

Book Reviews

Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy, by J. B. Schneewind. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 447.

This is a fine collection of essays by one of our profession's most influential and learned historians of ethics. It is an important resource for those researching and teaching moral philosophy and its history.

J. B. Schneewind's *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* contains nineteen articles published between 1963 and 2009. In addition to a Foreword and a list of Schneewind's publications, it has seven parts: 'Theory', 'Victorian Matters', 'On the Historiography of Moral Philosophy', 'Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Moral Philosophy', 'On Kant', 'Moral Psychology', and 'Afterword'.

Some articles in this collection deal with or expand on themes explored in Schneewind's two major books, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* and *The Invention of Autonomy*. Others pursue distinct pedagogical and scholarly issues, including those arising from interaction with the authors of the excerpts found in Schneewind's invaluable *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*.

It is impossible in a review of this size to discuss all that this rich collection has to offer. Accordingly, only some of its contributions are dealt with here.

In 'Moral Knowledge and Moral Principles', the only essay in 'Theory', Schneewind outlines his view of ethical reasoning. Historically, such reasoning was thought to rely on principles that are (a) general, for example, one ought to promote welfare, (b) exceptionless, (c) substantive, and (d) foundational, that is, self-evident or non-derivatively justified. This, Schneewind argues, is the classical conception of moral principles (p. 4). Proponents hold that one such principle or a plurality of them arranged in a fixed hierarchy is essential to acquiring moral knowledge, preserving rationality in ethics, and avoiding epistemic regress.

In contrast to this view, Schneewind advocates a method of moral reasoning that treats the relationship between ethical principles and moral beliefs as similar to the relationship between scientific laws and empirical data. Moral reasoning involves developing principles (laws) that explain, systematize, and justify our pre-reflective moral attitudes (data). These principles must adequately determine what we ought to do in a wide range of cases, both

present and future. We engage in a process of reflective adjudication when our principles and the judgments they attempt to systematize conflict. We give up the principles when the conflicts with our pre-reflective attitudes are too great, though we may accept a principle that impugns some such attitudes.

Schneewind believes that this form of ethical reasoning is superior to the one based on the classical conception of moral principles. It is no less capable of explaining moral knowledge and rationality in ethics and it avoids the foundationalist element of the classical conception which troublingly leaves no room for the justification of principles by reference to particular judgements, for, Schneewind argues, though we 'give reasons for particular judgements in terms of principles', we also 'justify principles in terms of particular judgements' (p. 9).

It is not clear that these are the only options for reasoning in ethics. There is another view, historically important, in which moral principles are justified by appeal both to self-evidence and to coherence with particular judgements. This gives expression to the plausible thought that moral reasoning depends on fixed points and on inferential relations. This position was popular among late nineteenth and early twentieth century moralists, including Hastings Rashdall, A. C. Ewing, and (possibly) W. D. Ross.

Some claim to find this third method in Sidgwick. Schneewind demurs. In 'First Principles and Common-sense Morality in Sidgwick's Ethics', he tells us in the Foreword to *Essays*, he shows that Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* is a 'classical instance' of moral reasoning based on the classical conception of moral principles (p. x).

Schneewind attempts this through an examination of Sidgwick's argument for utilitarianism. On his reading, Sidgwick's case for utilitarianism relies on two arguments, the dependency argument and the systematization argument (p. 24). The first involves showing that, because common sense moral rules are imprecise, they fail to serve as a complete guide to what we ought to do in practice; these rules need to be supplemented by a superior moral principle that supplies the needed precision, on which they are then considered to be dependent and which they cannot overrule. The superior principle, holds Sidgwick, is utilitarian in nature. The second involves demonstrating that utilitarianism gains credibility through its power to capture, explain, systematize, and supplement the core components of common sense morality in a way that common sense approves.

Schneewind is right that there are elements of the classical conception of ethical reasoning in Sidgwick's ethics. Sidgwick holds, for instance, that correct moral principles are exceptionless, because if the only principles on offer admitted of exception, we never could be sure that an inference from them was what we ought all things considered to do in some situation, for that situation might be the exception. Schneewind raises plausible worries about this aspect of Sidgwick (p. 5). But it is not clear that on Schneewind's

interpretation Sidgwick turns out to be all that committed to foundationalism. On this account, utilitarianism is justified because it captures common sense morality which is 'by and large acceptable' (p. 29; also p. 34); Sidgwick's argument puts 'little weight ... on intuition unsupported by such [dialectical] arguments' (p. 40). Schneewind does not discuss the self-evident truths, the search for which occupies much of *The Methods of Ethics*, on which Sidgwick's case for utilitarianism relies.

