

Sidgwick on Motives and Right Action (20171230)

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I would like to ask you to consider the following proposition:

*The right act is the act that a person with good motives, and lacking bad motives, would have done in those circumstances.*¹

When I suggested an idea like this several years ago, I was told, “Go read Sidgwick,” being assured that he had already defeated that idea.

What I found in Sidgwick was a devastating response to a similar idea that also related right act to good motives. That idea suggested that an act borrowed its moral value from the motive behind it. However, Sidgwick’s objections have no power here.

Right Action and Good Motives

Specifically, in *Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick targeted a view that a contemporary philosopher, James Martineau, defended. (ME, III, 12)² Martineau’s thesis, very roughly, is that the moral value of an action is taken from the moral value of the motives from which it springs.³ More specifically, Martineau argued that, when an agent has a choice between two actions, each springing from a different motive, the right act is the act that springs from the higher – better – motive.

Sidgwick sought to defeat that idea by providing examples where our moral judgment of an action deviates from the moral judgment of the motive. Specifically, he provided counter-examples 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 with a mundane motive does what he ought not to do.

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. (ME III, I, §2, ¶12). We may imagine that she wants to see the accused harmed. Yet, motivated by this sentiment, she takes care to make sure that she makes no mistakes. She demands that her staff be careful in collecting evidence. She makes certain all search warrants and other paperwork is in proper order. She makes sure that nothing happens that the accused can use as a loophole to escape prosecution.

Insofar as she acts from malice, we can imagine that there are cases where she may be tempted to do something wrong. If she does not have a good case, she may be tempted to manufacture evidence or to

¹ Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, proposed a similar claim: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.”

² Sidgwick, Henry. *Methods of Ethics* (7th Edition), 1907, as presented at the Classical Utilitarian Web Site, <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/sidgwick/me/>. All references to the *Methods of Ethics* will be to this presentation. Last accessed Nov. 17, 2017.

³ Martineau, James, *Types of Ethical Theory*, 1886, Clarendon Press.

bully a witness. However, as it happens, she has a good solid case and none of these other steps are needed.

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. If the prosecutor does what a prosecutor is supposed to do, even if motivated by malice, she does nothing wrong.

Good Motives, Wrong Action

For his example of a person with good motives doing something wrong, Sidgwick mentioned a man who "commits perjury to save a parent's or a benefactor's life." (ME III, I, §2, ¶12). Though we judge affection for one's parent to be a good thing, when it comes to testifying in court, we do not allow that lying under oath to get one's parent acquitted is the right thing to do.

Acts with Bad Consequences.

In the third type of case, Sidgwick pointed out:

[I]t will be admitted that we cannot evade responsibility for any foreseen bad consequences of our acts by the plea that we felt no desire for them, either for their own sake or as a means to ulterior ends (ME III, I, §2, ¶12).

The drunk driver who only wants to go home, but he ends up drifting off the road and killing a pedestrian. What he did was wrong. It does not matter that he did not intend to kill the pedestrian. It was neither a goal, nor did he kill the pedestrian as a means to reaching some other goal, such as getting home. He took a risk. His action is wrong, even though he sought only to get home and go to bed.

Summary

These cases – the malevolent prosecutor, the grateful perjurer, and the drunk driver – are examples of cases where we do not evaluate actions by evaluating the motives that give rise to them. In this, Sidgwick provided sound criticism of Martineau's proposal for linking right act to good motives.

However, we have another option.

Another Way of Relating Actions to Motives

I have asked you to consider another way to relate right action to good motives.

The right act is the act that a person with good motives, and lacking bad motives, would have done in those circumstances.

To determine right action on this model, we begin with a judgment of what counts as good and bad motives. After determining the good and bad motives, we determine what a person with those motives would do in the circumstances.⁴ We compare this to what the agent did. Then we measure the gap (if any) between what the agent did and what the agent with good motives would have done.

For the sake of this discussion, I want to assume that a motive is good to the degree that it would increase utility if it were universally adopted. A bad motive simply tends to decrease overall utility.

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.

Ultimately, I do not think this will work, but it is close enough to what I think does work that it will suit my purpose.

