

# Russell and Sidgwick\*

by Nicholas Griffin

DURING THE YEAR in which he was a student of philosophy at Cambridge (1893–94), Russell had three teachers: James Ward, G.F. Stout and Henry Sidgwick. Of the three, Sidgwick was by far the most eminent and had by far the least immediate influence on Russell. Nonetheless, this very lack of influence has its interest. For it reveals both something of Sidgwick's years of decline at Cambridge and something of Russell's hopes for philosophy. The two parts of this paper are concerned respectively with these two topics.

## I

By 1893 Sidgwick, then in his mid-fifties, had been at Trinity College for a very long time. As an undergraduate he had been a member of the Apostles, whose meetings he continued occasionally to attend.<sup>1</sup> After graduation he obtained a fellowship at Trinity in 1859 which he held until 1869, when his growing religious doubts led him to resign. Although it was necessary to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to become a fellow, it was not necessary to resubscribe to them in order to remain one. Many fellows before Sidgwick had found it possible to retain their fellowships through loss of religious faith on the

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<sup>1</sup> On 2 June 1894 Russell wrote to Alys Pearsall Smith that he was pleased he'd had to read an Apostles paper on Mr. Bennett (the kindly but detached father in *Pride and Prejudice*) because Sidgwick had turned up "and the other subjects were too intimate to read about before an old man like Sidgwick."

grounds that continuing in their fellowships did not require them to reaffirm their faith. Sidgwick, like Leslie Stephen before him, did not allow such subterfuges to offer him an easy way out and, after a long period of agonized self-interrogation, he resigned. The forthright way in which he confronted the issue helped bring about the repeal of the subscription rules.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, Trinity appointed Sidgwick to a lectureship, and later reappointed him to a fellowship once subscription had been abandoned. In 1883 he became Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy, a position he held until his death in 1900.<sup>3</sup>

In the middle years of the nineteenth century Sidgwick had been among the pioneers of educational reform at Cambridge. He had, of course, been prominent in the campaign to end subscription. But he also took a prominent role in furthering the cause of women's education at Cambridge. He was among the first to give lectures for women, and played an important role in founding and financing (out of his own pocket) Newnham Hall, the nucleus from which Newnham College grew. For many years, he lectured there and served on its governing body. His wife became the principal of Newnham College in 1892. More generally, he was among the first of the dons who made serious efforts to improve the quality of university teaching at Cambridge in the 1870's. This movement produced a revolution in Victorian university education and led to the appearance of what came to be known as "the new don": a don, that is, who was seriously involved in undergraduate education and academic research.<sup>4</sup> The new dons came, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to replace the remote, autocratic and usually cantankerous dons who previously had neglected their

<sup>2</sup> See H. Sidgwick, *The Ethics of Conformity and Subscription* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1870). Russell frequently referred to this episode with admiration, e.g. in "Toleration", *The Listener*, 39 (1948): 696; "Eminent Men I Have Known", *Unpopular Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> The best general study of Sidgwick and his place in moral philosophy is J.B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), but see also C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1930). See R. Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, Vol. 1: *Hopes Betrayed, 1883–1920* (London: Macmillan, 1983), Ch. 2, for his role in Victorian culture. Carl Spadoni in a judicious review of Schneewind (*Russell*, nos. 33–4 [1979]: 45–52) emphasizes Sidgwick's isolation from the philosophical mainstream for most of his career—a fact not given due emphasis by Schneewind. The standard life is still A. and E.M. Sidgwick, *Henry Sidgwick, a Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1906), a memorial volume compiled by his brother and wife, the Victorian ethos of which inspired Keynes to remark, "I have never found so dull a book so absorbing".

<sup>4</sup> See especially S. Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons* (London: Faber, 1968); also D.A. Winstanley, *Later Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947).

duties and dominated the university. Sidgwick had suffered under the rule of such dons, particularly during William Whewell's long and notoriously autocratic reign as Master of Trinity (1841–66)<sup>5</sup>, and he had no intention of inflicting similar conditions on others.

