I

Overture

My aim in what I am about to say now is to give such an account of my life – mainly my inner intellectual life – as shall render the central and fundamental aims that partially at least determined its course when apparently most fitful and erratic, as clear and intelligible as I can. That aim is very simply stated. It has been the solution, or contribution to the solution, of the deepest problems of human life. The peculiarity of my career has been that I have sought light on these problems, and that not casually but systematically and laboriously, from very various sources and by very diverse methods.

Henry Sidgwick, "Autobiographical Fragment" dictated from his deathbed[1]

Stranger lives than Henry Sidgwick's have resulted from the philosophical quest for the ultimate truth about the Universe, but his is nonetheless a source of considerable fascination. As a Victorian philosopher, social scientist, literary critic, educator, reformer, and parapsychologist, an academic who spent nearly his entire adult life teaching at and reforming Cambridge University, Sidgwick was at the philosophical heart of England when England was at the height of its worldly power. He was friendly with everyone from William Gladstone to George Eliot, had in one brother-in-law a future prime minister and in another a future archbishop of Canterbury, and served as a leading figure in that most famous of elite secret discussion societies, the Cambridge "Apostles," which would go on to give the world the Bloomsbury circle and the Cambridge spies. And, after the publication of his masterpiece, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), he was often regarded as the most philosophically sophisticated defender of the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, who had been perhaps the single most influential intellectual figure of the mid-Victorian period.

Sidgwick represented a form of philosophical life that held on to many of the reformist Millian hopes for an open, educating society rich in social

experimentation and cultural vanguards, a society that would represent a progressively expanding circle of human sympathy and the flourishing of social intelligence. Like other academic liberals, notably his friend T. H. Green, he helped open the way for such developments as the ethical culture movement and the settlement movement. In fact, Sidgwick battled in a brilliant series of culture wars about the fate of religion, morals, art, and education, proving himself a forceful critic of Matthew Arnold's claims about "the best that has been thought and said." Significant portions of the modern university curriculum now being fought over were shaped by Sidgwick, the classicist who opposed mandatory Greek and Latin, who helped to establish philosophy as an independent professional discipline, who worried about the scientific illiteracy of the graduates in the humanities, and who fought to extend educational opportunities to women and the working class. Cambridge University's Newnham College stands today as a vivid reminder of Sidgwick's life and work, or at least of one of the more public parts of it. His influence often worked behind the scenes.

Yet Sidgwick always remained rather distanced, even alienated, from a good many of his cultural contexts; his life, like Mill's, was punctuated by mental and moral crises. An exceptionally self-critical, reflective voice, his brilliance shone through more in his perpetual doubt about the proposed solutions to "the deepest problems of human life" than in the defense of one. One formative event, personally and philosophically, was his agonized decision in 1869 to resign his position at Cambridge because he could no longer in good conscience subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, as legally required. This drama would replay itself over and again in his life, his detailed casuistical reflections on it extending from his early publications and to his last, since even after subscription was no longer required he would question whether someone as skeptical as himself ought to be teaching ethics.[2] Ironically, given how recent critics of utilitarianism have urged that it cannot effectively handle the matter of integrity, Sidgwick's life and work were entangled from beginning to end with precisely this issue, which was of a piece with his struggle with hypocrisy, both his own and that of the larger culture.

Sidgwick thus represented the classic mid-Victorian, post-Darwinian struggle between the "emancipated head and the traditional heart."[3] However, to paint his deepest concerns in such broad strokes is scarcely to do justice to the richer, more intriguing, and more troubling elements of his legacy. Unlike Nietzsche, who died at nearly the same historical moment,

Sidgwick was an eminently sane person much loved for his sympathetic and beneficent character, with a certain genius for intimate friendship and conversation, albeit of a seriously philosophical sort. But like Nietzsche, and unlike Bentham or Mill, he regarded the "death of God" as of monumental significance for Western civilization, a potential cataclysm. This was where the deepest problems were to be found, the ones most demanding of serious reflection and self-scrutiny, of all the rigors of the Socratic quest. Sidgwick's various inquiries and reformist efforts were infused with a sense of urgency and anxiety that finds no clear parallel in the earlier utilitarians, energetic reformers though they were; this urgency and anxiety had everything to do with the fate of civilization in a post-Christian era and with the need for a new cultural synthesis.

