

**“LOSING MY RELIGION”: SIDGWICK, THEISM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR  
UTILITARIAN ETHICS IN ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**

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## **“LOSING MY RELIGION”: SIDGWICK, THEISM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR UTILITARIAN ETHICS IN ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**

Sidgwick wanted it all: a rational, orderly universe that unfailingly maximized both collective and individual happiness. He wanted the philosopher to be armed with a cognitivist defense of the moral order of the universe that could substitute for the theologian's and convert both the clerisy and the 'sensual herd.' (Schultz, 2004, 245)

For Sidgwick was, in a plain sense, searching for a new religion, a new synthesis combining the best of the classical and the Christian. (Schultz, 2004, 105)

The Cambridge School of welfare economics, which culminated in the seminal work of A.C. Pigou, traces its lineage through the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham, the Mills, and Henry Sidgwick. Sidgwick's major contribution to this stream of thought is his *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), which was both the capstone work of classical utilitarianism and cemented Sidgwick's place as one of the great philosophers of ethics during the Victorian period.<sup>1</sup> Here, Sidgwick followed Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in espousing the normative doctrine of "the greatest good for the greatest number." Sidgwick's studies in political economy carried this ethical perspective into the economic realm, as did his influence on economists such as Pigou, whose welfare analysis is very much a restatement of the Sidgwickian view, but undertaken with Marshallian analytical underpinnings.

The writing of *The Method of Ethics* was motivated largely by Sidgwick's struggles with Anglican orthodoxy and the desire to free himself from it. The most public aspect of this struggle was the resignation of his Trinity College

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<sup>1</sup> On Pigou and Sidgwick, see O'Donnell (1979).

Fellowship in 1869, because he found that he could not meet the Fellowship's condition of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Yet, in falling away from orthodox religion, Sidgwick did not reject the idea of a supreme force in the universe. Rather, his views evolved into a Theism that was not attended by adherence to the doctrines—such as those of the Trinity, the virgin birth, and eternal damnation—reflected in the creeds of the church.

Sidgwick's Theism included the idea that the universe has a moral ordering and that there exists a benevolent God. However, his falling away from orthodox religion led him to search elsewhere for an ethical basis for evaluation individual and social action, and thus for what Sidgwick described as “a reconciliation between the moral sense and utilitarian theories” (Memoir, 75). The results of this search, combined with his reformist inclinations, provided Sidgwick with a normative basis for the analysis of economic, political, and legal issues.

This essay will discuss Sidgwick's crisis of faith and his subsequent attempt to devise an ethical basis for social life that was at once divorced from religious concerns and at the same time consistent with his own more general theistic stance. It will further show how the results of this search impacted Sidgwick's work in economics and, ultimately, the Cambridge welfare tradition.

### **The Crisis of Faith**

Sidgwick's life (1838-1900) spanned the Victorian era, a period that saw a significant challenge to religious faith in England.<sup>2</sup> There were intellectual challenges offered by the learned classes and a decline in religious participation

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<sup>2</sup> Waterman (2007) provides a brief survey of religion and economists attitudes toward it in Britain during this period.

and belief among the working classes (Schneewind, 1977, 17-20) The collision between religion on the one hand and science and reason on the other was perhaps most famously (but by no means exclusively) illustrated in the controversy over Charles Darwin's writings. There was an increasing sense that religion and science were incompatible, with religion coming out on the losing end of the evidentiary test. The tension between Anglican orthodoxy and the evolving religious mood of the age preoccupied Sidgwick for his entire adult life. As J.B. Schneewind (1977, 21) described it, "Sidgwick was raised in the firm orthodox Christian certainties of his age and class, and moved away from them to a view that was highly individual and deliberately tentative."

We know relatively little about Sidgwick's early life. His father graduated Trinity College, became a clergyman, and went on to head the grammar school in Skipton, Yorkshire. However, he died when Henry was only three years old and so had no influence on Henry's religious outlook. The major familial influence on Sidgwick's early religious views came via E.W. Benson, an older second cousin and frequent visitor to the family home. Benson was a clergyman who eventually married Sidgwick's sister, became the Headmaster of Wellington College, and ultimately rose through the ecclesiastical ranks to become Archbishop of Canterbury. It was Benson who persuaded Sidgwick's mother that Henry should go to Rugby School, where Benson was an assistant master teaching classics, and he came to live with the family not long after Sidgwick entered Rugby.<sup>3</sup> Here, Sidgwick would likely have been exposed to a relatively conservative orthodox form of Christianity. But Benson's influence went well beyond schools advice: his forceful personality and orthodox views made a deep

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<sup>3</sup> The need for persuasion arose because Sidgwick's father had opposed public schools based on what he believed to be their poor moral state.

impression on the young Sidgwick, and Sidgwick speaks of Benson having an “unquestioned rule over” his mind in matters intellectual, moral, and practical (Memoir, 10).