Russell took two courses of lectures with Sidgwick, one on ethics started in the Long Vacation 1893 and continued through Lent Term 1894, while the other, called "The Elements of Philosophy", lasted a single term, Michaelmas Term 1893. Both series of lectures were published posthumously, and the lectures as Russell heard them probably did not differ very much from the published versions.<sup>6</sup> Russell kept very full notes on Sidgwick's lectures on ethics, as he did on the lectures he attended by Ward and Stout. But his notes on "The Elements of Philosophy" break off after a few lectures, and it is not known whether Russell stopped attending the lectures or merely stopped taking notes.<sup>7</sup>

There were certain things about Sidgwick's philosophy which might have been expected to appeal to Russell, notably his utilitarianism and his rejection of Mill's strong empiricism (especially in connection with inference). Russell, on going up to Cambridge, endorsed much of Mill's philosophy, except for his view that mathematical truths were strongly supported inductive generalizations.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Sidgwick's fallibilism may well have seemed defeatist to Russell who had entered philosophy with a view to acquiring certain knowledge, especially when such certainty was widely proclaimed by the neo-Hegelians to be available. Sidgwick's differences from classical utilitarianism, e.g. his refusal to define moral concepts in terms of non-moral ones and his insistence on common sense, were probably minimized by Russell, who referred to him (mistakenly) as "the last survivor of the Benthamites".<sup>9</sup> With the neo-Hegelians as a contrast, Bentham and Sidgwick would seem much more alike.

In fact, Russell, in common with the other young philosophers at Cambridge, "did not give [Sidgwick] nearly as much respect as he deserved" (*ibid.*). With the rise of Kant and Hegel in British universities, utilitarianism and common-sense philosophy had been on the defensive, and "Old Sidg", as he was called by Cambridge undergraduates, was considered philosophically out of date.<sup>10</sup> The neglect of Sidgwick had as much to do with his style as with his doctrines. Both resulted from his painstakingly scrupulous integrity which came to be regarded as diffidence as the issues over which he agonized came to appear less difficult. Thus, for example, Keynes's dismissive summary: "He never did anything but wonder whether Christianity was true and prove that it wasn't and hope that it was."<sup>11</sup> The writings of the then fashionable neo-Hegelians had a certain dash and elegance, which were entirely lacking in Sidgwick's.<sup>12</sup> There was nothing, wrote C.D. Broad (*Five Types*, p. 144), "to relieve the uniform dull dignity of his writing". In labyrinthine Victorian sentences, heavily overloaded with dependent clauses and qualifications, Sidgwick pursued his argument, determined to leave no objection unanswered. His scrupulous attention to detail, which pursued his *Methods of Ethics* through seven editions of meticulous revision, made it difficult for his readers to follow his argument.

Some features of his writing transferred with unfortunate effects to his teaching. Although an earlier generation of undergraduates gave high praise to his teaching, even they noted the high degree of sustained attention that was necessary to follow his classes (*cf.* A. and E. M. Sidgwick, *Henry Sidgwick*, pp. 307, 312). F.W. Maitland, the historian, who was one of his pupils, remarked in a memorial address that in his lectures Sidgwick presented "the complex truth ... with all [its] reservations, and qualifications, exceptions and distinctions"; and that he

<sup>5</sup> For Sidgwick's sense of liberation when Whewell finally died, see A. and E.M. Sidgwick, pp. 130–1, 147–6. The dimension of Whewell's tyranny can be gauged from the fact that it provoked so restrained and overscrupulous a man as Sidgwick to harbour such feelings, much less express them.

<sup>6</sup> H. Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Ethics of T.H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau*, ed. E.E.C. Jones (London: Macmillan, 1902) and *Philosophy, Its Scope and Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1902).

<sup>7</sup> Russell's notes on Sidgwick's ethics lectures are to be found in the first of two notebooks devoted to the undergraduate lectures he attended; the notes on "The Elements of Philosophy" lectures are in the second. The two notebooks are referred to as the "Lecture Notebooks" (RA 220.010040, .010050).

