How much more demanding is utilitarianism than common sense morality?[1]

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Introduction

A common and longstanding objection to utilitarianism is that it makes excessive demands on us. Utilitarianism, the objection goes, demands that we ought always to do what will maximize utility, and this is contrary to common sense morality and to our considered moral judgments.

There are many ways in which utilitarians have sought to meet this objection. Most of them can be traced back to Henry Sidgwick's classic *The Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick is aware of the charge that utilitarianism makes "exaggerated demands on human nature" [ME, 87].[2] He held that utilitarianism is based on an axiom of universal benevolence that tells us to seek the greatest possible goodness, impartially considered. Common sense morality on the other hand, stresses the special set of obligations that we have towards those close to us. It supports us in having feelings such as love and affection for a few, and it even supports a certain amount of self-love, all of which seems contrary to the impartial nature of utilitarianism. Because most of us have far greater concern for our own interests and the interests of those close to us, utilitarianism demands much more of us than most people are willing to give. Sidgwick deals with this challenge by arguing that in practice the requirements of utilitarianism may not be so different from those of common sense morality. This is in part the case because utilitarians should, when seeking to maximize good on the whole, take into account existing social conditions, including the natural dispositions and capacities that people have. Pressing the ultimate utilitarian standard in too direct a form may be counterproductive.

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[2] References in square brackets in the text are to Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics,* 7th edition, London, 1907.

We will argue that although Sidgwick was right to state that how demanding utilitarianism is will depend on the conditions under which we act, some conditions have changed so much since Sidgwick's time that the gap between utilitarianism and common sense morality has widened since the Victorian era.

Why Utilitarianism may not require us to act impartially

For Sidgwick the fact that morality demands something from us is obvious. As he notes, the very notion of "moral obligation" or "ought" implies that we may do otherwise than the "ought" prescribes [ME, 217]. This, in turn, means that morality asks us to do something that we may not want to do, or that may give rise to a conflict of motives. We have duties because we are not like a god who would always *want* to do what is good or right, and be unwilling to do anything else. Such a being would have no duties. We humans do not always want to do what is right. In particular, we often do not want to give the interests of others nearly as much consideration as we give to our own interests or the interests of those close to us.

Sidgwick addresses this and similar problems in Book IV of *The Methods,* in which he defends utilitarianism from a variety of criticisms. If our obligation is to maximize the general good, he says, we must ask how best to do this in practice. When we ask that question we find that "the practical application of this theoretical impartiality of Utilitarianism is limited by several important considerations" [ME, 431].

First, each of us is likely to do better in obtaining his or her own happiness than in bringing about the happiness of strangers. We know what we need and want much better than we know what others need and want, so we maximise good on the whole by giving priority to our own happiness. Further, when we are happy ourselves, we are better able to increase the happiness of others. Sidgwick writes: "it is under the stimulus of self-interest that the active energies of most men are most easily and thoroughly drawn out: and if this were removed, general happiness would be diminished by a serious loss of those means of happiness which are obtained by labour" [ME, 431].

Second, similar practical reasons apply when we look beyond our own interests to those of others close to us. It is conducive to the utilitarian end that we first and foremost work for the happiness of those close to us, our family and friends. Close relations bring people pleasures, Sidgwick tell us, of the most "intense and highly valued" kind. Moreover people who are happy and satisfied with those relations are better able to be involved in activities that benefit strangers. Utilitarianism thus supports the “cultivation of affection” for special individuals.

Nevertheless, it will be asked, should the utilitarian not seek to cultivate a feeling “more universal in its scope – charity, philanthropy, or (as it has been called) the ‘Enthusiasm of Humanity’” [ME, 434]. To this Sidgwick answers, first, that most people can have strong feelings only towards a few people and “if these were suppressed, what they would feel towards their fellow-creatures generally would be, as Aristotle says, ‘but a watery kindness’ and a very feeble counterpoise to self-love: so that such specialised affections as the present organisation of society normally produces afford the best means of developing in most persons a more extended benevolence, to the degree to which they are capable of feeling it.” [ME, 434] Further, Sidgwick adds, the limits to our power or our knowledge mean that each of us, for the most part, is “not in a position to do much good to more than a very small number of persons.” This is a sufficient reason for limiting our “chief benevolent impulses.”