In other words, I will be using a type of motive utilitarianism.⁵ Such a utilitarian can say that maximizing utility is still the ultimate end of morality. However, utility is not the criterion of right action. It is the criterion of good motives.

Let me apply this alternative to Sidgwick's three cases.

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. However, if her malice motivates her to perform actions inconsistent with those duties – for example, causing the accused “needless pain with well-aimed insults,” – Sidgwick was ready to say that she acted wrongly (ME, III, I, §2 ¶12). I mentioned that the prosecutor may have a disposition to manufacture evidence if the case does not seem solid. This would be a wrong act, but it is not an act that a prosecutor with good motives and lacking bad motives would have performed.

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 be more strongly motivated to tell the truth under oath. The motive may be an aversion to lying under oath, or a love of justice, or an interest in protecting and preserving the institution of trial by jury - or, more likely, all of the above. Each of these can be defended as good motives. In the person with good motives they combine to outweigh the motive of parental affection. Perjury is still the action that a person with good motives would not have performed.

Having the motives that would bring one to give honest testimony does not not erase the motive of parental affection. Consequently, we may expect the person with good motives to also feel a lament and regret about having to perform such an act. Strictly speaking, an act utilitarian would suggest that, all else being equal, it would be better for the witness to cheerfully testify against his parent than to suffer the pain of regret that a properly motivated would likely feel. However, the motive utilitarian would draw a different conclusion about such a case. In the same way that the right act is the act that a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would have performed, the right emotional reaction is the emotional reaction that a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would have. Such a person would experience an inner conflict in this case. If our agent does not also experience an inner conflict, we may suggest that he is not such a good person, even though he performs the right action.⁶

Negligence

The case of the drunk driver involved in a fatal accident illustrated the possibility of an agent being blamed for consequences he was not motivated to bring about. In this type of case, we can attribute the agent's blameworthiness not to the presence of a bad motive but to the absence of a good motive. Specifically, the agent lacked a proper concern for the safety of others. An agent with this concern would have been motivated to take steps to prevent being the cause of their harm. Sidgwick himself notes, “a conspicuous obstacle to virtuous action is absence of adequate motive.” (ME, IV, III, §2, ¶1)

⁵ Adams, Robert Merrihew (1976). “Motive Utilitarianism”. *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (14):467-481.

⁶ 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.

A Concern with Motives

So far, I have shown that Sidgwick had good arguments against the thesis that an act acquires its moral value from the motives behind it. However, his objections are impotent against the thesis that actions get their moral value from whether a person with good motives and lacking bad motives would have performed that action.

I want to offer a more positive argument in favor of this consideration. For this argument I will borrow two premises from Sidgwick and add a third of my own.

Praise, Condemnation, and the Criteria of Rightness

My target here is Sidgwick's claim:

[T]he doctrine that Universal Happiness is the ultimate standard must not be understood to imply that Universal Benevolence is the only right or always best motive of action. For . . . it is not necessary that the end which gives the criterion of rightness should always be the end at which we consciously aim. (ME, IV, I, §1, ¶4)

The options that are presented here are confusing. As I have already noted, we have more options to choose from than between "universal benevolence" and "the end at which we consciously aim." A third option for a criterion of rightness are the ends at which we should consciously aim – the ends the people have reason to encourage people to adopt as ends. In Sidgwick's terms, the criterion for right action is whether the act would be motivated by the "right and best motives" – regardless of whether these are the motives at which the agent consciously aims.

The Utility of Praise and Condemnation

I begin with Sidgwick's claim that praise, like all actions, is to be judged according to its utility.

From a Utilitarian point of view . . . 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. (ME, IV, III, §2, ¶3)

There is no reason to think that Sidgwick would say anything different about "deserving of condemnation".

Utilitarians are often criticized for this view. It seems to suggest that, whether we praise or condemn a person has nothing to do with what they have done, and only with what the effects of praising or condemning the agent would be. If we can produce good consequences by condemning or punishing an innocent person, then this is the right thing to do.

However, these criticisms apply to act-utilitarianism, not to motive utilitarianism. The motive of punishing the innocent is not a motive that we have reason to promote universally. I will have more to say on this matter later.