At Benson’s urging, Sidgwick followed in his father’s (and Benson’s) footsteps, going on to Trinity College in 1855. Unlike his father, however Henry never left. He became a Fellow of Trinity in 1859 and his association with the College continued until his death. Sidgwick’s studies focused on classics and mathematics, but he early on developed a great interest in philosophy as well. In his second year at Cambridge, he was invited to join the Apostles, the exclusive discussion group that had such a formidable influence on so many young men at Cambridge during the nineteenth century. This group made a profound impact on Sidgwick. Its Saturday evening debates were highlight of his week, and the group’s “pursuit of truth with absolute devotion and unreserve” was a characteristic that Sidgwick felt marked his own approach to intellectual inquiry (Memoir, 34). The Apostles was only one of several discussion societies to which Sidgwick belonged over the years, and his interest in discussing religious questions was a significant motivation for him to join these groups. Sidgwick biographer Bart Schultz has said of this that, for Sidgwick, “The lure of discussion was always the same: free and open inquiry into issues of deep concern, usually involving religious or moral questions, and this as a search for unity in a conflictual world and an antidote to the dogma and dogmatism of school and church” (2004, 24).

There can be little doubt that the questioning method of the Apostles struck a particular chord with Sidgwick. As he later described it, “No consistency was demanded with opinions previously held—truth as we saw it

then and there was what we had to embrace and maintain, and there were no propositions so well established that an Apostle had not the right to deny or question, if he did so sincerely and not from mere love of paradox” (Memoir, 34-35). Looking back at his apostolic period shortly before his death, Sidgwick said that his attachment to it was “much the strongest corporate bond which I have known in life.” At least as important, though, was the direction in which it pointed him: it revealed to him that “the deepest bent of [his] nature was towards the life of thought—thought exercised on the central problems of human life” (Memoir, 35).

By the time Sidgwick graduated Cambridge in 1859, he was “in a state of religious, moral, and philosophical turmoil” that lasted for a solid decade (Schultz, 2004, 28). His association with the Apostles played no small role here, and the growth of their influence on Sidgwick was matched by a diminishing of Benson’s influence. There was a significant demarcation between the two in Sidgwick’s mind already in the early 1860s. He reports that he and others among the Apostles were working toward an ideal that had both philosophical and theological aspects:

What we aimed at from a social point of view was a complete revision of human relations, political, moral, and economic, in the light of science directed by comprehensive and impartial sympathy; and an unsparing reform of whatever, in the judgment of science, was pronounced to be not conducive to the general happiness. This social science must of course have historical knowledge as a basis: but, being science, it must regard unscientific beliefs, moral, political, of past ages as altogether wrong,—at least in respect of the method of their attainment and the grounds on

which they were accepted. History, in short, was conceived as supplying the material on which we had to work, but not the ideal which we aimed at realizing; except so far as history properly understood showed that the time had come for the scientific treatment of political and moral problems.

As regards theology, those with whom I sympathized [i.e., the Apostles] had no close agreement in conclusions ... and my own opinions were for many years unsettled and widely fluctuating. What was fixed and unalterable and accepted by us all was the necessity and duty of examining the evidence for historical Christianity with strict scientific impartiality; placing ourselves as far as possible outside traditional sentiments and opinions, and endeavoring to weigh the *pros* and *cons* on all theological questions as a duly instructed rational being from another planet ... would naturally weigh them (Memoir, 39-40).

Benson's outlook and his perspective on the pressing issues of the day were very different from this. Christianity was the unquestioned starting point for thought rather than something to be subjected to the same critical and questioning processes of inquiry as everything else. As Sidgwick later described it,

For him, the only hope of effective and complete social reform lay in the increased vitality and increased influence of the Christian Church: useful work might be done by those outside—his recognition of the value of such work was always ample and cordial—but it could only be of limited and partial utility. The healing of the nations could only come from one

source; and any social science that failed to recognize this must be proceeding on a wrong track (quoted in Schultz, 2004, 37).

Benson considered attempts at unbiased (i.e., by Christianity's influence) inquiry dangerous and, unlike the Apostles, was not one for dispassionate argumentation.

Sidgwick's own ideas on religion and ethics developed simultaneously from the late 1850s through the late 1860s, a period that he referred to as his "years of 'storm and stress' as regards religious convictions and ecclesiastical relations" (Memoir, 33). The increasing influence of the Apostles and the diminishing influence of Benson are paralleled on the ethical and religious fronts: We see the major tenets of his ethical system worked out and solidified in his own mind as his religious beliefs progressively faded (Schneewind, 1977, 51).

Evidence for the weakening of Sidgwick's religious commitment can be found in a letter written to close friend and fellow Apostle Oscar Browning in 1860. Here, Sidgwick speaks of "a great gulf" between his views and those of the framers of the 39 Articles that set out the doctrinal perspective of the Church of England, to which Cambridge Fellows (among others) had to subscribe. Given the breadth of meanings that could be said to fall within these very general Christian beliefs, Sidgwick allowed that "I think I could juggle myself into signing the Articles as well as any one else." At the same time, however, he was gripped by an internal ethical conflict, feeling that it was the duty of some, at least, not to sign off on a set of beliefs that did not accurately reflect their thinking—to avoid what he called "the best-motived perjury" (Memoir, 62).