Indeed, one might accuse Schneewind of giving too little attention to the intuitionist element of Sidgwick's method. This should not, however, lead one to think that Sidgwick endorses all aspects of the classical conception of moral reasoning. After all, he does not argue that utilitarianism (or egoism) is deduced from the self-evident truths that he accepts, and he leaves plenty of room for testing such truths by means of dialectical argument and for common sense in his attempt to establish utilitarianism.

Parts three and four of *Essays* constitute its intellectual core. The two most powerful articles in part three are 'Modern Moral Philosophy: From Beginning to End?' and 'No Discipline, No History: The Case of Moral Philosophy'.

'Modern Moral Philosophy' provides a compelling justification for studying seventeenth and eighteenth century moral philosophy: its study is the study of the 'emergence of one central aspect of our self-understanding' (p. 87), namely, that all normal adults are 'self-governing in moral matters' (p. 86). During this period, philosophers typically denied that moral competence was equitably distributed to all normal adult humans. Among such philosophers were Suarez, Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Wolff, and Clarke, all of whom taught that the masses need to be instructed in what to do and goaded by sanctions to do it. By the end of the eighteenth century this altered in part because the practical problem to which philosophers directed their attention had altered (p. 97). The main problem, forcefully expressed by Grotius, concerns how to work out rules of interaction for beings who crave sociality but who are quarrelsome and disagree about how best to live. According to Schneewind, this problem is hard to resolve without assuming the 'full and equal moral competence of all normal adults' (p. 86). The idea that some have greater access to moral truth and that an authority is needed to motivate us to act in accordance with it is open to serious abuse in the context of managing conflict and 'is more likely to perpetuate than to confine' it (p. 101). The emergence of the assumption of equal moral competence gives rise to a fresh view of morality, the most important proponent of which is Kant, for whom morality is crucially linked to self-governance and autonomy, though, on Schneewind's view, the idea is present in Price, Reid, and Bentham, who attempt to find some place for it in their moral outlooks.

According to Schneewind, the equal moral competence view is 'central' to 'modern morality itself', making us 'uneasy about the idea of moral experts'

(p. 87). But the idea that there are moral experts and that moral philosophers are among them still held serious sway after Kant. In the nineteenth century, the position survived in, among others, Sidgwick and Rashdall, for whom philosophers have an important expertise in resolving practical moral problems and, though the view has been challenged in various ways since, it still survives in contemporary practical ethics, especially amongst those keen on moral reform (for example, Peter Singer). Schneewind does note that acceptance of the equal moral competence view is 'tenuous' amongst the utilitarians but its relationship to that view's exponents is more problematic than this allows (p. 87; also p. 87 n2).

In 'No Discipline, No History', Schneewind outlines his approach to the history of ethics. Some assume that moral philosophy has the aim of answering one question or of solving one set of practical problems. Schneewind calls this the single-aim view of moral philosophy (p. 120; also pp. 103, 129 and 293). This contrasts with the variable-aim view on which the aims of moral philosophy are many and dependent on context; the problems and questions with which ethics deals are a response to the particular social and spiritual needs of the time (p. 125; also pp. 131 and 294).

Schneewind advocates for the variable-aim view. He thinks that the single-aim approach is problematic for a variety of reasons (pp. 120ff.). One is that '[i]f we look historically at what moral philosophers have said they were trying to do, we do not come up with a single aim uniting them all' (p. 120; also p. 129). He thinks, for example, that if one examines what Aristotle, Sidgwick, and Parfit say about their ambitions, one finds no (meaningful) consensus (pp.120-1; pp. 129-30). Aristotle thinks the study of moral philosophy should improve people's lives. Sidgwick casts aspersions on the idea that the function of moral philosophy is to edify. Parfit aims to develop a 'wholly secular, science of morality' (p. 121).