My aim in this book is to convey some sense of just what Sidgwick's self-assessment actually involved, and of how his "inner intellectual life" ultimately evolved, how he became what he was. But the Sidgwick who emerges in the following pages is quite different from the one featured in most twentieth-century readings of him, framed when his legacy was often rather cloudy.

As a once-popular line of interpretation had it, the utilitarian tradition of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number began, in its modern, secular form, with Jeremy Bentham's fanatical legal and political reformism, culminating in Britain's Reform Act of 1832, which movement was then philosophically and politically developed and qualified mainly by the younger Mill, with whom it crested. Sidgwick is then cast as a kind of bookish, academicized remnant of this legacy, holding out against the wave of philosophical idealism that swept such figures as Green and F. H. Bradley into the forefront of British philosophy, until with the new century G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell shifted the current, and contemporary analytical philosophy was launched. "The last surviving representative of the Utilitarians" is how Russell depicted and dispatched his teacher, "Old Sidg."[4]

Indeed, during the twentieth century, Sidgwick was all too often viewed as merely an "eminent Victorian," an erudite but dull read, what with all that tedious Victorian earnestness. By the time Russell, Moore, Lytton Strachey, J. M. Keynes, and Ludwig Wittgenstein were designing the Cambridge scene, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Sidgwick was deemed the dead hand of a pre-philosophical, hypocritical, sexually warped era. It was a lonely C. D. Broad, a later successor to Sidgwick's

chair at Cambridge, who would write that "Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* seems to me to be on the whole the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written, and to be one of the English philosophical classics."[5] For the most part, the aesthetic vanguards of Bloomsbury, along with the logical positivists and empiricists and those under the spell of the magnetic Wittgenstein or of ordinary language philosophy, found Sidgwick's substantive ethical theorizing a quaint relic of Cambridge's dim past, better forgotten. And the (long) enduring elements of the earlier, idealistic school were not exactly given to recalling the importance of Sidgwick, even when they criticized what they saw as the simplistic formalism of the new analytical movement. F. H. Bradley went from being a youthful critic of Sidgwick to being an older critic of Russell and Moore.

Ironically, it was the remarkably pervasive Bloomsbury mentality that, as much as anything, clouded the reception of Sidgwick during the first half of the twentieth century. "He never did anything but wonder whether Christianity was true and prove it wasn't and hope that it was" – this was the famous pronouncement of J. M. Keynes, after reading *Henry Sidgwick, A Memoir* (1906), assembled by Eleanor Sidgwick and Arthur Sidgwick.[6] The Bloomsbury letters, especially those between Keynes and Strachey, are littered with disparaging remarks about Sidgwick, his life, his times, and his philosophy.[7] Strachey called it "an appalling time to have lived" and "the Glass Case Age":

> Themselves as well as their ornaments, were left under glass cases. Their refusal to face any fundamental question fairly – either about people or God – looks at first sight like cowardice; but I believe it was simply the result of an innate incapacity for penetration – for getting either out of themselves or into anything or anybody else. They were enclosed in glass. How intolerable! Have you noticed, too, that they were nearly all physically impotent? – Sidgwick himself, Matthew Arnold, Jowett, Leighton, Ruskin, Watts. It's damned difficult to copulate through a glass case.[8]

Strachey had in fact seriously considered using Sidgwick as one of the featured figures in his wickedly sarcastic *Eminent Victorians* (1918), but he contented himself with pronouncing him a "shocking wobbler," and a dishonest one at that, someone whose lamentations over his lost faith were suspiciously prolonged. Moreover, the leading Bloomsberries, mostly bred by the Apostles, were none too pleased with the light shed on them by the *Memoir*, which told of Sidgwick's involvement with the group.

Even those who lamented the ascendance of Bloomsbury tended, in the very act, to concede its importance. F. R. Leavis, the famous literary critic who directed much of his criticism at both Bloomsbury and the cult of Wittgenstein, expostulated, "Can we imagine Sidgwick or Leslie Stephen or Maitland being influenced by, or interested in, the equivalent of Lytton Strachey? By what steps, and by the operation of what causes, did so great a change come over Cambridge in so comparatively short a time?"[9] That the change was great was something that few cared to deny, whatever their stance on its quality. But in any event, the younger generations of Apostles were scarcely prone to casting nostalgic backward glances, even at one of their "Popes" who had profoundly shaped their own order.

