment) according to what a person with good motives would praise or condemn. Such a person would have an eye on promoting good motives, but also other concerns such as an aversion to punishing the innocent and an aversion to cruel and unusual punishments that could be justified on utilitarian grounds. Acts of reward and punishment may draw their own condemnation if agents display an absence of these particular motives.

Conclusion

It would take a lot more work to argue for a full-fledged motive utilitarianism. All that I have done here is chip away at one roadblock to that investigation and provided a reason to continue a distance past that roadblock. 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.

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 is focused on the ends at which people should aim.

The case of whether motives, rather than actions, are the primary object of moral evaluation in either common-sense or utilitarian morality should not be considered closed.

Addendum: Potential Questions

As a part of my preparation for the presentation, I want to consider in advance some potential questions.

Part 1: Counter examples

The most likely type of question that I anticipate will be attempted counter-examples to the thesis that the right action is the action that the person with good motives (and lacking bad motives) would perform. It is impossible to attempt all possible counter-examples (some of which might actually work), but I suspect that two possible responses will be applicable to most of them.

1. **Act utilitarian objections.** One set of counter-examples will likely include the cases generally brought up against utilitarianism. These would be cases such as that of the doctor who can carve up a patient to harvest organs to save five others, pushing a heavy person in front of a runaway trolley, or torturing the child of a terrorist to get him to reveal the location of a bomb. This family of objections are not applicable to motive utilitarianism. They apply, instead, to preference-satisfaction act utilitarianism (the right act is the act that satisfies the most and strongest preferences). They provide reasons to reject that alternative theory. The motive utilitarian can simply ask whether it would be a good idea to eliminate the aversion to kill or torture innocent people. It can argue that eliminating these motives is not such a good idea.
2. **Action without motive objections.** In these counter-examples, the questioner will assert that a person with the right and best motives will do X, but the right action is Y where $Y \not\leftrightarrow X$. The response is, "How is the agent going to do Y?" If this requires a motive, and this is a moral objection, we can then ask about the effects if that motive were made universal. If those effects are good, then the agent in question did not have the right and best motives. If not, then we are left better off if agents did not do Y.
3. **Exotic thought experiments.** These are counter-examples that are outside of normal experience. It includes trolley cases or science-fiction examples that regular people do not experience. If we are using praise and condemnation to mold desires to generate utility in the real world, we should not be surprised to discover that those sentiments may not produce good consequences in all possible worlds. More importantly, motives that produce good consequences in other possible worlds may be motives people generally have strong reasons to discourage in this world. So, even if the motives would produce good consequences in an imaginary world, we still have reasons to discourage neighbors in the real world from losing their real-world attitudes.

Part 2: Objections that do not involve counter-examples.

4. **Rule Worship Objection:** This objection states that something parallel to the "rule worship" objection to rule utilitarianism is applicable to motive utilitarianism. If ultimate value is based on utility and you know this, and you know that an act will maximize utility, then it seems that you must conclude that you should perform that action. Going with "the right act is the act that the person with the best motives would perform" would seem to require some sort of unjustified rule worship. This objection is the same as the "action without a motive" counter example above. Rule utilitarianism would have an answer to the rule worship objection if it were the case that one can not override a rule except with another rule, and then we would need to consider the implications of that rule universalized. Well, one cannot override a motive except with another motive, which then requires that we consider the implications of that motive universalized.

5. ***Demandingness and permissibility.*** “You said that ‘right action’ refers to things such as what to wear and what to eat that are permissible without obligation. Yet, it seems that your well motivated agent will always have a concern with not harming others or helping others that will dictate an action in every circumstance stance. Isn’t this account still vulnerable to objections that it is too demanding.” Yes, the properly motivated agent will have these concerns but, in some choices, they become weak enough to be mere noise behind other signals such as the desire to eat what tastes good, to dress appropriately, to work at a job that one enjoys. Yet, those other concerns remain present so that the instant one discovers that the choice does more than a little harm, the noise becomes a signal that influences action.
6. ***The motive of doing one’s duty.*** “Among the good motives many count the motive of doing one’s duty. In fact, some consider this the greatest motive (I.e. Kant). Yet, the motive to do one’s duty requires knowing one’s duty. This requires a prior determination of right action. But you can’t derive this right action as ‘the action that a person motivated to do his duty would perform.’ That is viciously circular.” There is room for a motive of doing one’s duty, which does require a prior determination of right action. Right action is still what a person with good motives would do. It is possible, of course, to give people a desire to obey God and a belief that God commands X, Y, and Z in order to get them to do X, Y, and Z, but one has to do with the truth of the assertions about what God commands. Similarly, a person can be given a desire to do that which has intrinsic value and a belief that X, Y, and Z has intrinsic value. The same applies with the motive of doing one's duty and a belief that one has a duty to do X, Y, and Z. These are all effective ways to get people to do X, Y, and Z, but they do justify the claim that people ought to do X, Y, and Z.
7. ***Rule following.*** If praise and condemnation – particularly condemnation – aim at promoting virtue and discouraging vice, it seems that this is not applicable to certain areas such as traffic laws or in following the rules of a game. While breaking the rule seems to be wrong, it would be strange to argue that we have devoted ourselves to see turning without the use of a turn indicator or driving with a broken tail light as a vice. Indeed, it is the case that in some parts of our life we have promoted a general desire to follow the rules or aversion to breaking the rules, rather than to link desires and aversions to each specific rule. When we do this, we allow ourselves to change the rules at will, when new evidence and experience suggests that it would be wise to do so, and to have the motivation switch immediately to following the new rule and ignoring the old rule. Among the right and best motives we must include a motive to follow the rules, to obey the laws, to follow the instructions, to obey an authority figure who, in the real world (as opposed to Millikin’s laboratory) would generally also be a properly motivated individual.
8. ***The intrinsic value of desires.*** In a discussion of utilitarianism, one is likely to be asked to consider the question of whether pushpin is better than poetry or whether it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. Here, as elsewhere, we must distinguish between questions that look at their actions in terms of their tendency to produce utility and desires or motives in virtue of their disposition to produce utility. On the account we are examining here, we are not looking about the act of playing pushpin versus that of reading poetry, but the desire to play pushpin versus the desire to play poetry. Here, we can say that if the habits and dispositions acquired through a love of pushpin were generally universal, whereas those of poetry were not, we would have more and stronger reason to promote a love of pushpin rather than poetry. However, as things stand in the real world, I think we can give the higher score to a love of poetry. As for the relative merits of Socrates dissatisfied versus a fool satisfied, we have more and stronger reasons to seek to have

neighbors who are more like Socrates and not so many reasons to move into a neighborhood of fools.