<sup>8</sup> See N. Griffin, *Russell's Idealist Apprenticeship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> *My Philosophical Development*, p. 38; "My Mental Development" in P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), I: 10; *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Skidelsky, p. 34. There are any number of clever caricatures of Sidgwick; witness the following by Skidelsky himself: "He was a man of considerable parts: the trouble was they did not fit" (p. 33), and "His mind is a window into the whole range of Victorian infirmity" (p. 34). For another, from Walter Raleigh, even more amusing but too long to quote, see N. Annan, *Leslie Stephen, The Godless Victorian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), pp. 277–8. More sympathetically, Blanshard includes Sidgwick among his *Four Reasonable Men* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> For a perceptive comparison of Bradley's style with Sidgwick's, see D.G. James, *Henry Sidgwick: Science and Faith in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 30–1.

carried “candour and sobriety and circumspection to their furthest limit” (*ibid.*, p. 306). In the early years of the Moral Sciences Tripos, Sidgwick’s unpretentiousness, and the scrupulous care which he took in marking their essays and considering their opinions, endeared him to many students. In later years, however, some of this changed. The virtues which Sidgwick, as one of the first new dons, had exemplified almost uniquely became more common. Also the Moral Sciences Tripos became more popular and attendance increased, forcing Sidgwick to give more formal lectures which he found uncongenial. Finally, as he got older he came to find teaching more and more burdensome (*ibid.*, p. 312). By the 1890’s he was simply reading out his lectures, “fit for publication as they stood”, according to G.E. Moore, who added: “I think I could have gained more by reading them to myself than by hearing him read them.”<sup>13</sup> This is almost certainly an opinion that Russell would have shared. Russell much later, however, went out of his way to praise Sidgwick’s intellectual honesty and the care and courtesy with which he commented on student essays.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the latter was evident on Russell’s own essays for Sidgwick.<sup>15</sup>

Although Russell read Sidgwick’s major work, *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), in July 1893, there is little sign of its having had any major influence on him. The same might also be said of Sidgwick’s lectures. Russell, like Moore, found the latter dull and tiresome, as the notes he took illustrate. For example, in the “Elements of Philosophy” lectures Sidgwick investigated the meaning of the word “metaphysics” and commented that it was no use enquiring into the word’s etymology. Russell remarked in parentheses: “Next 10 minutes spent doing so” (“Lecture Notebook”, II: 12). Russell’s brief notes end with an exasperated “etc. etc. etc.” (p. 18). Each lecture, Russell remembered, contained exactly one joke, after which the students’ attention would flag (*Portraits from Memory*, p. 63). There was a marked contrast between Sidgwick’s manner in the lecture-hall and his manner in private, where he was a congenial host and (despite a stammer) an unexpectedly good conversationalist. Moore noted the contrast in a letter to his mother (30 April 1895) after he’d had dinner with the Sidgwicks at Newnham College:

The professor is immensely interesting and amusing: he always has plenty to say, wandering on gently from topic to topic, with shrewd remarks and plenty of witty anecdotes; I wish it were the same with his lectures, but they generally seem three times as long as anybody else’s, and are very difficult to follow. He is so familiar with his subject and all its side-issues, that he does not make its skeleton clear enough, being continually engaged in arguments on details.<sup>16</sup>

Although Sidgwick’s interests were far from narrow (his teaching at Cambridge included classics, economics, literature, politics and law, in addition to philosophy), his main contribution was to ethics and consists essentially of a single (great) book, *The Methods of Ethics*.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, his failure to achieve more was partly due to his failure to decide on a single line of activity. His vacillation between teaching, philosophy, parapsychology and Biblical studies (the last of which involved him in extensive work in Hebrew and Arabic) often undermined his efforts in any one area. In addition, he was plagued by personal problems and religious doubts which took up his time and sapped his energy. In these areas especially he could not make quick decisions, and every move was preceded by an agonized period of self-interrogation.<sup>18</sup> Once he had decided, however, he acted on his decision, sometimes in cases where action required courage, as when he resigned his fellowship.

Nonetheless, his *Methods of Ethics* is an impressive and undeservedly neglected work. According to Sidgwick, the purpose of ethics, as the rest of philosophy, was the rational reconstruction of legitimate beliefs.<sup>19</sup> It was typical of Sidgwick’s method (lightly parodied by Russell at the beginning of his first paper to the Apostles<sup>20</sup>) that he began with common-sense views of morality. He found that there were three (hence the plural in his title): the view that moral principles may be known intuitively; the view that actions are right in so far as they are conducive to the agent’s happiness (egoism); and the view that they are right in so far as they are conducive to the general happiness (utilitarianism). Faced with this trichotomy the task of the philosopher is to seek a systematic unity. This Sidgwick partly achieved by means of four

<sup>13</sup> G.E. Moore, “An Autobiography” in P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, 3rd ed. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1963), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Unpopular Essays*, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, ed. K. Blackwell et al. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 419–22.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Paul Levy, *Moore: G.E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> 1st ed., 1874; 7th ed., 1906 (reprinted, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> See James, *op. cit.*, p. 16, who refers to him somewhat hyperbolically as a “nineteenth century Hamlet”—he was not so romantic.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. Sidgwick, “The Verification of Beliefs”, *Contemporary Review*, April 1872, pp. 582–90.