Given the social and intellectual positioning of the Bloomsbury group, it is perhaps not surprising that their judgments on cultural matters carried such punch, though in the case of Sidgwick, the disparagement was exacerbated by the constant flow of invidious comparisons to Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* (1903) was virtually an object of worship. Strachey effused to Moore:

> I think your book has not only wrecked and shattered all writers on Ethics from Aristotle and Christ to Herbert Spencer and Mr Bradley, it has not only laid the true foundations of Ethics, it has not only left all modern philosophy *bafouee* – these seem to me small achievements compared to the establishment of that Method which shines like a sword between the lines. It is the scientific method deliberately applied, for the first time, to Reasoning. Is that true? You perhaps shake your head, but henceforward who will be able to tell lies one thousand times as easily as before? The truth, there can be no doubt, is really now upon the march. I date from Oct. 1903 the beginning of the Age of Reason.[10]

Echoes of this can still be found in some philosophers of a metaethical bent. An influential recent work, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends," coauthored by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton," takes Moore's *Principia* as setting the agenda for twentieth-century ethical philosophizing: "However readily we now reject as antiquated his views in semantics and epistemology, it seems impossible to deny that Moore was on to something."[11]

But of course, despite his own Bloomsbury-style rhetoric, most of what Moore was "on to" was already there in Sidgwick, his teacher in the 1890s, whose *Methods* is the most heavily cited work in the *Principia*. Moore

had attended the Sidgwick lectures that were posthumously published as *Lectures on the Ethics of T. H. Green, H. Spencer, and J. Martineau*, and many of the more philosophical reviewers of the first edition of *Principia*, such as Bernard Bosanquet, noted how deeply indebted he was to Sidgwick's work.[12] Moore's *Principia* in fact shared much of its philosophical orientation with earlier work by Sidgwick and Hastings Rashdall and with developing work by H. A. Prichard, David Ross, A. C. Ewing, and Broad.[13] In later years, Russell, at least, readily admitted how unfairly Sidgwick had been treated during this dawning of "the Age of Reason," though his own noncognitivist approach to ethics scarcely served to renew interest in the *Methods*, however indebted to that work he may have been.[14]

Getting beyond the caricatures of Sidgwick floating through the first half of the twentieth century has been no easy task. If few commentaries on Sidgwick have quite succeeded in doing this, perhaps part of the reason is that they have failed to grasp how, ironically enough, Sidgwick was so profoundly important in shaping the Bloomsbury circle itself, or at least the better, more philosophical parts of it, those reflecting its Apostolic origins. This latter refers to more than the academic commonalities binding, say, Moore, Broad, and Ross, or what Keynes acknowledged as "the foot" Moore had in Sidgwick. It refers, more comprehensively, to the Apostolic ethic, linked to the Victorian Platonic revival, of molding character for the wholehearted, high-minded, disinterested fellowship committed to the pursuit of truth via intimate conversation – a dialogical ethic that in Sidgwick, as in Moore, often resulted in creative tensions with elements of the utilitarian tradition, though the utilitarian tradition itself has often been much too narrowly read on this score. Of the Bloomsberries, Leonard Woolf, at least, recognized this:

> I am writing today just over a century after the year in which Sidgwick was elected an Apostle, and looking back to the year 1903 I can say that our beliefs, our discussions, our intellectual behaviour in 1903 were in every conceivable way exactly the same as those described by Sidgwick. The beliefs 'fantastically idealistic and remote from reality and real life', the absurd arguments, 'the extravagantly scholastic' method were not as simple or silly as they seemed.

For Woolf, what became Bloomsbury was shaped by Strachey's generation of Apostles, who were all given over to Moorism and "the purification of that divinely cathartic question which echoed through the Cambridge

Courts of my youth as it had 2,300 years before echoed through the streets of Socratic Athens: 'What do you mean by that?' "[15] But Moore's Platonism was but another reflection of that Apostolic ethic by which Sidgwick had been philosophically turned, the one he would carry into innumerable discussion societies and friendships devoted to the deepest problems. This was education with the personal touch, putting one's life on the line and challenging convention and the common wisdom – the form of education Sidgwick valued most.