One way to make sense of this claim is to ask, "Why do we praise some acts and condemn others?" Some may want to answer that there is no reason for these reactions other than that they are fitting or appropriate. However, another possible answer is that praise and condemnation are expected to do work – they are expected to accomplish something important.

What is it that praise and condemnation are supposed to accomplish?

Sidgwick already told us in the quote above that it is found, “with a view to it’s future production” – the future production of the quality being praised.

The usefulness of praise and condemnation is found in their ability to encourage people to adopt certain ends and to discourage them from adopting others – and in adopting or rejecting certain ends, to modify their behavior accordingly. Praise a person for being helpful and she will tend to become more helpful. Praise a person for their hard work and they will tend to work harder. They may begin by being helpful or working harder as a means to acquiring praise. However, what begins as a means to an end develops into an end, so the agent comes to value these things for their own sake.

We see this more explicitly in the writings of John Stuart Mill:

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

Sidgwick seems to accept this. It sits in the background of passages such as:

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. (ME, IV, III, §2, ¶13)

In other words, if a good and useful motive is found wanting in society, we praise the actions that the motive recommends in order to encourage the motive. If, instead, a generally good motive such as self-love is found in excess, we may well condemn the excess to tamp down the otherwise good motive.

To see how this may work, imagine a community of individuals with an aversion to pain. They also have the ability to create in others certain ends using praise and condemnation. They would all have a reason to use these tools to promote in each other a universal aversion to causing pain.

Praise and condemnation become even more useful when we recognize that they have effects far beyond that of modifying the behavior of the person being praised or condemned. When one person experiences the praise or condemnation of another, this has a certain power to mold his motives as well. In fact, the person being praised or condemned does not even have to be real. Parables and stories have the capacity to mold character traits as well.

We can tell a similar story about using praise and condemnation to promote, for example, an aversion to lying, or breaking promises, or to taking property without consent. In this way, as Mill stated, an agent’s aversion to performing these types of actions does not begin as ends in themselves, but become ends through society’s use of praise and condemnation.

I now have two claims taken from Sidgwick and Mill.

- 1) Praise and condemnation are acts that are to be judged according to their usefulness.

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

- 2) The usefulness of praise and condemnation is found largely in their ability to promote good motives.

Now, I want to add a third claim that will come to challenge what Sidgwick called the “criterion of rightness.”

Right and Wrong as Praise and Condemnation

This third claim is that statements of right and wrong action are, at least in part, statements of praise and condemnation.

In saying this, I am not asserting a non-cognitivist emotivism. For the record, I hold that moral claims can be objectively true and false. However, a statement can be both, at the same time, objectively true, and a statement of praise or condemnation. For example, “You are lying,” has a truth value and is typically understood in most contexts to also be a statement of condemnation.

That statements of right and wrong action are statements of praise and condemnation is easiest to see with respect to “wrong action”.

I promise to pick you up at 7:00 AM and drive you to the airport. It’s now 8:30. I haven’t arrived. I haven’t called. You can’t reach me on the phone. I broke my promise. You are ready to strangle me.

When next we meet, I try to convince you that I did nothing wrong. I report that I was hit by a drunk driver on my way to get you and I was injured. Or I came across an accident on my way to get you where there was no cell-phone coverage and, being a doctor, I stopped to give aid.

My attempt to convince you that I did nothing wrong is, at the same time, an attempt to convince you that I did nothing that warrants your condemnation. Whether I did something wrong and whether I deserve criticism – in common practice – are two parts of the same question.

The case of “right action” is more difficult. This is because we use the term to refer to both obligation and non-obligatory permission.

The case of non-obligatory permission is generally a case where neither praise nor condemnation is warranted. In choosing what to wear, I have a non-obligatory permission to choose among the many options in my closet - usually.

Simple utilitarianism has a problem with non-obligatory permission. There is no such thing. The right action is the action that maximizes utility and all other options are wrong. This leads to the objection that utilitarianism is too demanding.

However, the idea that statements of right and wrong action are used as praise and condemnation, which in turn is used to shape motives, provides a way out of this problem. There are many realms of activity where people simply have no reason to promote a common motive. What to eat. What to wear. Where to live. Who our friends are. What profession to go into. Who to marry. Not only do we have no reason to promote a common motive, in some cases – such as in what profession to pursue – we have reasons to promote diverse interests. Utilitarianism would recommend against driving everybody into the same profession or studying the same subjects.