<sup>20</sup> “Can We Be Statesmen?”, in *Collected Papers*, 1: 79–82.

self-evident axioms:<sup>21</sup>

- (1) “[I]t cannot be right for *A* to treat *B* in a manner in which it would be wrong for *B* to treat *A*, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment” (p. 380).
- (2) “[M]ere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another” (p. 381).
- (3) “[T]he good of any one individual is of no more importance from the point of view ... of the Universe, than the good of any other” (p. 382).
- (4) “[A]s a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally,—as far as we recognize it as attainable by my efforts,—not merely at a particular part of it” (p. 382).

From these axioms Sidgwick derives a principle of benevolence which he finds at the heart of both utilitarianism and intuited common-sense morality. Since none of the axioms conflicts with anything in either utilitarianism or common-sense intuitionism, he concludes that these two ethical methods can reach consensus based on his four axioms. On the other hand, of course, egoism is radically at odds with axioms (1)–(3) and the derived principle of benevolence, and to achieve the unity he desired Sidgwick is forced to postulate a deity that sets up an appropriate system of rewards for benevolence to bring the two into line. Sidgwick’s well-known interest in psychical research stemmed in part from an attempt to find empirical support for this hypothesis.

The *deus ex machina* employment of Sidgwick’s religious beliefs to solve what Russell identified as “the fundamental difficulty of Ethics”<sup>22</sup> could hardly have appealed to the agnostic Russell. But a more fundamental obstacle was the fact that Russell, encouraged by McTaggart and the other idealists, probably expected more heroic measures from philosophy than Sidgwick’s common-sense fallibilism. Carl Spadoni has speculated that, were it not for the influence of neo-Hegelianism, Russell, under Sidgwick’s influence, would have retained the utilitarian moral philosophy he acquired before going up to Cambridge and may

<sup>21</sup> Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Bk. III, Ch. 13. Schneewind’s discussion, pp. 290–7, is more useful, however. Counts of the number of Sidgwick’s axioms range from three to eight (cf. Schneewind, p. 290n). Schneewind himself gives four as the (claimed) least, complete set, though the independence of (1) and (3) needs to be shown.

<sup>22</sup> “Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver”, *Collected Papers*, I: 97.

well have refined and expanded it.<sup>23</sup> This seems the more plausible since Russell’s neo-Hegelian attempts to solve “the fundamental difficulty of Ethics” were hardly more satisfactory than Sidgwick’s. It is worth considering these early efforts of Russell’s, however, for (failures though they are) they do indicate what Russell took to be the advantages of neo-Hegelian boldness over Sidgwick’s diffident fallibilism.

## II

Russell tackled “the fundamental difficulty of Ethics” head-on in an essay, “Ethical Axioms”,<sup>24</sup> which he wrote for Sidgwick’s ethics course. The essay is an odd mixture of perceptiveness muddled by an infusion of incompletely thought-out neo-Hegelian pieties. Ostensibly the essay was to have “special reference” to Bk. III, Ch. 13 of Sidgwick’s *Methods*, where the four axioms are stated (cf. “Lecture Notebook”, II: 69), but Russell makes no reference to Sidgwick except for an irreverent swipe at Sidgwick’s “consensus of common sense” which, Russell says, cannot “afford even the shadow of an ultimate ethical axiom, being [itself] concerned with what is and not with what ought to be” (*Collected Papers*, I: 227).<sup>25</sup> As the quoted passage suggests, Russell utilizes the “is”/“ought” distinction to argue that if there are axioms on which moral judgments may be based then at least one of them must be ethical. He then divides such axioms into formal and material, admitting that formal axioms (he cites Kant’s categorical imperative as an example) may be self-evident, but not material axioms. So far so good, but Russell gives no indication of whether Sidgwick’s own axioms are formal or material, nor of whether material axioms are required for the validation of moral judgments. The worst confusion is reserved for the final paragraph of the essay, however. There, the “is”/“ought” distinction notwithstanding, Russell defines the good naturalistically “as that which satisfies desire”, in particular, the desire of the agent (*Collected Papers*, I: 228). Thus “[o]ur duty will consist in self-realization”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. Spadoni, “Philosophy in Russell’s Letters to Alys”, *Russell*, nos. 29–32 (1978): 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Collected Papers*, I: 227–8.