Next Sidgwick observes that we have developed ways of attaining the general happiness by focusing on attaining the happiness of a small group. Society as a whole will be better off if children are brought up and cared for in a small unit such as a family. Such units must be based on special concern for family members, which means that for parents there is no better way of achieving the general happiness than to focus on the happiness of their own children. [ME, 435]

Nevertheless, Sidgwick acknowledges, we do have special obligations to strangers under certain circumstances. He considers the issue of helping the poor:

> …the main utilitarian reason why it is not right for every rich man to distribute his superfluous wealth among the poor, is that the happiness of all is on the whole most promoted by maintaining in adults generally (except married women), the expectation that each will be thrown on his own resources for the supply of his own wants. But if I am made aware that, owing to a sudden calamity that could not have been foreseen, another’s resources are manifestly inadequate to protect him from pain or serious discomfort, the case is altered; my theoretical obligation to consider his happiness as much as my own becomes at once practical; and I am bound to make as much effort to relieve him as will not entail a greater loss of happiness to myself or others. If, however, the calamity is one which might have been foreseen and averted by proper care, my duty becomes more doubtful: for then by relieving him I seem to be in danger of encouraging improvidence in others. In such a case a Utili-

> tarian has to weigh this indirect evil against the direct good of removing pain and distress… [ME, 436]

If we follow this line of thought, how demanding the obligations of the rich to the poor will be, would depend on whether or not the rich find ourselves in a situation in which a calamity that could not have been foreseen or averted leaves others without the means to live without "pain or serious discomfort." We shall return to this topic after considering another important way in which Sidgwick responds to the demandingness objection.

What you ought to do and what you ought to be blamed for

Sidgwick also uses another argument to diminish the differences between common sense morality and utilitarianism.

Usually, we encourage people to do what is right and obligatory, and blame those who fail to meet their obligations. But when what is right and obligatory is highly demanding, the situation is different. We may know that certain acts would lead to the best consequences and would be right and obligatory, yet we do not always promote the social acceptance of rules requiring such acts, or even urge those acts on people who could do them. There are also right acts that we do encourage people to do, while not blaming them for failing to do them. What is going on here? How can we accept that some acts are obligatory without blaming people when they do not do them?

Sidgwick points out this paradox when he discusses the relation between obligation and virtue and notices that there are virtuous acts that we do not regard as obligatory:

> Certainly we should agree that a truly moral man cannot say to himself, 'This is the best thing on the whole for me to do, but yet it is not my duty to do it though it is in my power': this would certainly seem to common sense an immoral paradox. And yet there seem to be acts and abstinences which we praise as virtuous, without imposing them as duties upon all who are able to do them; as for a rich man to live very plainly and devote his income to works of public beneficence. [ME, 220]

If it is our duty to do what is the best thing on the whole for us to do, as long as it is in our power to do it, how can we praise acts as virtuous without imposing them as a duty on all who are able to do them? Sidgwick thinks that the apparent inconsistency can be explained by distinguishing the question "what a man ought to do or forbear" from the question "what other men ought to blame him for not doing or forbearing."

This distinction between what is obligatory and what we ought to blame people for can be explained in a number of ways. First of all, sometimes we cannot say whether a particular person has an obligation to do something as we do not have sufficient knowledge of all the circumstances in which he is to act. "Thus I may easily assure myself that I ought to subscribe to a given hospital: but I cannot judge whether my neighbour ought to subscribe, as I do not know the details of his income and the claims which he is bound to satisfy" [ME, 221].[3] But the real basis of the distinction arises from situations in which we do not blame others because we are, as utilitarians, concerned about the practical outcome of our approbation and disapprobation. Sidgwick suggests that we can best promote moral progress by "praising acts that are above the level of ordinary practice, and confining our censure – at least if precise and particular – to acts that fall clearly below this standard." He adds that the standard is inevitably vague, and will be different in different communities with different average levels of morality. The aim of teachers of morality, he says, is to raise it continually [ME, 221].