Looking back on this period some three decades later, Sidgwick said that, prior to 1862, he “had not in any way broken with the orthodox Christianity in which [he] had been brought up.” He had, however, been seriously questioning, and through this had “become skeptical” about many of the conclusions of orthodox Christianity “and generally with regard to its methods of proof” (Memoir, 36). In 1862, though, Sidgwick was clearly questioning whether, given his religious views, it was appropriate for him to continue to hold the Fellowship (Memoir, 83). In June of that year he wrote to his good friend H.G. Dakyns that “At present ... I am only a Theist.” Yet, he went on to express the hope that his continued studies would lead him to Christianity in the end, saying that, if he did not get there, it would not be for lack of trying (Memoir, 82).

The problem here was in the “proof,” or evidence, what passed for such within Christianity, and the conflict between this and his own scientific (as he saw it) approach. Sidgwick insisted that religious claims should satisfy the same evidentiary tests as scientific facts. Writing to fellow Apostle Roden Noel in early 1862, Sidgwick said, “I am sometimes startled to find to what a halt my old theological trains of thought and sentiment have come; I have never deliberately discarded them, but the scientific atmosphere seems to paralyse them” (Memoir, 74-75). This tension between his felt religious needs and his scientific approach to inquiry, including theological inquiry, is perhaps best reflected in a letter to Dakyns in June, 1862: “I want to be orthodox,” he said, “and hunger after proofs.” He did not see his desires here as at all unreasonable, particularly given what was at stake: “The distinctive tenets of Christianity are either *true* and final or not true and temporary,” he said

(quoted in Schneewind, 1977, 24). Writing to Dakyns a few months later, he gave a clear indication of his position on beliefs that could not be empirically substantiated: “You see, I still hunger and thirst after orthodoxy: but I am, I trust, firm not to barter my intellectual birthright for a mess of mystical pottage” (Memoir, 90).<sup>4</sup> Sidgwick felt that the results of theologians’ inquiries would only be respected widely if they adopted the methods of scientists (Memoir, 150; Schneewind, 1977, 55), and that preachers of religion would only be able to “retain their hold over educated men” if they could “show in their utterances on sacred occasions the same sincerity, exactness, unreserved, that men of science show in expounding the laws of nature” (Memoir, 226).<sup>5</sup> Even so, Sidgwick was not ready to abandon Christianity, saying that he was “cling[ing] to the hope of a final reconciliation of spiritual needs with intellectual principles” (Memoir, 75).

His own attempts to accomplish such a reconciliation came via a lengthy historical study of Christianity, which, as he described it, was pointed toward solving “the great issues between Christianity and Scepticism or Agnosticism” (Memoir, 37). In 1862, Sidgwick read Ernest Renan’s *Études d’ Histoire Religieuse* (1857) which convinced him that an historical understanding of Christianity required encountering the original texts. This led him to an intensive study of the Arabic and Hebrew languages and then the relevant literature and history—a venture that occupied roughly three years of his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Speaking of a 1883 visit to Rome, Sidgwick said that “all that is connected with the form of Christianity centralised here is apathetic to me—partly, no doubt, because one almost never finds the Ages of Faith purely conveyed; the expression of them is almost always ‘restored’ and plastered over by the later ages of *make believe*” (Memoir, 367).

<sup>5</sup> Nearly two decades later, Sidgwick would write in an address on “Authority, Scientific and Theological” that “the deepest antagonism between Science and Theology lies in the difference in the authority derived from the *consensus* of experts in either case” (Memoir, 611). He considered the consensus of authority in theology as weaker than that in science, particularly given the divergence of opinions in the field on many questions.

By 1865, though, Sidgwick began to think that these historical studies would not help him to answer “the great questions raised by the orthodox Christianity from which [his] view of the Universe had been derived” What were these questions? They went to the truth of the foundational elements of orthodoxy: “Was Jesus incarnate God, miraculously brought into the world as a man? Were his utterances of divine authority? Did he actually rise from the grave with a human body glorified, and therewith ascend into heaven?” And, he said, if one could not give a straightforward affirmative answer to these questions, “what element of truth, vital for mankind, could be disengaged from the husk of legend, or symbolised by the legend, supposing the truth itself capable of being established by human reasoning?” Sidgwick’s ultimate lack of confidence in the ability of historical studies to provide conclusive answers to these questions, along with the influence of Comte’s arguments about the necessity of religion, led him to turn his attention increasingly to the study of philosophy and theology (Memoir, 37-38).

The “storm and stress” of these years can be seen in the to and fro nature of his relationship with Christianity, and this comes out quite clearly in the *Memoir*. Writing his friend Dakyns in 1866 regarding the struggles over continuing to hold his Fellowship, Sidgwick said, “I sometimes think again of resigning ... My dear boy, this remaining in the Church of England is just—humbug” (Memoir, 142). But then a month or two later he writes again to Dakyns about approaching “complete practical reconciliation with the Church” (Memoir, 145). Sidgwick’s simultaneous desire to hold on and move away can be seen in his decision to participate as a founding member of the Free Christian Union in 1868. The Union’s objective was “to invite ‘to common action

all who deem men responsible, not for the attainment of Divine truth, but only for the serious search for it; and who rely, for the religious improvement of human life, on filial Piety and brotherly Charity, with or without more particular agreement in matters of doctrinal theology” (Memoir, 189-90).