<sup>25</sup> Presumably Russell’s argument here is that from the fact that there is a consensus of common sense that *A* ought to be done it doesn’t follow that *A* ought to be done. But Sidgwick never claimed that it did. The point is put most clearly in Sidgwick’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Kant and Other Philosophical Lectures and Essays*, ed. J. Ward (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 464, where consensus is at most a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the legitimation of beliefs. See also Russell, “On the Definition of Virtue”, *Collected Papers*, I: 219, for further criticism of common-sense principles.

but “in what more particularly self-realization would consist I cannot here discuss: this is a metaphysical rather than an ethical question.”<sup>26</sup> The use of the “is”/“ought” distinction to attack Sidgwick’s theory and the rejection of the distinction to support a neo-Hegelian theory of self-realization is hardly satisfactory, and Russell’s discussion must at best be dismissed as inconclusive.

The confusion is muted in an earlier essay, “The Relation of What Ought to Be to What Is, Has Been or Will Be”,<sup>27</sup> also written for Sidgwick. Again the point about the impossibility of deriving an “ought” from an “is” is made, thus leading to the conclusion that, if moral judgments are to be validated, there must be independent ethical axioms by to validate them. In this paper, however, Russell leaves open the possibility that some such ethical axioms may be “materially equivalent to some assertion about what is, has been, or will be” (p. 213) and suggests Mill’s “justification” for the principle of utility as an example.<sup>28</sup> But instead of pursuing this obscure distinction between formal derivability and material equivalence, he proceeds to attack Mill’s account on the ground that the term “ought” presupposes a choice, whereas if, as on Mill’s supposition, man can do nothing else but seek pleasure, the question of whether pleasure ought to be sought becomes meaningless. On the other hand, if other objects of desire than pleasure are admitted, utilitarianism can provide no good reason why they, and not pleasure, ought not to be sought (*Collected Papers*, I: 213–14). The argument is clever, and effective if its initial presupposition is true;<sup>29</sup> but it misses the central problems which are: What (if anything) does it mean to claim that “A ought to seek X” is materially equivalent to “A (always) desires X”? Is it possible both that these two statements be materially equivalent and that no statement about what ought to be the case is formally derivable from any statement about what is the case? Finally, if the answer to the second question is yes, in what way does the admission of materially equivalent factual propositions widen the axiomatic base by which moral judgments are validated?

<sup>26</sup> *Collected Papers*, I: 228. Russell’s ethic of self-realization is modelled on Bradley’s. See the latter’s *Ethical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959; 1st ed., 1875), esp. p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Collected Papers*, I: 213–14.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ch. iv of Mill’s *Utilitarianism*.

<sup>29</sup> This presupposition runs into immediate trouble when confronted by Russell’s determinism. Russell recognizes the problem, but his brief discussion is hardly sufficient to carry his point. Russell tried again with determinism a little later on, in “The Free-Will Problem from an Idealist Standpoint”, *Collected Papers*, I: 230–9, where he argues for a compatibilist position on free will and determinism.

Russell was in a position to be more open about his hopes for a neo-Hegelian resolution of the problem—and its difficulties—in the more unbuttoned atmosphere of the Apostles. It forms the main unresolved issue in the third paper he read to them,<sup>30</sup> which concerns the mastery of the passions and raises issues in philosophical psychology and ethics. The essay begins, in best seventeenth-century manner, with a taxonomy of the passions, classified according to their objects in a hierarchy of increasing abstractness. With characteristic precision Russell defines a “passion” as “a body of particular desires coordinated by direction to a single end or to a closely related system of ends”, and an “emotion” as “the State of Mind accompanying the fruition or frustration (final or temporary) of a Passion, with special reference to its aspect of pleasure and pain” (p. 92). But after this highly theoretical beginning, Russell turns to the practical issue of controlling one’s passions, illustrated by reference to literary characters and some personal examples which were subsequently deleted (cf. *Collected Papers*, I: 468, 469). His further theoretical remarks are entirely incidental to this end.