Later in *The Methods of Ethics* Sidgwick returns to this view of when it is appropriate to blame, this time considering it explicitly from a utilitarian standpoint. Here he notes that "human nature seems to require the double stimulus of praise and blame from others, in order to [achieve] the best performance of duty that it can at present attain."[4] He then adds that "since the pains of remorse and disapprobation are in themselves to be avoided," utilitarianism will itself point against using them, unless it is clear that using them will bring about a significant addition to happiness. He then concludes:

> …it is reasonable for a Utilitarian to praise any conduct more felicific in its tendency than what an average man would do under the given circumstances:--being aware of course that the limit down to which praiseworthiness extends must be relative to the particular state of moral progress reached by mankind generally in his age and country; and that it is desirable to make continual efforts to elevate this standard.

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[3] This does not really show that there is a distinction between what is obligatory and what we should blame people for, because it is possible that both whether my neighbour has an obligation to give to the hospital, and whether we should blame him for not giving, will depend on his specific financial circumstances.

[4] ME 493; the sentence appears to lack a word, which have suggested might be "achieve".

We believe that this is an important part of the utilitarian answer to the demandingness objection and we will return to this issue after we consider the issue of demandingness in the world today.

When can we defend impartiality?

We believe that Sidgwick was right about several points regarding special obligations towards those close to us. In our everyday lives, taking care of our children and caring for those close to us will lead to better outcomes than being fully impartial. Our psychological nature is not likely to change anytime soon, and most of us would not like it to change in this respect anyway. We are beings with a strong need for love and with special feelings towards our children, which for most people are a great source of happiness and fulfillment.

In *Reasons and Persons,* Derek Parfit discusses the significance for utilitarianism of partial affections such as love. He considers the example of Clare, who has to choose to give some benefit to her child or a much greater benefit to some "unfortunate stranger." Because of her love for her child, she gives the benefit to her child. She may know she acts wrongly, but she defends herself by maintaining that she acted from the motive of love for her child, and it is better that she should have this motive than that she should not have it. This, Parfit suggests, could be regarded as "blameless wrongdoing."[5] There is more that could be said about this case, but we do not need to take the discussion further here; what is important is the idea that though Clare's act may be wrong, there are good reasons not to blame her for doing it. Of course, there are limits to how far we would want to take this. If unusual circumstances force a mother to chose between the life of her own child and the lives of several strangers, we can probably not blame her if, because of her love for her child, she allows the strangers to die. If, on the other hand, again because of her love for her child, she buys him another expensive toy instead of sharing the money with someone desperately in need of food or medication, even a motive as strong and as generally desirable as love cannot justify her action. Sidgwick makes this point when he asks us to suppose that I land upon a desert island with my family and find an abandoned orphan there. "Is it evident," he asks, "that I am less bound to provide this child, as far as lies in my power, with the means of subsistence, than I am to provide for my own children?" Apparently, Sidgwick thought that this was not evident at all.

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[5] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons,* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 32.

Why we have to do more for strangers now.

As we have seen (p. 429 above) for Sidgwick one important reason why our benevolent impulses should be limited is that the limits to our knowledge and power mean that we are, "for the most part…not in a position to do much good to more than a very small number of persons." One might wonder why Sidgwick should have thought this, given that there were many poor people in England in his own time; but he thought that the solution to this problem was more likely to come from improvements to the public system of relief for the poor, rather than from private charity, which, as we saw, he thought runs the risk of "encouraging improvidence" and reducing the incentive to find employment.[6] He could not, of course, have been unaware of the existence of famines in other parts of the world, including parts of the British Empire, but in Victorian times it would have taken weeks for news of a distant famine to reach London, and months for any substantial amounts of grain to be gathered and transported to those in need. Now we can receive news instantly, and transport food and medical supplies within days. It is true that sometimes knowing how best to help people in need is not as straightforward as it might appear, but we have also made considerable progress in that area since Sidgwick's time.