In other words, these are parts of our lives where utilitarians would find little reason to use praise and condemnation to promote universal common motives. Because statements of “right” and “wrong” are statements of praise and condemnation directing people to adopt common motives, these are options

where utilitarians see little reason to call any option “right” and other options “wrong”. Instead, they are all permissible and non-obligatory.

We also see the concept of “right action” being closely connected to praise and condemnation in the use of phrases like, “You did the right thing.” Imagine that your boss asks a co-worker to deliver some paperwork to a remote site and he accepts. You know that your coworker has had several drinks during lunch and, after failing to convince your co-worker to do the right thing, you tell the supervisor. Your co-worker is fired. You may ask, “Did I do the right thing?” This is the same as asking, “Do people deserve condemnation for doing things like this?” The answer, “You did the right thing” means, in part, that no condemnation is warranted.

I offer these examples at least to suggest that statements of right and wrong action are statements of praise and condemnation. Now, I want to refer back to that statement from Sidgwick I quoted at the start of this section.

Recall that Sidgwick stated that universal benevolence may be the correct standard for right action, but it may not be the right or best motive.

If a statement that an action is right or wrong is an intentional action that we carry out for a reason, then universal benevolence might not be the right and best motive for calling an action right or wrong either. To call an act right or wrong based on utility is to promote universal benevolence as the right and best motive. If universal benevolence is not the right and best motive, we may need to look at a different standard for calling actions right or wrong other than the standard of universal benevolence.

I suggest that the standard be whether the agent did that which a person with the right and best motives would have performed the act in those circumstances.

To take this one step further, we also need to ask whether a person with the right and best motives would have praised or condemned the specific action. One reason for the agent to praise or condemn an action is to promote the right and best motives in the community. However, it may not be the only relevant motive. The person with the right and best motives would also prefer to make honest and true statements – and would be reluctant to lie. We also have reason to promote in people generally an aversion to condemning or punishing the innocent. Consequently, this, too, may motivate the agent in circumstances that override the simple interest in promoting the right and best motives or producing the best consequences. Such an agent may be reluctant to call an act wrong, even when doing so may otherwise maximize utility, when it is false, or it involves condemning or punishing the innocent.

Conclusion

I have asked you to give some consideration to the proposal:

The right act is the act that a person with good motives, and lacking bad motives, would have done in those circumstances.

Sidgwick’s objections to the idea that morality is concerned primarily with motives are solid, but they apply to a different claim – that actions acquire their moral value from the motives behind them. They are not effective against this proposal.

I offered a reason to make motives the focus of right action. Statements of right and wrong action are statements of praise and condemnation.⁸ Statements of praise and condemnation are useful in terms of

⁸ I would further argue, if I had the time, that these statements are also used to direct the praise and condemnation of others.

their ability to shape motives. So statements of right and wrong action may look primarily at whether they are promoting good motives.

This, of course, requires a separate account of what counts as a good motive. If rights acts are defined in terms of good motives, and good motives defined in terms of right actions, this would be viciously circular. In this paper, I have used the thesis that a good motive is one that, if universal, would promote utility, while a bad motive tends to produce negative utility. Ultimately, I would argue that a good motive is one that people generally have many and strong reasons to promote universally. However, the two are closely enough related that the former serves the current purposes.

A motive-utilitarian theory, or something like it, produces several advantages over an act-utilitarian theory.

It accounts for the moral emotions, such as the regret and discomfort a person may feel testifying against their parent in a court of law.

It allows for the possibility of non-obligatory permission, as there are certain parts of our lives such as deciding what to eat and what profession to enter where we have good utilitarian reasons not to promote common motives.

It explains the role of praise and condemnation.

Finally, it explains why praise and condemnation themselves are not best justified in terms of maximizing utility, but why it may be backed up by desires to promote good desires universally, be true and honest statements, and avoid the condemnation and punishment of the innocent. All of these are motives that people generally have many and strong reasons to promote universally.