

from the point of view of the universe

Interview by Richard Marshall.

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Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek is the philosopher who is always pondering contemporary ethics from the point of view of the universe with Pete Singer. She thinks about Sidgwick and why he's not widely read, about his approach to ethics and why he's significant, about what we mean by 'the point of view of the universe', about Sidgwickian rationality and Kant, about reflective equilibrium, about self-evident axioms, about Parfit's future Tuesday indifference, about *On What Matters*, about hedonism, about esoteric morality, about the repugnant conclusion and about why Kitcher is wrong to think naturalism in ethics is defensible. Light the blue touch-paper and read...

3:AM: What made you a philosopher?

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek: This may sound a bit naïve but I did always want to make the world a better place. And though you can do it without studying philosophy, it is easier to have influence on people when you understand the world better and you have certain abilities to formulate arguments, analyse problems, seek a fault in your own as well as someone else's thinking. I wanted to know what would be the thing that makes the world a better place, what is the good, what should I do, what are our obligations and who are these that I should take care of. These are all ethical questions that you need to think over. There is no better place to find answers than philosophy. It gives you enormous possibilities to think. Hannah Arendt once said that evil comes from the lack of reflection. I think I agree.

3:AM: You have joined forces with **Peter Singer** to defend act utilitarianism. Most people will have an inkling about Mill and Bentham but not perhaps the philosopher you want to return to – Henry Sidgwick. He’s the guy who might be the very first of the analytic philosophers isn’t he – messing up the usual time line that tends to see the analytics kick starting with Frege, Russell and Moore. Why isn’t he so well known as the rest of the utilitarian band? Is it that he tends to be quite boring to read compared to the others?

KLR: I think that the main reason for Sidgwick not to be widely read is simple – his prose is really difficult. It is very complex and you often lose the line of an argument as it is so complicated. Sidgwick sometimes writes a few pages, you think he presents his own ideas but at the end of the section he rejects all of what he has argued so far. You need to get back, look at the argument again and find a mistake in it together with Sidgwick. I think English speaking people are used to simpler English texts. You know, Kant or Hegel are very difficult, but an English philosopher is usually much more straightforward. As for Sidgwick being the first of analytical philosophers I agree that he gave a good start to Moore. Many people forget that without Sidgwick’s ***The Methods of Ethics*** there would be no ***Principia Ethica***. The naturalistic fallacy was not Moore’s invention – it is already in Sidgwick.

3:AM: You’ve two aims in the book – one to make Sidgwick accessible, and to defend utilitarianism. On the first aim first – do you think there’s a problem with contemporary philosophy requiring that we always read the original text rather than a ‘made easy’ text book. Wouldn’t we get more progress if philosophers were a little less precious about the originals and got on with making things more accessible? Is that a reason why you treat him as if he were a serious contemporary rather than someone from the history of ideas?

KLR: As for your first question, I believe a lot depends who is supposed to read philosophical texts and for what purpose. You cannot really study philosophy seriously on the basis of what you called “a made easy text book”. Also why not exercise your brain a bit? We would definitely hope that our book is not treated as a substitute for *The Methods*, but rather as an introduction to *The Methods*. On the other hand, if you study something else, political

thought, let's say, you read Rawls and you want to know who that guy Rawls often refers to was and what he said, our book will be a good summary, I would think.

3:AM: So for Sidgwick, what is ethics, its methods and what is a philosopher up to when she's investigating them? And what does it mean to say there is a 'point of view of the universe'?

KLR: Sidgwick defines ethics as a study of what we ought to do as opposed to other studies such as psychology or biology that tell you what is the case. The methods of ethics are rational procedures which we, individual beings, use to determine what we ought to do. In everyday life we are often not very consistent: we use many different methods, and we mix them as well. But Sidgwick is a scholar and he wants to make them scientific. Therefore he will separate them carefully and underline differences between them. He will talk of egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism.

As for the most important expression: "the point of view of the universe" that is to symbolize an impartial concern for everyone. Sidgwick calls for impartiality in ethics and thinks that when deciding what we ought to do, we should try to take an impartial perspective – not mine, not yours, not my children's but "the point of view of the universe". Rawls, Nagel and Parfit will all refer to that perspective in their works later on.