At any rate, had he lived another decade, Sidgwick would have viewed Bloomsbury as but one more vanguard Apostolic experiment – albeit a rather naive and apolitical one – testing the limits of the human potential and the horizons of happiness through unorthodox art and unorthodox sex. Moore, Russell, Strachey, Keynes, and Virginia Woolf may have mocked their Victorian predecessors, but to a surprising degree, in their unconventional explorations of the potential of friendship and art for building a post-Christian ethic, they simply realized some – by no means all – of Sidgwick's hopes for future generations.

Yet if Bloomsbury would have carried little shock value for Sidgwick, it might have dismayed him in some respects. For Sidgwick had a more encompassing intellectual vision – a wider, deeper, more troubled, and ultimately more troubling vision of things to come. Oddly enough, to understand this more fully, it is necessary to challenge not only his detractors, but also many of his admirers.

Admittedly, despite lingering Bloomsbury prejudice, Sidgwick is today a much-prized member of the philosophical canon, perhaps more highly regarded among Anglo-American philosophers than at any time since his death. The second half of the twentieth century was considerably kinder to his reputation than the first half, albeit in a somewhat blinkered way. Consider Alan Donagan's instructive exaggeration, expressing something of the outlook during the late 1970s:

> Most of Sidgwick's contemporary rivals, Herbert Spencer and James Martineau, for example, have long been unread. And those who are still referred to – T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, perhaps Bernard Bosanquet now and then – may safely be neglected by a young philosopher aspiring to contribute to the main current of analytic moral philosophy. Nor need he expend much labor even on Sidgwick's predecessor and master, John Stuart Mill, or on his pupil and critic, G. E. Moore. Yet he cannot, in the principate of Rawls, omit to address himself to *The Methods of Ethics*.[16]

Donagan's estimation is, of course, a product of the Rawlsian revolution, sparked by John Rawls's hugely influential work *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and, more recently, by *Political Liberalism* (1996).[17] Rawls long insisted on the importance of Sidgwick's *Methods* both as a seminal model of how to do moral theory in general and as a fundamental challenge to his own particular theory of "justice as fairness." According to Rawls, classical utilitarianism was a profoundly important theory of enduring relevance, and Sidgwick was the most philosophically profound and insightful representative of it; more philosophically acute than Bentham or James Mill and more consistent than John Stuart Mill, he went beyond all of them in providing an impartial, scholarly defense of the view that individual actions and social institutions ought ultimately to be judged by how well they serve the greatest happiness.[18] Not only did Sidgwick powerfully articulate just what was involved in the classical utilitarian approach to ethics, economics, and politics, but he did so by using a method that avoided the dead ends of premature metaethics: careful, comprehensive, historically informed comparisons of the best of the competing substantive views about how to determine what one ought to do – that is, the different ways of plausibly systematizing the core ethical concepts of right, good, and virtue. Sidgwick's exhaustive comparison of the "methods" of utilitarianism, egoism, and commonsense or dogmatic intuitional morality – seeking to reconcile these views or at least to clarify their differences, while pointing up the weak spots even in his own favored positions – was a far cry from Bentham's thunderous denunciations of natural rights as "nonsense upon stilts." Sidgwick worked assiduously to do justice to the alternative views, and he went well beyond Mill in showing how utilitarianism could do justice to many of our commonsense moral rules.[19]

Such claims on Sidgwick's behalf no doubt reflected Rawls's own early struggles to shake free of both the positivistic and Wittgensteinian hostility to substantive "theory" in ethics and appeals to the history of philosophy. Clearly, Rawls himself brilliantly succeeded in doing this, playing a central role in what has been called the "Great Expansion" of substantive ethical theorizing in recent decades, as well as in the revitalization of historical work by philosophers. Of course, one of his weighty allies in bolstering the history of philosophy was J. B. Schneewind, whose brilliant book *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*[20] was by far the most important twentieth-century commentary on Sidgwick. On the more

analytical side, Derek Parfit's extraordinary *Reasons and Persons*[21] was clearly a direct outgrowth of the renewed interest in Sidgwick's work.