In spite of the waning of religious belief in England at the time, Sidgwick felt very alone on the theological front, writing in 1863 that, as a religious sceptic, “There is no man in England who reflects my notions in print, no, not one” (Memoir, 94). He sensed a decided lack of interest in grappling with the questions that he considered so central. Yet, it is not as if Sidgwick was the only Fellow who did not agree with Church of England orthodoxy. Leslie Stephen, who had earlier resigned his Fellowship on religious grounds, described the situation thusly:

The average Cambridge don of my day was (as I thought and think) a sensible and honest man who wished to be both rational and Christian. He was rational enough to see that the old orthodox position was untenable. He did not believe in Hell, or in ‘verbal inspiration’ or the ‘real presence.’ He thought that the controversies upon such matters were silly and antiquated, and spoke of them with indifference, if not with contempt. But he also thought that religious belief of some kind was necessary or valuable, and considered himself to be a genuine believer. He assumed that somehow or other the old dogmas could be explained away or ‘rationalised’ or ‘spiritualised.’ He could accept them in some sense or other, but did not ask too closely in what sense. Still less did he go into ultimate questions of philosophy. He shut his eyes to the great difficulties or took the answer for granted (quoted in Schultz, 2004, 122).

The problem for Sidgwick was that he could not continue to maintain what he considered a religious charade.

In June 1869, Sidgwick finally took the step of resigning his Fellowship. He did so, as he described it to Benson on 13 June, “in order to free myself from dogmatic obligations” (Memoir, 198)—specifically, the particulars of the Apostle’s Creed. He also informed Benson that he did *not* wish to secede from the Church of England, of which he felt he could remain a member even though not subscribing to the Creed. His confidence in taking this step comes through very clearly in a letter to his mother, where he said that “Whatever happens I am happy and know that I have done what was right. In fact, though I had some struggle before doing it, it now appears not the least bit of a sacrifice, but simply the natural and inevitable thing to do” (Memoir, 197). In the end, Trinity appointed him lecturer in Moral Sciences, which meant that he continued to perform essentially the same duties as under his Fellowship, but did so at reduced compensation.<sup>6</sup>

Forsaking his Fellowship did not, however, mean forsaking God. Sidgwick said in 1870, “I find ... in me an inherited predisposition to this faith” (in immortality) (quoted in Schultz, 2004, 442). As Schultz has put it, “Reverence, a prayerful attitude, these were things Sidgwick would not give up, elements of what he took to be the religiously oriented psychology of human beings (2004, 679). Sidgwick considered himself at this time to be not a Christian, but a Theist and said that he could not see how unbelievers could be “content with, happy in, a universe in which there is no God” (Memoir, 227-28).

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<sup>6</sup> One can read more of Sidgwick’s own thoughts on this whole episode in the Memoir (pp. 198-202) and in Schultz (2004). Religious tests were abolished by an Act of Parliament in June 1871, and Sidgwick was reappointed to his Fellowship not long thereafter (Memoir, 219).

Sidgwick had little tolerance for those who looked down on the religious attitudes of others, and he regarded “insouciant atheism or agnosticism as shallow, insensitive to the religious experience and the demands of the human heart” (Schultz, 2004, 43).

Given his views on “proof,” one might surmise that Sidgwick had some empirical grounding for his Theism. But this was not the case:

I myself regard Theism as a belief which, though borne in upon the living mind through life, and essential to normal life, is not self-evident or capable of being cogently demonstrated. It belongs, therefore, to a class of beliefs which I do not dispute the general reasonableness of accepting, but which I think have to be considered carefully and apart in estimating the grounds of their acceptance—assumptions for which we cannot but *demand* further proof, though we may see no means of obtaining it (1902, 242; quoted in Schultz, 2004, 684-85).<sup>7</sup>

There was, for Sidgwick an “indestructible and inalienable minimum of faith which humanity cannot give up because it is necessary for life; and which I know that I, at least so far as the man in me is deeper than the methodical thinker, cannot give up” (Memoir, 541).<sup>8</sup>

### **Ethics and the Dualism of Practical Reason**

Sidgwick’s interest in philosophy dates to his undergraduate days, and his entry point into the subject was the study of the works of J.S. Mill. However, the classics and his examination of the historical case for Christianity occupied

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<sup>7</sup> See also Sidgwick (1898).

<sup>8</sup> One can find more by Sidgwick on his religious views in the 1880s and 1890s in the Memoir, especially at pp. 346-48, 508.

most of his attention until the mid-1860s, when he was led back to philosophy by his struggles over whether he had the right to retain his Fellowship. It was in dealing with this question that he went through the thought processes that eventually were systematized in *The Methods of Ethics*, a book in which he wanted to show that religious “doubt did not necessitate a falling off of moral standards” (Schultz, 2004, 138).<sup>9</sup>

Sidgwick has indicated that his “first adhesion to a definite Ethical system was to the Utilitarianism of Mill,” and this interest in utilitarianism goes back at least to 1860. The attraction was related in part to his religious struggles: he found in utilitarianism a “relief from the apparently external and arbitrary pressure of moral rules which [he] had been educated to obey, and which presented themselves to [him] as to some extent doubtful and confused; and sometimes, even when clear, as merely dogmatic, unreasoned, incoherent” ([1907] 1981, xvii). Early on, Sidgwick seems to have found a degree of consistency between utilitarianism and his religious beliefs (Schneewind, 1977, 41-42).<sup>10</sup> And indeed, one can find in some writers a sense that utilitarianism, with its golden rule type implications, reflected Christ’s teachings.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Sidgwick ultimately came to reject the view of an essential continuity here, seeing the state of the heart rather than the nature of the act as determining goodness or not in the eyes of Christ (Sidgwick, 1866, 23; Schneewind, 1977, 45-47).

