

Book Review

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Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and **Peter Singer**, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. xvi + 403.

One of Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's aims in *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* is 'to enable you to appreciate Sidgwick's thought without having to face the difficulties of reading all 500 pages of *The Methods [of Ethics]*' (viii). Although Lazari-Radek and Singer themselves end up at 403 pages, they make Sidgwick's ethical theory – including the finer details of that theory – significantly more accessible than it has hitherto been made. Importantly, however, *The Point of View of The Universe* is not just a book about Sidgwick. In each chapter, after presenting an aspect of Sidgwick's ethics, the authors provide a tour of how this topic is discussed in contemporary philosophy. Finally, in response to contemporary challenges, Lazari-Radek and Singer provide an up-to-date defence of Sidgwick. On a systematic level, the book is a defence of hedonistic act-utilitarianism.

Lazari-Radek and Singer start by explaining what Sidgwick means by a 'method of ethics', and argue that, properly construed, Sidgwick's three methods – egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism – encompass the breadth of contemporary ethical theorizing. They then discuss the nature of reasons, and argue for objectivism about reasons and foundationalism about the justification of reasons. After discussing Sidgwick's axioms, the authors turn to his 'dualism of practical reason', and argue – contrary to Sidgwick himself – that reason can help us decide between egoism and utilitarianism. They then defend a hedonistic theory about what is good, defend esoteric morality (the view that we might have good reason not to tell the public about what is the correct ethical theory), reply to the demandingness-objection and discuss a number of problems in population ethics.

The Point of View of the Universe has many virtues. The authors succeed in illustrating the magnitude of Sidgwick's influence; Sidgwick is the Kant of consequentialism. They also give the reader insight into the internal consistency of Sidgwick's views, and sometimes a glance at how Sidgwick's views related to his personality. Some sections, especially the one on esoteric morality, are convincing: Lazari-Radek and Singer argue, contrary to Kant, Rawls and Hooker, that it is not a problem for utilitarianism that, if the theory is true, it might well be that its adherents should not promote it. The authors also make a solid case that, granted a utilitarian theory of praise and blame, the demandingness-objection loses much of its intuitive force.

There are, however, also a number of problems with the book. One problem is its intended audience. On the one hand, its main topic – Sidgwick's relation to contemporary ethics – is one of interest primarily to academic philosophers. Still, Lazari-Radek and Singer devote a lot of space to introducing well-known positions and arguments, and the book sometimes reads like a textbook: many theories are presented beyond what is strictly required for the authors to defend their own positions. This makes the book's overall argument flow less well than it could have done, and it takes up precious space that could have been used to make Lazari-Radek and Singer's defence of utilitarianism even more convincing.

For example, in their discussion of the dualism of practical reason, Lazari-Radek and Singer argue that evolutionary debunking arguments do not pose a problem for utilitarians. In response to Sharon Street's 'Darwinian Dilemma', they suggest that evolution did in fact make us sensitive to moral truths, but that it did so indirectly, by virtue of giving us general reasoning abilities, a by-product of which is our ability to grasp moral truths. The utilitarian view that everyone matters equally, they suggest, is an insight of reason, for evolution could not have instilled in us evaluative attitudes that prompt us to sacrifice ourselves for total strangers. This is an interesting suggestion, and I believe Lazari-Radek and Singer are right that utilitarianism need not be vulnerable to evolutionary debunking arguments. It is unclear, however, if their argument settles the dispute between utilitarians and egoists. Quite possibly, egoists could provide a similar argument in favour of their own position: They could argue that we have evolved tendencies to sacrifice ourselves for larger groups, such as our families, but that in fact everyone has an ultimate reason to be concerned only with his or her own well-being. Possibly, the egoist's argument can be rebutted. Lazari-Radek and Singer's arguments, however, are insufficient to show that we are all rationally required to take 'the point of view of the universe'.

It would also have been interesting if Lazari-Radek and Singer had devoted more space to making explicit some of their theory's metaphysical and epistemic commitments. What kinds of facts are the facts that we grasp through reason and how does reason give us access to these facts? Here the authors say very little, other than to suggest a parallel to mathematics.

Finally, Lazari-Radek and Singer's response to the 'repugnant conclusion' is not satisfactory. The 'repugnant conclusion' is a major objection to utilitarianism, yet the authors do little but state that 'it may simply be too hard for our intuitions to grapple with the numbers involved in the comparison we are being asked to make. Our intuitions don't really respond to the difference between 100 million and 10 billion' (373). True as this might be, Lazari-Radek and Singer's reply does little to remove the extreme counterintuitiveness of preferring a very large population of people whose lives are barely worth living over a small population of people who all have very good lives. The authors are also very brief in their discussion of utility monsters and the ethics of torturing one person in order to elevate slightly the hedonic level of a million. These are objections which a defence of hedonistic act-utilitarianism must address head-on and with great care.

The Point of View of the Universe helps revitalize Sidgwick, and provides a defence of a theory that has not been defended in detail since Torbjörn Tännsjö's *Hedonistic Utilitarianism* (a book that offers a coherentist alternative to Lazari-Radek and Singer's foundationalist utilitarianism, but which they do not discuss). Though *The Point of View of the Universe* is full of interesting arguments and thought experiments that will inspire further debate, it is more successful as a book on Sidgwick than as a defence of utilitarianism.

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