3:AM: What does rationality add up to in Sidgwick? Is this a return to Kantianism and a kick back against Hume and Hare and is it part of the reason why Sidgwick rejects common sense ethics?

KLR: I do think Sidgwick was influenced by **Kant** in this respect, but also by such English intuitionists as Thomas Reid or William Whewell as well as Coleridge. He did believe in reason and rationality. But he also saw a great crack in it. Claiming that both maximizing my own good and maximizing impartial good is rational, he could not reach a final answer to the most important question of his inquiry: what ought I to do? When in a tragic situation, should I save my own child or rather a few children of complete strangers? Sidgwick regretted to say that but he confesses at the end of *The Methods* that reason may not give us a final answer. That would be tragic indeed as it would

open the door to subjectivism again. Peter Singer and I tried to help Sidgwick to overcome that chaos. We claim that only impartial action is fully rational.

As for his rejection of common sense. He is not satisfied with rules given by common sense as he finds them unclear, vague, not self-evident.

3:AM: And does this mean that he is out of line with someone like Rawls who'd argue that we need to find a 'reflective equilibrium between theory and considered moral judgments? Where do you stand on this?

KLR: This is an interesting question but I treat it more as a problem of justification. First, unlike Rawls, both Sidgwick and we are interested in truth and finding true moral principles. Now the question is do we use coherentism or foundationalism to find out the truth. Reflective equilibrium seems a useful tool but as Hare, in his review of *The Theory of Justice*, recalled Plato saying: "If a man starts from something he knows not, and the end and middle of his argument are tangled together out of what he knows not, how can such a mere consensus ever turn into knowledge?" (Rep. 533 c). On the other hand, foundationalism can lead easily to dogmatism. We tried our best to stand somewhere in between those two.

3:AM: Are you sympathetic to the foundational self-evident axioms Sidgwick uses? Is this where the idea of 'rational intuition' comes in – and your use of Parfit's 'Future Tuesday Indifference'? Can you explain the argument here? And why wouldn't this be congenial to contemporary economists who might have expected to find a defence of their models of rationality in this approach?

KLR: Yes, we are sympathetic to Sidgwick's appeal to self-evident axioms, especially his axiom of rational benevolence, which is linked to taking "the point of view of the universe." We argue that this is a rational axiom, because, in contrast to many other moral intuitions, our acceptance of it cannot be debunked by an evolutionary explanation.

Parfit's uses the idea of "Future Tuesday Indifference" in a slightly different context, to argue against the subjectivist view that what is

rational is always dependent on a person's ultimate desires, or ends. A person who is indifferent to what happens to him on any future Tuesday (and therefore, when offered a choice between being pinched today and hours of torture next Tuesday, chooses the torture) may be acting in accordance with his bizarre set of desires, but he is still irrational. Contemporary economists assume that a view of rationality that is subjectivist, or as they would call it, instrumentalist, so they won't find this argument congenial. It will force them to reexamine their fundamental assumptions about rationality.

3:AM: Unlike Parfit's '*On What Matters*' you defend act utilitarianism don't you? Can you explain what this is and why you don't go all the way with the Parfit approach?

KLR: Yes, together with Sidgwick, we are act-utilitarians. When you think of how to maximize the good, there are two main types of utilitarian theory: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. The former tells you that you should decide what to do, to maximize the good, each time you need to take an action. But rule utilitarianism tells you first to decide on certain rules that, generally, will lead to maximizing the good. For example, it is generally better for us that we do not deceive each other and can trust each other. Therefore it is desirable to have a rule forbidding lying. When in a situation where you have to choose whether to lie or not, a rule utilitarian will apply a rule, no matter what are the further consequences; an act utilitarian has to think whether in this very situation a lie will bring about better overall consequences, if so – then it is better to deceive at that moment.

In *On What Matters*, Parfit works on putting together three seemingly very different moral theories: contractualism, utilitarianism and Kantianism. I think that rule utilitarianism goes better with his idea of reaching the same summit even if taking different routes. But next year, we should be lucky to have a third volume of *On What Matters* where Parfit will spend much more time discussing act-utilitarianism.

3:AM: This is a form of hedonism isn't it? How does Sidgwick understand hedonism – and are you sympathetic?