When it comes to our power to help, the improvements in communications and transport are obviously relevant. Also highly significant, however, is the fact that the gap between rich and poor – and thus the power of the rich to help the poor – has greatly increased since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850 the rich nations accounted for 26 percent of the world's population, and 35 percent of the world's wealth. By the 1980s, the rich countries accounted for almost the same percentage of the world's population (to be precise, 25 percent) but their share of the world's wealth had almost doubled, to 68 percent. To put it another way, the difference between the per capita income of the rich and poor countries rose from 70 percent in 1850 to more than 1000 percent in the 1980s.[7] Our vastly greater wealth gives us the power to do much more for others, without putting our own welfare at risk.

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[6] In the interests of promoting further discussion of how the English system of poverty relief could be improved, he encouraged the publication of, and wrote a preface to, an English translation of, P.F.Aschrott's *Das Englische Armen-Wesen,* which was published as *The English Poor Law System* in 1888, available on CD in Bart Schulz, ed., *The Complete Works of Henry Sidgwick*, Past Masters, Intelex, Clayton, Georgia, 1992.

[7] Hans Singer and Javed Ansari, *Rich and Poor Countries,* 4th edition, London, Routledge, 1988, p.25.

These changed circumstances mean that the reasons Sidgwick gave for his belief that our "benevolent impulses" can properly be limited are no longer as generally applicable as they were in his day. Recall the point Sidgwick made, in the long passage we quoted earlier, with regard to circumstances in which "I am made aware that, owing to a sudden calamity that could not have been foreseen, another's resources are manifestly inadequate to protect him from pain or serious discomfort…" He appears to have thought that such circumstances are rare, and his use of the singular suggests that he had in mind calamities that befell individuals, rather than large numbers; but in our own time, only a determination to remain ignorant about the world in which we live can prevent us being aware of a never-ending series of such calamities affecting thousands or sometimes millions of people. As we write, for example, in December 2011, disaster relief organizations are seeking contributions for aid to the victims of famine in the Horn of Africa, an earthquake in Turkey, floods in Thailand, floods in four central American nations, and an outbreak of cholera in Haiti, which is still in need of aid to house people made homeless by the 2010 earthquake. Moreover, it seems true that these disasters either could not have been foreseen, or, if they could have been foreseen, the victims did not have the resources to take the steps necessary to avert the disaster or its consequences. If, as Sidgwick writes, my awareness of the needs of a victim of such disasters means that "I am bound to make as much effort to relieve him as will not entail a greater loss of happiness to myself or others," then it seems that everyone living in comfort and security with money to spare is so bound, and hence utilitarianism has become much more demanding.

Demandingness and Blame Again

The way in which the world has changed makes utilitarianism more demanding because it increases the tension between, on the one hand, our self-interested desires and the feelings that we have towards those close to us, and on the other hand, the utilitarian requirement that we make the world better from an impartial point of view. At the same time, what the moral standards of our society should openly demand from us, and what we ought to praise and blame people for, will still depend largely on the productiveness of those demands. It seems reasonable to assume that if we urge people who are comfortably off to aid disaster victims to the point Sidgwick indicate – that is, the point at which by giving more to the disaster victim that would be reducing their own happiness or that of others by a greater amount than they would be increasing the happiness of the victim - virtually no one will act in accordance with this standard. It may well be that advocating so high a standard is less effective in motivating people to give than advocating a lower standard – for example, that every comfortably off person ought to give 10% of their income. In that case, a utilitarian ought to advocate the 10% standard, and we should praise those who meet this standard, rather than blame them for failing to meet a higher standard. In this way utilitarianism offers an answer, implied by its own core principle, to the question what we should do when morality demands more than we can expect humans to do. Because praising and blaming people are themselves acts, and are subject to the utilitarian principle that we should do whatever will bring about the best consequences, we should praise and blame in ways that can be expected to have the best consequences.