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<sup>9</sup> See also Memoir (36-38). “A method is a rational procedure for determining right conduct in any particular case” (Schultz, 2004, 150).

<sup>10</sup> As David Levy (2001, 53) has noted, the golden rule and utilitarianism were considered “formally identical” by a number of prominent thinkers in England during this period. Others, though, saw utilitarianism and religion as fundamentally opposed. See, e.g., the discussions in Almodovar and Teixeira (2007, p. 15) and Waterman (2007, pp. 11-14).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Mill and Cambridge Historian J.R. Seeley (1866).

The tangle between Sidgwick's religious and utilitarian views extended to his decision to resign his Fellowship. We noted earlier his increasing conviction that he could not in good conscience maintain his Fellowship when he did not subscribe to Church of England theology. His resignation, and the moral stance behind, it were clearly grounded in his utilitarianism, as we see from his letter to Blanche Clough written shortly after his resignation:

It is my painful conviction that the prevailing lax subscription is not perfectly conscientious in the case of many subscribers: and that those who subscribe laxly from the highest motives are responsible for the degradation of moral and religious feeling that others suffer. It would require a very clear and evident gain of some other kind to induce me to undergo this responsibility. And such gain I do not see (Memoir, 200-201).

In fact, Sidgwick's essay on "The Ethics of Conformity and Subscription" (1870) was a utilitarian attempt to settle the subscription issue. His approach to religious questions, reflected in the "Essay," among other places, was very much like the approach he ascribed to utilitarian analysis: "answering questions about actual practice in terms of realistic appraisals of the facts and the probabilities." And in situations of conflicts between duties (such as truth and church), the conflict should be resolved by an appeals "to what is expedient or useful or least harmful—by an appeal, in short, to some form of the utilitarian principle" (Schneewind, 1977, 51).<sup>12</sup>

The ethical hedonism of Mill's system—the idea that people ought to seek the general happiness—was very attractive to Sidgwick, who found it "morally

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<sup>12</sup> See also Schultz (2004, 133).

inspiring” (1907, xvii). But he was also attracted by Mill’s psychological hedonism—the idea that each person seeks his own happiness—owing to what he considered “its frank naturalness” (1907, xvii), and because common sense suggested to him that egoism, or the pursuit of self-interest, is reasonable (1907, Book II, Ch. 1). Sidgwick did not initially perceive a conflict between self-interest and duty, but an increasing sense that there was an incoherence here led him to make a more systematic study of how the two could be reconciled.<sup>13</sup>

The basic problem with the conflict between self-interest and duty has been excellently described by Schneewind (1977) in his study of Sidgwick’s ethics. Schneewind restates Sidgwick’s two ethical axioms as follows:

P6: Maximizing the agent’s own good is an ultimate right-making characteristic.

B6: Maximizing the universal good is an ultimate right-making characteristic. (1977, 373)

If both of these principles are true, as Sidgwick asserts, an act is “right” only if they hold simultaneously. This means that there must be a perfect coincidence between the acts dictated by P6 and by B6, or at least that acts dictated by one are neutral with respect to the other. In fact though, said Sidgwick, this will not be the case, as an empirical matter: “the inseparable connexion between Utilitarian Duty and the greatest happiness of the individual who conforms to it cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated on empirical grounds” (1907, 503). Elsewhere, Sidgwick spoke of the “inevitable divergence, in this imperfect world, between the individual’s Duty and his Happiness” (Memoir, 473). Having set out to discover what practical reason demands of human action, he was forced to

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<sup>13</sup> The issue of this conflict between egoism and utilitarianism seems to have preoccupied him already in the early 1860s.

conclude that it “inevitably makes contradictory demands” (Schneewind, 1977, 374). Because of this, he could not help but conclude that his work here was a failure.<sup>14</sup>

Sidgwick felt self-interest and duty would only be aligned if some external force worked to bring about such a harmonization, and he was convinced that the sanctions of this world alone could not do it. This brought him back to the issue—indeed, the necessity—of religious belief: there would have to be an afterlife that made acts in this world, such a benevolence, which satisfy the dictates of duty, also consistent with individual happiness, even though that would not seem to be the case by the dictates of this world. What was needed, in effect, was an invisible hand which would direct the pursuit of self-interest to the greater good, simply because it is God’s will that people do—and thus in people’s self-interest to work toward—the greater good. The threat of divine sanction meant that benevolence was in the self-interest of the individual if the effect on eternal life is taken into account. As Schultz put it, “without a theistic postulate that the universe has a friendly moral order, there was ever the potential for a basic conflict between acting for one’s own greatest happiness and acting for the greatest happiness of all, each option presenting itself as what one has most reason to do” (Schultz, 2004, 15).<sup>15</sup>

The problem, of course, is that Sidgwick could not find evidence for the existence of a deity who had imposed such an order:

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<sup>14</sup> Contrast this with Bastiat, who considered self-interest a God-given positive motive force (Faccarello and Steiner, 2007, pp. 42-43).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Richard T. Ely did not believe that, in practice, religion was necessarily the answer, either. As Frey (2007) points out, Ely was concerned that selfishness led people to (incorrectly, in his view) see religion as being about the attainment of a personal afterlife rather than about the redeeming of the society in which we live.