KLR: Well, you can be a hedonist no matter whether you are a rule or an act utilitarian. A hedonist defines the good which you should maximize in terms of happiness or pleasure. For Sidgwick the two were the same thing and he defines pleasure as desirable consciousness, that is a state of mind which you desire at the time of feeling it.

We do argue for hedonism and for the idea that we ought to maximize certain states of minds. I think it is interesting to see how Peter Singer has changed his idea about it. For years he was a preference utilitarian.

3:AM: Is an esoteric morality ok – and are we sometimes right to do in secret what would be wrong to advocate or do in public?

KLR: It seems that the idea of esoteric morality, that is a lack of total transparency, is a natural outcome of hedonistic act-utilitarianism. For example, on the whole it is good that we have a law forbidding torture, because we know that when torture is permitted, it is often used simply as a form of degrading others and demonstrating one's power over them. But imagine a situation in which you can really save many innocent lives by torturing a criminal, and there is no other way to save those lives. That might be the right thing to do, while still supporting the law that prohibits torture.

3:AM: The 'repugnant conclusion' argument of Parfit regarding optimal population growth seems on the face of it a pretty decisive one for rejecting utilitarianism doesn't it? How do you handle this issue so we can remain utilitarians?

KLR: I don't see this as a ground for rejecting utilitarianism at all. Parfit's "repugnant conclusion" is an objection to one way of answering the simple question that Sidgwick was the first to raise: if by increasing the population, the average level of welfare decreases, but because everyone still has lives that are, on balance, happy, the total amount of happiness in the world increases, is that a good thing? What Parfit has shown is that all of the answers that seem plausible – not just those offered by Sidgwick or other utilitarians –

lead to either inconsistency or counter-intuitive judgments. Therefore it isn't as if non-utilitarians do any better in answering the question than utilitarians.

3:AM: Is your view a non-reductive and non-naturalistic, non-metaphysical and non-ontological form of cognitive intuitionism of the sort that someone like **Philip Kitcher** would deplore – as he did with Parfit's '*On What Matters*'? Won't many think that we have evolved evaluative attitudes to help us survive and breed rather than because they are true – and isn't this fatal for Sidgwick's position? And isn't it strange that someone like Peter Singer would argue from a non-naturalistic point of view given his work in animal rights?

KLR: Yes, our view is the kind that Kitcher deplores, but, like Parfit and many other philosophers, we don't think naturalism in ethics is defensible.

Singer is a utilitarian and so does not base his arguments about animals on rights. But anyway, I don't see why you should think there is anything strange about rejecting naturalism in ethics, while defending the view that animals are sentient beings whose welfare should be considered alongside our own. I can't see what one has to do with the other. Perhaps there is some confusion going on here, because the term "nature" is used in so many different ways, but naturalism in ethics has nothing to do with whether one values "nature" in the sense of the world apart from human beings.

3:AM: Is the view of human reason you defend here with Sidgwick a ground for optimism or pessimism?

KLR: I never have thought of that in this way! First, as I have mentioned, our point about reason is a bit different from that of Sidgwick or Parfit. We try to argue that reason is always impartial, that what is on the side of egoism is not really rational. It can be pretty uncomfortable for us sometimes. But on the other hand, it leaves us with quite clear guidance about what we should do.

3:AM: And for the readers here at 3:AM who want to get further into your philosophical world are there five books you can recommend?

KLR: This is a cruel question indeed! How to choose 5 out of so many. Apart from Sidgwick's *Methods* I would recommend Scheffler's ***Death and the Afterlife*** – a book that will put your life into a perspective; how would you feel about the sense of your existence if you knew that life on our planet will end a few hours after your natural death as an old man? A lovely witty book on happiness is always good – if you have not read it yet, get Gilbert's ***Stumbling on Happiness***. It seems to me that getting happy in your life can be a hard, rational work. If you want to be better to yourself read Kahnemans's ***Thinking, Fast and Slow***. Maybe next time you will save yourself some troubles doing shopping! As for serious philosophy – Parfit's *On What Matters* is a must. Be quick though, as I have mentioned, the third volume is supposed to appear next year! If you are interested in ethics always and forever Singer's ***Practical Ethics***.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Richard Marshall is still biding his time.

Buy **his book here** to keep him biding!

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