He stated the thesis of the paper in the form of a paradox to Alys Pearsall Smith: “I shall read them a paper on controlling our passions, in which I shall point out that we can’t and that the greater they are the less we ought to though the more easily we can.”<sup>31</sup> The paradox is easily dispelled when it is realized that by a “greater passion” Russell meant one which was more abstract and required for its satisfaction a more extensive set of circumstances. Such passions he regarded as morally better than lesser ones, and therefore that it was less desirable to control them. On the other hand, such great passions were not likely to be intense and were liable to be eclipsed by more immediate physical desires, thereby making them easier to control (p. 94). The reason that larger passions were better was that “the larger [the passion’s] universe, the more permanent is its possible satisfaction, and the more self-consistent can the life be made which is regulated by it” (*ibid.*).

Russell sketches an entire theory of ethics on the basis of this theory of the passions. As with any theory in which virtue consists in satisfaction of desire, Russell’s runs into the problem, already broached in his first Apostles paper, “Can We Be Statesmen?”, of evil desires (“like Iago’s hatred of Othello”, p. 96), and he devotes the final pages of the essay to its attempted solution. Russell states the problem with an Idealist cast as follows: “[H]ow to prove, à priori, that the satisfaction of the individual is necessarily that of the Universe, I do not see, and this

<sup>30</sup> “Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver”, *Collected Papers*, I: 92–8.

<sup>31</sup> B.R. to A.P. Smith, 20 Oct. 1894.

is to me *the* fundamental difficulty of Ethics” (p. 97). Stated this way, the conditions on an adequate solution are high, and Russell scales down his expectations somewhat by the end of the paper. He first considers the problem from the point of view of McTaggart’s personal idealism, in which reality consists of a community of finite selves evolving towards perfection. On this theory, in Russell’s view, the difficulty is avoided “for with higher sensibility comes acuter sympathy, and so personal satisfaction cannot be perfect until it is shared by all” (*ibid.*). This, of course, evades solution for all those states which fall short of perfection. Moreover, Russell is not prepared to accept McTaggart’s personal idealism: “I am vastly tempted to regard the Subject,” he says (as strongly as possible without actually committing himself), “as apparently Bradley does, as a mere fluid nucleus of Feeling ... and so adopt an almost Spinozistic monism” (p. 98). Thus the moral problem of conflict of desires between the self and others is solved metaphysically by postulating an ontological identity between the self and the non-self.

It would thus seem that the problem is solved, at least within the confines of Bradleian metaphysics. However, Russell is not content with this solution, and in a very brief passage (which anticipates some of his later criticism of Idealism<sup>32</sup>) he retracts: “And yet Conduct is *my* Conduct, and therefore Virtue is *my* Virtue—so nothing can be plainer than the egoistic nature of the whole question” (p. 98). It is difficult to see the precise import of this remark from someone who is “vastly tempted to ... adopt an almost Spinozistic monism”, but it looks very much as if Russell, though prepared to accept Bradley’s solution in a purely theoretical way, nonetheless feels that it leaves the essentially practical moral question open. It may well be that Iago’s hatred of Othello contributes in some obscure way to the greater satisfaction of the Absolute, but this does not help us to minimize its harmful effects on Othello.

Moreover, there is an ambiguity in the Bradleian solution Russell sketches, though it is not clear how far Russell saw it. On the one hand, the Bradleian solution may be maintaining that Iago’s hatred actually contributes to the overall satisfaction of the Absolute and therefore may be indulged with impunity—costs to Othello being offset by benefits elsewhere. Since Othello is held to be not actually distinct from those regions of the Absolute which receive the benefits, this may be (albeit somewhat implausibly) a matter of little consequence for him. On the other hand, it may be that Iago’s hatred is to be condemned on the

Bradleian view because, as Russell suggests, “reciprocal hatreds do not form a harmony like reciprocal loves, and cannot both be satisfied” (p. 98). (We may ignore the fact that *pure* hatreds, i.e. hatreds not in conflict with other passions such as self-preservation, which is the case Russell supposes, may be both satisfied—by mutual murder.) But this solution to the initial problem of justifying altruism makes Bradley’s metaphysics quite unnecessary: no use is now made of the “almost Spinozistic monism”. For given the ethical postulate that passions with larger universes ought to be satisfied over those with smaller universes, and the claim that passions such as hatred necessarily have smaller universes than passions such as love, we get the required condemnation of Iago without metaphysical support.