Schneewind overstates the differences between these (seemingly representative) philosophers. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick says that we 'study Ethics, as Aristotle says, for the sake of Practice: and in practice we are concerned with particulars' (p. 215). He expresses the same view in his *Practical Ethics* (p. 5). This places him close to Aristotle. True, Sidgwick does say in *The Methods of Ethics* that the desire amongst moralists to edify has 'impeded the real progress of ethical science' (p. vi). But, first, this occurs in the Preface of the first edition of the work and fits uneasily with what Sidgwick aims to do in it, and, second, Sidgwick's target is not edification per se: he is worried instead about the 'predominance' of this desire in guiding moral philosophical discussions. He is concerned more with putting edification in its place than with expunging it from moral philosophy altogether. Parfit may not explicitly state that the aim of moral philosophy is to improve our practical moral thinking, but some of his arguments are designed to support such a statement. Consider his view that we must accept the moral relevance of the imperceptible and the small effects of

actions. The moral relevance of these has serious practical implications for a host of moral issues, including our treatment of the environment.

Furthermore, Aristotle, Sidgwick, and Parfit seem keen to work out a view of ethics using a method of reasoning that is at least as scientific as Schneewind's own favoured method (outlined above). All appeal in some fashion to the views of the many and the wise, and on the basis of these beliefs try to work out a moral framework that gives expression to them. Of course, Aristotle and Sidgwick do not share Parfit's aim of working out a 'wholly' secular view of ethics, but that they do not share this aim does not entail that they are not contributing to the solution of some shared set of problems.

Schneewind does note that in his *Problems of Ethics*, Moritz Schlick endorses a view of moral philosophy that clashes with the approach that is apparently shared by Aristotle, Sidgwick, and Parfit. Schlick claims that moral philosophy is 'in essence, theory or knowledge' (p. 3). It aims only at truth, not application to practice or edification (p. 1). But it is not clear on reflection that Schlick is doing moral philosophy, and so it is not clear that noting his approach impugns the single-aim view. He thinks that moral philosophy is a branch of psychology, the 'central problem' of which 'concerns the causal explanation of moral behaviour' (p. 28). One might argue that this is more a rejection of moral philosophy than a way of approaching it.

At the end of 'Modern Moral Philosophy', Schneewind suggests that 'the distinctive conflict-prone and morally competent individual of modern ethics was primarily constructed in response to social realities and to moral and political demands, not because of metaphysical or epistemological needs' (p. 106). His idea is that 'moral philosophy has a history of its own, which may have exerted its influence on other developments in philosophy and not merely been dependent on them' (p. 129).

The clearest and most compelling expression of this approach is found in the penetrating essay in Part Four entitled 'Voluntarism and the Foundations of Ethics'. Schneewind argues that 'moral concerns motivate moral epistemologies' (p. 214 n39). He maintains that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, various defences of moral rationalism about the foundations of ethics did not involve arguments used in general epistemology to work out a response to sceptical challenges or challenges of other kinds. Instead, defences of the view were motivated in part by worries about the voluntarist account of the source of morality according to which the view made God an arbitrary tyrant and his subjects servile to his whim and wish. This conflicted with the idea that we should love God. The way out of this predicament was to demonstrate that both God and human beings were bound by the same morality, that they formed a common community under one moral code. Only on this basis could love for God emerge, for only on this basis could we be sure that God was benevolent and just. Moral rationalism made this

possible through its idea that moral requirements are necessary and capable of motivating all rational agents.

This is a highly informative look at discussions surrounding moral epistemology; it deserves sustained attention. This style of analysis, moreover, exhibits an approach that has the potential to inform discussions of philosophical defences of the foundations of morality more generally and certainly beyond the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Schneewind enjoyed a long career in academic philosophy. In the final article of this volume, a 2009 Dewey Lecture entitled 'Sixty Years of Philosophy in a Life', he reflects on it. He tells the story of his career and of the origin of his philosophical interests. Of note is his willingness to make contributions to research and to university administration and to the profession at large. On Schneewind's telling, his is a well-rounded academic life, in which one attempts to satisfy one's own intellectual appetite without losing sight of one's obligations to the commonweal both within and without academia. He is to be credited for achieving what appears to be a very felicitous balance.

Schneewind remarks that professional philosophy improved in terms of its inclusivity during his time working in it. He notes in particular the success of Jews in academia. He speaks with happiness that, though philosophy has 'lagged behind other disciplines', 'women and African-Americans have become noticeable and notable contributors to philosophy' (p. 408).

More work has to be done, it goes without saying, to encourage women and other minorities to join the ranks of professional philosophy. Schneewind gives us an example of the kind of career that makes this possible, in which the focus is not solely on publication and professional advancement, but in addition on issues of social justice in our profession and the mechanisms and work needed to realize it. Here as elsewhere Schneewind's reflection on history (albeit his own) proves instructive.

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