I find that I undoubtedly seem to perceive, as clearly and certainly as I see any axiom in Arithmetic or Geometry, that it is 'right' and 'reasonable,' and the 'dictate of reason' and 'my duty' to treat every man as I should think that I myself ought to be treated in precisely similar circumstances and to do what I believe to be ultimately conducive to universal Good or Happiness. But I cannot find inseparably connected with this conviction and similarly attainable by mere reflective intuition, any cognition that there actually is a Supreme Being who will adequately reward me for obeying this rule of duty, or punish me for violating it. (1874, 470; quoted in Schultz, 2004, 211)

This left Sidgwick with a problem or, if you will, another conflict—this time between his concern about the implications for his system of ethics and his empirical nature: “the whole system of our beliefs as to the intrinsic reasonableness of conduct must fall, without a hypothesis unverifiable by experience reconciling the Individual with Universal Reason, without a belief, in some form or other, that the moral order which we see imperfectly realized in this actual world is yet actually perfect” (1874, 473). Because he considered the existence of the afterlife necessary “in order to effect that harmony of Duty with Happiness which seemed to me indispensable to rational moral life,” he followed Kant in provisionally postulating “the continued existence of the soul” and set out in search of empirical evidence to support this hypothesis (Memoir, 467).<sup>16</sup>

Sidgwick’s search for empirical support for the existence of the afterlife focused largely on the exploration of psychic phenomena. This interest, which

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<sup>16</sup> Schultz (2004, 213): “As C.A.J. Coady has neatly put it, Sidgwick seems to be envisioning a God that has so effectively harmonized the world of practical reason that both the principles are ‘true, and possibly self-evident, and it is the appearance of a contradiction between them that is wrong.’”

began during his undergraduate days and continued throughout his life, explicitly linked the religious and the ethical: it was motivated largely by a desire to find scientific evidence, or proof, of another world and thus to provide a measure of scientific support for religious belief—some form of theism at least, if not Christianity itself—but had the added effect that it would provide the underpinnings for belief in an underlying moral order within the universe that harmonized self-interest and duty (Memoir, 466-67).<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Sidgwick's psychical studies did not bear any fruit. Even with this lack of empirical success, though, Sidgwick could not allow himself to jettison his belief in duty, writing in 1880 that, if he did so, he would "feel that the last barrier between [himself] and complete philosophical scepticism, or disbelief in truth altogether, was broken down." Therefore, he said, "I sometimes say to myself 'I believe in God'; while sometimes again I say no more than 'I *hope* this belief is true and I must and will act as if it was.'" (Memoir, 347-48). But as he was led increasingly toward the conclusion that he was unlikely to find proof of life after death, or the immortality of the soul, he was forced to confront the question of whether he could continue to postulate the existence of a deity who would accomplish the necessary harmonization of self-interest and duty. The import of this had deep personal implications for Sidgwick, who then asked himself, "have I any ethical system at all?" This, in turn, led him to question whether he could consistently continue to be a professor of ethics (Memoir, 467).

The import of the dualism of practical reason, for Sidgwick, went far beyond the personal to the social implications of the larger controversy over

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<sup>17</sup> See also Schultz (2004, 276-77).

religion in England at the time. Religion was widely thought to provide the foundation for morality and, as Schneewind has put it, “was needed to control the passions and desires of human beings, and to assure social order” (1977, 20). If the only issue was one’s happiness in this world, people would act far differently than they did under the threat of divine sanction. The promise of eternal salvation—or the sanction of eternal damnation—was the force that would motivate people to act benevolently in this life. Yet, the status of religion in society was increasingly in question, and Sidgwick was afraid of destroying the existing moral order if Christianity was dismantled. As he said in 1881,

In fact, the reason why I keep strict silence now for many years with regard to theology is that while I cannot myself discover adequate rational basis for the Christian hope of a happy immortality, it seems to me that the general loss of such a hope, from the minds of average human beings as now constituted, would be an evil of which I cannot pretend to measure the extent. I am not prepared to say that the dissolution of the existing social order would follow, but I think the danger of such dissolution would be seriously increased, and that the evil would certainly be very great” (Memoir, 357).

In light of this, Sidgwick was eager to “take part unhesitatingly in any social action to adapt and sustain” religion (Memoir, 227-28). He believed that churches met “a social need of fundamental importance,” and had great social utility because of their “systematic teaching of morality” (1897, 584). His support for religion, then, was utilitarian—to save society from moral collapse—not based on empirical evidence regarding the existence of God.

While Sidgwick regarded Christianity as “indispensable and irreplaceable ... from a sociological point of view,” his doubts about its truth of were as solid as his conviction of its utility. Writing in 1886, he said that he found it “more and more incomprehensible how any one whom I feel to be really akin to myself in intellectual habits and culture can possibly find his religion in [it].” He described his alienation as completely grounded in intellectual objections, and wondered how—though pleased for the result, in light of his concerns about the demise of religion—so many possessed of intellectually able minds can be drawn to the clergy” (Memoir, 455).