In certain respects, this book began life as an effort to come to terms with the ways in which Sidgwick figured in the conflicting arguments of, on the one side, such neo-Kantian philosophers as Rawls and Schneewind and, on the other, such neo-utilitarian philosophers as Parfit.[22] Of special importance here has been the issue of just how to interpret Sidgwick's methodology and his views on the meaning and justification of moral claims, his metaethics. Oddly, Sidgwick has been praised both for his Rawlsian avoidance of metaethical worries and for doing substantive ethical theory from a developed metaethical standpoint, the theory of knowledge called "philosophical" or "rational" intuitionism (which he contrasted with William Whewell's "dogmatic" intuitionist defense of the self-evidence of commonsense moral rules).

However, this effort to reconcile the different readings of Sidgwick led only to a warmer appreciation for Sidgwick's original and very sophisticated position, a complex, fallibilistic intuitionism that also finds a place for coherence and consensus as criteria for reducing the probability of error. His intuitionism dovetailed with his Apostolic, dialogical inquiry, and he wielded it in a decidedly skeptical fashion, deploying it in ways that, far from endorsing the ethical status quo, tended to undermine the notion of certain ethical truth – though without lapsing into relativism or subjectivism – and avoided most of the metaphysical and metaethical entanglements usually associated with intuitionism.[23]

Some suggestions along these lines have been made by James Kloppenberg, in *Uncertain Victory*, but unfortunately his effort to link Sidgwick to pragmatist and progressivist movements fails to capture the tensions and shifts within Sidgwick's epistemological trajectory, or to deal with the particulars of the history of intuitionism.[24] Sidgwick came to have a vivid appreciation for the social nature of inquiry and the disappointments of the philosophical "quest for certainty," the quest for the ultimate, final truth about the universe shared by Plato and Descartes, but he learned the hard way. His Apostolic conscience remained highly Platonic, however frustrated.

Furthermore, like the works of Rawls, Parfit, Schneewind, and others, Kloppenberg's account is silent on, among other things, all questions of sexuality and race, questions so central to both the late Victorians and Bloomsbury, and so relevant to matters epistemological. Despite various

abstract concerns with the nature of the knowing self and personal identity, recent authors concerned with Sidgwick have been largely oblivious to these proto-Bloomsbury priorities of Sidgwick and his circle. Perversely, the positive academic reception of Sidgwick's work still reflects various prejudicial Bloomsbury readings of him.

Indeed, curiously enough, Sidgwick's Bloomsbury critics and analytical admirers have all tended to be blinded by a too-narrow view of the classical utilitarian backdrop to Sidgwick's work.[25] Utilitarianism has, of course, come in for an extraordinary amount of criticism from a great many quarters during the past century, much of it astonishingly dim. Even Rawls's generous acknowledgment of the significance of this tradition was part of a sustained effort to demonstrate its inferiority to the theory of justice as fairness. But all too often the historical reading of this tradition has suffered from a too-hasty equation of it with classical and neoclassical economic theory and practice, or with rational choice theory generally, or, worse, some vision of purely administrative rationality.

Thus, in some disciplines, Bentham and his followers, the Philosophical Radicals of the early nineteenth century, continue to go down in history as the zealous champions of classical liberal reformism, the authors of endless proclamations on behalf of institutions productive of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Panoptical prisons run by invisible authorities, a market economy guided by an invisible hand, subterranean sewers flushing away microscopic germs, a trim and efficient political and legal system kept in line by an omnipresent public eye, and Lancastrian schools drilling the scrutinizing conscience of Dickens's Mr. Gradgrind into ever-improving pupils – these were the means by which humanity would progress and flourish, find happiness as well as pursue it. Facts, free markets, self-help, and clear law – yes; lawyers, politicians, and priests – no, or at least in sharply limited numbers. Poets were also dispensable, being mere purveyors of falsehood. Hard facts to unmask sinister interests – that was the war cry. The cultivation of one's soul did not signify.

But as both a philosophy and a fighting creed, utilitarianism was a wild, conflicted current of history, figuring in everything from early women's liberation to the attempt to decriminalize same-sex behavior. The actual history of utilitarianism was a strange affair, absorbing and assimilating everything from the Platonic revival to Romanticism to Darwinism to