This is, we believe, broadly consistent with what Sidgwick suggests when he argues that it is reasonable for a utilitarian to praise those who do more than the average person would do. That average in regard to giving to charity today would, of course, be very much less than the 10% figure, which we arbitrarily chose to illustrate our point, indeed it would be less than 1%.[8] The standard needs to be pitched above this level, but how far above it is, in the absence of relevant empirical research, difficult to know.

If we accept Sidgwick's view that we should praise people who give more than the average but less than they ought to give, a further question arises: what else we should say to those who do enough to merit praise, but no more than that? Suppose that Jack has given a tenth of his income to reduce poverty-related deaths, but he still has enough left to dine out, go to movies, and take vacations abroad. We have praised him for what he has done, but he knows that we are consequentialists, and therefore asks us whether he ought to give more. What do we say?

One suggestion has been made by Richard Arneson, in a commentary on Peter Singer's views on the obligation to give to the poor:

> the act consequentialist should downplay the distinction between acts that are right and wrong. Her more important task is to grade acts as "righter" and "wronger" depending on the extent of the shortfall between the act being evaluated and the best that could have been done in the circumstances… We can think of the acts an agent could do on some occasion as ordered in an array of groups of acts that have consequences

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[8] Only 5 nations exceed the United Nations target of giving 0.7% of Gross National Income as official development aid; the United States, for example, gives only 0.2%. Private charitable contributions to the global poor are much less than official development aid. For details see the Donor Aid Charts of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, http://www.oecd.org/countrylist/0,3349,en_2649_34447_1783495_1_1_1_1,00.html

> that range from very close to the consequences of the best act to very close to the very worst one could have done. With this picture in view, we can see that options of a sort have an important role in moral life and moral assessment. Far more important than determining whether one's act on an occasion was right or wrong would be fixing the degree of wrongness if it is not the very best one could have done.[9]

This gives us a good response to Jack. What he has done is much righter than his conduct would have been if he had given nothing, but it would be much righter still if he were to give a lot more. We agree with this in theory, but making the change might be difficult. There is a real question about how much nuance people can live with, and what impact such a graduated change would have on how people behave. If they thought that everything is a matter of degree, would they care less about doing what is "righter" and so slip below the level of rightness they might otherwise have achieved?

A different way of responding to Jack would bring us back to Sidgwick and his famous, or notorious, advocacy of esoteric morality. As he put it: "it may be right to do and privately recommend, under certain circumstances, what it would not be right to advocate openly." To apply that view to this situation, if the facts are as we are assuming, it would not be right to advocate openly that people ought to give much more than 10% of their income to the poor, because that would be counterproductive. The right level of giving to advocate openly is 10%. On the other hand, assuming that Jack has no other relevant obligations that constrain him from giving more than 10%, he ought to give more, and in not giving more, he is doing something wrong. What if Jack asks me, privately, how much he should give? If I know him well, and know that he is one of those rare people who would respond positively to a highly demanding standard, I should privately tell him what, as a consequentialist, I believe: that he ought to give substantially more than 10%.

This is, admittedly, not an ideal situation, but a necessary accommodation to the facts of human nature, as we have assumed them to be – and the assumption is not implausible. Bernard Williams called this "Government House utilitarianism," an image designed to conjure up arrogant colonial administrators ruling over "natives" they see as too stupid to grasp the truth.[10] Other philosophers, including Rawls, Gert and Hooker, claim that morality has a "publicity condition" that is incompatible with the idea of esoteric morality.[11] But where does this "publicity condition" come from? No doubt if we are trying to answer the question "What principles should society promote?" then a publicity condition is implied by that question. But if I am trying to figure out what *I* ought to do, we would need some substantive moral argument to show that I ought to do only those things that I can publicly advocate. We believe esoteric morality is defensible,[12] and the example we are now discussing shows why.