### **Political Economy and the Dualism**

Mill’s influence on Sidgwick was not limited to philosophy; Sidgwick’s time spent studying Mill’s writings also led him to the study of politics and political economy (Memoir, 36; 1897, vi).<sup>18</sup> Sidgwick’s interest in economics, theology, and utilitarianism were closely linked, as we see from his admission that:

I desire only studies that however abstract in ... reasonings have for their end human happiness. Thus Political Economy to make men happier and better en masse: Theology, to know, not what conduces to *my* eternal weal, but to *our* &c. The strongest conviction I have is a belief in what Comte calls ‘altruisme’: the cardinal doctrine, it seems to me, of Jesus of Nazareth (quoted in Schultz, 2004, 42).

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<sup>18</sup> Sidgwick was reading political economy already in the 1860s and said that he did so “as a ballast to my necessarily busy selfishness which would otherwise be intolerable to my real self” (Memoir, 66). He seems to have developed a particular interest in political economy in the 1870s, when he began to both write and deliver lectures on the subject (Schultz, 2004, 534).

That is, as with theology, Sidgwick was attracted to the study of political economy for utilitarian reasons—its potential to improve societal wellbeing.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, though, utilitarian considerations were, for Sidgwick, the “ultimate standard of right and wrong” in the adjudication of the rightness of economic and political outcomes (1897, p. 42).

Yet, Sidgwick considered self-interest a centerpiece of human motivation, noting in his *Principles of Political Economy* that “the motive of self-interest does work powerfully and continually” (1901, 402). He allowed that individuals at times were motivated by moral considerations, even in the economic realm (1901, 581; [1885] 1904, 184). Yet, such was his sense for the import of self-interest as a motivating force that he even went so far as to wonder whether his own ostensibly altruistic acts might actually be motivated by “enlightened selfishness” (Schultz, 2004, 42). In fact, Sidgwick was very much aware of the utility of self-interest in the economic sphere, to the point where “the difficulty of finding any adequate substitute for it, either as an impulsive or as a regulating force, is an almost invincible obstacle in the way of reconstructing society on any but its present individualistic basis” (Sidgwick 1901, 402).<sup>20</sup> He was not, though, a cheerleader for self-interest, but instead, as Schultz (2004, 42) has put it, “was apt to regard the prevalence of self-interest as akin to the prevalence of sin, something that had to be recognized and dealt with realistically, though certainly not applauded.

If the good of society is the ultimate criterion and individuals are motivated by self-interest, we are back to the question of the extent to which we

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<sup>19</sup> This perspective even extended to sport: Sidgwick found curling to be a “fine game” and loved the spirit of it because “the individual has to be subordinated to the common interest” (Memoir, 465).

<sup>20</sup> Sidgwick’s *Principles* was originally published in 1883. References given here are to the third edition, which was published in 1901.

can assume that self-interested action redounds to the best interest of society—the question that, in an ethical context, gave rise to the dualism of practical reason. In his *Elements of Politics*, Sidgwick argued that the case for laissez-faire requires both “the psychological proposition that every one can best take care of his own interest” and “the sociological proposition that the common welfare is best attained by each pursuing exclusively his own welfare and that of his family in a thoroughly alert and intelligent manner” (1897, 45). The latter is nothing more than the economic application of the ethical axioms P6 and B6, set out above. If self-interest and the promotion of the general welfare are the two ultimate moral goods, they will be simultaneously realized in the economic arena when the pursuit of self-interest redounds to the general welfare. As Sidgwick pointed out, ideal competitive markets translate self-interested action into the “morally *right* price”; here, “the self-interest of the seller seems to be working as a necessary factor in the realisation of the economic harmony of society” (1901, 586). As with the God who resolves the dualism of practical reason issue, we have an invisible hand which directs the pursuit of self-interest to the greater good.

But just as Sidgwick could not find empirical support for the equivalence of self-interest and duty in the ethical context, so, in the economic realm, he saw self-interest as “inadequate to produce the attainable maximum of social happiness” in many instances (1897, 43).<sup>21</sup> His *Principles of Political Economy* reveals an extensive list of divergences between private and social interests, both where laissez-faire’s wealth-maximizing results are not in society’s best interest because there are “extra-economic considerations” that are more

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<sup>21</sup> He also did not believe that each individual could always best see to his or her own interest. See, for example, Sidgwick ([1886] 1904, 202-205; 1901, 425).

important than wealth, and where laissez-faire does not even generate the wealth-maximizing result ([1886] 1904, 203; 1901, 399-418; Medema 2007a). He was concerned that orthodox political economy had “often produced a blind confidence in the economic harmony resulting from natural liberty,” to the point where it even seemed to neglect to note the opposition between the monopolists interests and those of the community (1901, 588).

This lack of confidence in the ability of natural liberty to harmonize self-interest and social interest led Sidgwick to suggest that improvements could come via government intervention. Sidgwick’s qualms about the market were matched, though, by a concern that government interference could make matters worse owing to the various incentive problems that worked against an efficiently operating governmental machine. As such, he insisted that intervention be implemented on a utilitarian basis—that is, the gains had to outweigh the costs. The same empirical perspective evidenced on the religion side comes through in his political economy. His sense that policy choices involve imperfect alternatives made him critical of the supporters of both laissez-faire and socialism, and of the idea of finding a golden mean between the two. Such a mean implies “that both extremes are right, if each would only see the other’s side, and that truth can be arrived at by harmoniously compounding the two.” Sidgwick, in contrast, believed that “both are proceeding from unwarranted premises to uncertified conclusions, and that scientific truth on the subject of dispute is only to be reached, if at all, by a road that neither has found” (Memoir, 457).

