

The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics

By Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, Peter Singer


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What does the idea of taking 'the point of view of the universe' tell us about ethics? The great nineteenth-century utilitarian Henry Sidgwick used this metaphor to present what he took to be a self-evident moral truth: the good of one individual is of no more importance than the good of any other. Ethical judgments, he held, are objective truths that we can know by reason. The ethical axioms he took to be self-evident provide a foundation for utilitarianism. He supplements this foundation with an argument that nothing except states of consciousness have ultimate value, which led him to hold that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good.

Are these claims defensible? Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer test them against a variety of views held by contemporary writers in ethics, and conclude that they are. This book is therefore a defence of objectivism in ethics, and of hedonistic utilitarianism. The authors also explore, and in most cases support, Sidgwick's views on many other key questions in ethics: how to justify an ethical theory, the significance of an evolutionary explanation of our moral judgments, the choice between preference-utilitarianism and hedonistic utilitarianism, the conflict between self-interest and universal benevolence, whether something that it would be wrong to do openly can be right if kept secret, how demanding utilitarianism is, whether we should discount the future, or favor those who are worse off, the moral status of animals, and what is an optimum population.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[The authors]...do something new and worthwhile. They present Sidgwick's most important ideas in an admirably clear and accessible way...And they do a fine job of illuminating connections between ideas discussed by Sidgwick and related ideas in contemporary moral philosophy." -- *Mind*

About the Author

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek is a Polish utilitarian philosopher, working as an assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Lodz. She received her PhD at the same university. She is the author of several articles in Polish and English on Henry Sidgwick, utilitarianism, bioethics, and philosophy for children.

Peter Singer first became well-known internationally after the publication of *Animal Liberation* in 1975. Since then he has written, co-authored, edited or co-edited more than forty other books, including *Practical Ethics*, *The Expanding Circle*, *How Are We to Live?*, *Rethinking Life and Death*, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (with Jim Mason), and *The Life You Can Save*. He was born in Melbourne, Australia, and educated at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford. Since 1999 he has been Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, a position that, since 2005, he has combined with that of Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. In 2005 *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world, and in 2012, he was made a Companion of the Order of Australia, the nation's highest civic honour.

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