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[9] Richard Arneson, "What Do We Owe to Distant Strangers," in Jeffrey Schaler, ed., *Peter Singer Under Fire,* Open Court, Chicago, 2009, pp. 288, 292.

[10] Bernard Williams, 'The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics', *Cambridge Review,* May 1982, p. 189.

Moral progress

It is clear now that in general terms utilitarianism is less demanding in practice than it might at first seem. This is especially true if we focus on what utilitarians would praise or blame people for doing, rather than on what they would say we ought to do. It may seem that in taking this view, utilitarianism accepts too many of our common sense moral attitudes. We may think that we can rest on our laurels; while we clearly should not. So how can morality encourage us to make moral progress, and act more impartially?

Sidgwick comments on this issue, suggesting a solution that is in accordance with the axiom of utilitarianism. When utilitarians see that the rules of established morality are not "intrinsically reasonable" their initial response is likely to be to advocate disregarding the rules. Sidgwick, however, warns against "that temper of rebellion." [ME, 475] Instead, he says, we must compare "the total amounts of pleasure and pain that may be expected to result respectively from maintaining any given rule as at present established and from endeavouring to introduce that which is proposed in its stead" [ME, 477]. Before openly supporting, offering or encouraging changes in a common sense system of rules accepted by their society, utilitarians should take several factors into account. They must think about their own happiness as well as that of those close to them. It may be that "social disapprobation" towards reformers and their families will diminish their powers of influence in the society. Of course, as Sidgwick notes, a utilitarian must be prepared to pay the "price" for "the advantage of this kind of reform in current morality" but the calculation of costs and benefits may still come down against attempting to change the existing rules. The other, more important thing to take into account will be the question whether a new, more felicific rule, even if established and adopted, will be likely to be obeyed. It may turn out, Sidgwick explains, that the new rule will be "too complex and elaborate: it may require a greater intellectual development, or a higher degree of self-control, than is to be found in an average member of the community, or an exceptional quality or balance of feelings" [ME, 481]. Instead of changing an old rule by proposing a new one, it may be easier to change human habits by weakening the old rule and the habits that go with it.

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[11] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* Revised edition, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.112; Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 8-11; B. Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 85.

[12] Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, "Secrecy In Consequentialism: A Defence Of Esoteric Morality", *Ratio*, vol. 23, no. 1 (March 2010), pp. 34-58. This section draws on that paper.

It is clear, that if we want to be effective in changing morality, we need to draw on our increasing understanding of the psychology of moral decision-making and moral action. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*[13] Steven Pinker draws on extensive studies of our moral behaviour in order to show that the development of our ability to reason gives grounds for hope that we are becoming less cruel and that the sphere of our moral concern is expanding outwards, to all humans and even to nonhuman animals. Though the experiences of the twentieth century may lead us to think that his thesis – that we have become much less cruel than our ancestors a few thousand or even a few hundred years ago – is implausible the data he presents is convincing. We may also think of some encouraging examples of such changes that have taken place quite recently, especially, especially in Western culture, and even when the changes have placed significant new moral demands on some sections of the community. Millions of men have accepted that women are fully their equals, and that therefore have had to give up the idea that they are the natural head of the household, simply because they are men. White racists have accepted a similar loss of inherently superior status to that of people from the races they previously considered inferior. Even in regard to non-human animals, many humans now acknowledge that they cannot be tortured or killed without reason, and there is a growing movement that supports what has traditionally been seen as a highly demanding moral claim: that we should cease to eat animals. So progress can be made in persuading people to act differently, There is still a lot to be done. We are still far from fully meeting the demands of morality in these areas, and there are other areas where less progress has been made. Nevertheless, there has been a dramatic and welcome change in our reasonable expectations of what people will do regarding some important moral demands. We can only speculate on how much further we can develop morally within the coming decades or centuries.

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[13] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Viking, 2011.