### **Hands, Visible and Invisible**

Sidgwick's ethics and his political economy were both characterized by the search for a harmonizing element. He wanted harmonization via invisible hands—God, perhaps, and whatever it was that equated private and social interests in the economic realm. But while the champions of Christianity and laissez-faire each touted the virtues of their particular religion, Sidgwick could not find empirical evidence for either. He could not rely on morality absent a divine sanction to get the job done on the ethical front, and he had little confidence in the ability of the economic system to channel self-interest toward the larger social interest.

Absent a harmonizing set of invisible hands, Sidgwick was forced to rely on hands more visible—the Church in the moral realm and the State in the economic—to get the outcomes mandated by utilitarianism. In the former case, he hoped for the continued beneficial influence of Christianity on morality; in the latter case, he held out hope that government action could nudge the economic system in directions that redounded to the general interest. He did not have a great deal of confidence in either, though he hoped that what he saw as a Theistic mood within society at large would be sufficient on the moral end, and that improvements in the methods of governance would help on the economic front.<sup>22</sup>

Sidgwick would almost certainly have numbered himself among the many (and not just socialists) who he said see the incentives for action under self-interest as very useful economically, but “yet feel the moral need” to make people conscious that their work is “a social function only rightly performed

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<sup>22</sup> See Backhouse and Medema (2007) and Medema (2007).

when done with a cordial regard to the welfare of the whole society” (1901, 590). This, of course, would be thoroughly consistent with his interest in socialism, itself a natural outgrowth of the centrality of benevolence in his ethical system. The problem, of course, was that Sidgwick felt self-interest often failed to promote the general interest, but yet the general-interest promoting socialism would fail because of the effects of self-interest.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, Sidgwick remained incredibly optimistic about what Christianity and government had to offer, and saw the possibilities of the latter in some sense tied to those of the former. In early 1891, he described his “attitude towards Christianity” as follows:

(1) I think Optimism in some form is an indispensable creed—not for every one, but for progressive humanity as a whole. (2) I think Optimism in a Theistic form—I mean the belief that there is sympathetic soul of the Universe that intends the welfare of each particular human being and is guiding all events of his life for his good—is, for the great majority of human beings, not only the most attractive form of optimism, but the most easily acceptable, being no more unproven than any other form of optimism, and certainly more than satisfying to the deepest human needs. (3) I think that no form of Optimism has an adequate rational basis; therefore, if Theism is to be maintained—and I am inclined to predict the needs of the human heart will maintain it—it must be, for Europeans, by virtue of the support that still obtains from the traditional belief in historical Christianity (Memoir, 508).

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<sup>23</sup> On the role of self-interest in state action, see Backhouse and Medema (2006) and Medema (2007a).

On the economic front, Sidgwick suggested that, over time, “moral and political progress [in society] may be expected to diminish” the extent and severity of the shortcomings associated with government intervention (1901, 416). This, in turn, would serve to increase the range of activities that government can carry out in a manner superior to market forces. This optimism is most strikingly expressed in his assessment of socialism. While concerned that any attempt to institute a collectivist system in the late nineteenth century would “arrest industrial progress” and bring about “equality in poverty,” he saw something potentially quite different for the future:

It is, I think, quite conceivable that, through improvements in the organization and working of governmental departments, aided by watchful and intelligent public criticism—together with a rise in the general level of public spirit throughout society—the results of the comparison [between individualism and collectivism] will at some future time be more favourable to governmental management than they hitherto have been (1897, 159).

This optimism about the improvability of the state, and thus for the ability of state action to enhance economic welfare, was to become a hallmark of the Cambridge welfare tradition, as elaborated by Alfred Marshall (1907, 336; 1926, 395) and A.C. Pigou (1912, 250; 1932, 333-35).

Sidgwick was, at heart, a skeptic who at once demanded empirical proof but yet allowed his desires on this score to be partially overridden by his own hopes and optimism. When preparing his address to the British Association in 1885, Sidgwick wrote of economics in a way that consciously paralleled his view of religion:

My problem ... is to put as optimistic a colour as possible on the rather low view that I take of the present state of our economic knowledge. Really, in this as in other departments, my tendency is to skepticism, but skepticism of a humble, empirical, and more or less hopeful kind. I do not argue, or even think, that nothing is known, still less that nothing can be known by the received methods, but that of what is most important to know we, as yet, know much less than most people suppose (Memoir, 417).

Keynes said of Sidgwick that “He never did anything but wonder whether Christianity was true and prove that it wasn’t and hope that it was” (quoted in Schultz, 2004, 4). Both religious and economic dogmas suffered at the hands of Sidgwick’s empiricism. Yet, in losing his religion, Sidgwick was forced to confront the inability of invisible hands to harmonize self and social interests, and thereby to search for institutional structures that could bring about results which comported with utilitarian dicta.

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