In fact, Russell almost immediately drops his dependence upon Bradleian metaphysics, in favour of a more “secular” argument. The aim of ethics, he maintains, is to promote harmony in conduct. Since harmony in an individual may be promoted by many means, ethical requirements at the individual level are under-determined. To ensure that the requirements of ethics are uniquely determined a universal harmony is required: “my conduct must bring satisfaction not merely to myself, but to all whom it affects” (p. 98). Such harmony cannot be produced by indulging passions such as hatred. The practical consequence is that: “it is better to sacrifice personal consistency than to obtain it from desires directly opposed to those of the others whom they affect—so that desires themselves can be judged ethically according as they are such as can be satisfied universally or such as must conflict in different individuals—this is really only the old Kantian rule, and is an eminently commonplace conclusion for so long an argumentation” (*ibid.*). In obtaining this result the problematic requirement that ethical demands be uniquely determined is strictly a red herring. Not only is it not clear that ethical demands must be uniquely determined (why may not two courses of action be equally good?), but it is not even clear that there is only one way of achieving universal harmony, nor indeed that there can be only one state of universal harmony. On the other hand, the remaining argument is much the same as that presented at the end of the previous paragraph.

There is one further point in “Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver” of relevance to Sidgwick’s problem with egoism. Russell puts the point succinctly in a letter to Alys Pearsall Smith written while he was working on the paper. It transforms Sidgwick’s local question about the legitimation of moral beliefs into what amounts to the riddle of the universe, the solution to which might, Russell intimates, be closer to hand than one had hitherto suspected.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. in “Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is”, *Collected Papers*, I: 106–11.

I am thinking of saying more on the independence of desire and knowledge: how they form coordinate realms, and how, just as no isolated truth is wholly true, so no isolated object of desire is wholly good—and as thought leads one on dialectically to the Absolute, so desire, by alternate satisfaction and disappointment, leads one on the Absolute good. And then I might discuss how to bridge the gulf between knowledge and desire—i.e. how to pass from morality to religion. But I'm inclined to leave this to McT[aggart], as I've never quite understood the transition myself. (B.R. to A.P. Smith, 26 Oct. 1894)

We have seen in "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver" the development of Russell's view that no isolated object of desire is wholly good—although the dialectic of satisfaction and disappointment was dropped. The view that no isolated truth is wholly true was simply taken for granted after his conversion to neo-Hegelianism, and would have been common doctrine among his audience.<sup>33</sup> The bridge between the two, which would require some sort of crossing of the "is"/"ought" distinction, was never attempted. Russell hints in a later letter<sup>34</sup> that McTaggart might have done what was expected of him. Alas, Russell gave no details of how this remarkable trick was turned. But with aspirations such as these it is easier to see why Sidgwick's diffident hopes had little appeal to Russell.

Nothing indicates more starkly the difference between Sidgwick's philosophical method and that of the neo-Hegelians than Russell's treatment of the problem of egoism. Sidgwick, by means of patient toil, through his system of axioms and the derived principle of benevolence, narrows the dispute between the different methods of ethics as much as possible, leaving only one, precise point of conflict. Russell, pursuing neo-Hegelian aspirations, inflated the issue until its ultimate resolution requires a dialectical unity of knowledge and desire, or of the real and the ideal. Sidgwick's original problem almost drops out of sight in the process. Russell did, in fact, take up the topic in these terms in "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver", though, in the event, McTaggart's grand metaphysical enterprise did not entirely overwhelm Russell's sci-

entific caution. "I confess", he wrote, "I have never understood any metaphysic which proves the world ethically as well as logically perfect."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> It is significant that Russell's idealism seems to have had a distinctly epistemological cast. The dialectical unity of knowledge seems during his idealist phase a much more settled position than the ontological unity of Reality or the moral unity of the Good.

<sup>34</sup> B.R. to A.P. Smith, 30 Oct. 1894.

<sup>35</sup> "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver", *Collected Papers*, 1: 97. The identity of the real and the ideal had long been a stumbling block for Russell's acceptance of neo-Hegelianism (*cf.* his letter to A.P. Smith, 25 Aug. 1893). It was also the occasion of his first breach with the philosophy (*cf.* "Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is").